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**FROM STATEHOUSES TO SCHOOLHOUSES: ERADICATING  
ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM\***

AUTHOR

Nicholas Daniel Hartlep, M.S.Ed., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Advanced Opportunity Program Fellow  
*E-mail address:* nhartlep@uwm.edu

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## Abstract

Written through the prism of Critical Race Theory (CRT), this paper addresses the question, “How can schoolhouses best serve the students within them?” The author begins by introducing “environmental racism” through a review of the literature. The author argues that CRT proponents, by allying with whites and using geographic information systems (GIS) mapping, can help curb or eliminate environmental racism.

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## **From Statehouses to Schoolhouses: Eradicating Environmental Racism**

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### ***Introduction***

If we talk about the environment, for example, we have to talk about environmental racism—about the fact that kids in South Central Los Angeles have a third of the lung capacity of kids in Santa Monica.

-- Danny Glover, Actor

Written through the prism of Critical Race Theory (CRT), this article addresses the question, “How can schoolhouses best serve the students within them?” The author begins by introducing “environmental racism” through a review of the literature. This review is selective and does not provide an exhaustive survey of the literature, something that would be inconceivable given the amount of scholarship written on the topic over more than 20 years. The author then proceeds—through personal stories—to make research-supported recommendations of what can be done to combat environmental racism as it relates to student learning and schools. The recommendations made suggest that schools need to teach; and school districts need to operate in critically raced fashions. The author contends that geographic information systems technology (GIS) and white-allies may be avenues that will lead to improvements in the environmental racism problem.

### ***Literature Review***

To think—many adults, inside and outside the schoolhouse, have the nerve to say that the world is fair (viz. putatively a meritocracy). It was not until I came across the term “environmental racism” (ER) as an urban teacher that I was keenly aware of how unfair the world actually is, and that merit alone cannot combat a person’s environmental poisoning. As an urban educator, ER impacted the students I taught. Before teaching in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), an urban school district, I never had so many students

who suffered from ADHD, asthma, and lead poisoning. The suburban school district I taught in before coming to Milwaukee did not appear to have as many students who suffered from these health impairments.

The literature on ER is fairly *carte blanche*: environmental racism is real and does exist. This article defines ER as the “disproportionate exposure to pollution between Whites and non-Whites.”<sup>i</sup> Studies have proven the existence of ER in Los Angeles (Sadd et al., 1999; Boer et al., 1997; Pulido et al., 1996; Burke, 1993; Szasz et al., 1993; Pastor et al., 1992; UCC, 1987), and elsewhere (Bullard, 1983; Bullard et al., 2007).

Sadd et al. (1999) found Blacks and Latinos in urbanized (central) Los Angeles disproportionately impacted by air toxins. Boer et al. (1997) found working-class Blacks and Latinos disproportionately impacted by transfer, storage, and disposal facilities. Pulido et al. (1996) found Latinos disproportionately impacted by air toxin emissions. Burke (1993) found Latinos disproportionately impacted by facilities emitting air toxins. Szasz et al. (1993) found certain Black and Latino households (*viz.* households earning \$20,000-40,000) disproportionately impacted by facilities emitting air toxins. United Church of Christ (1987) found Latinos disproportionately impacted by abandoned toxic waste sites. Pastor et al. (2002) evaluated the demographic distribution of hazardous facilities and health risks associated with ambient air toxics exposure of public schoolchildren in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Pastor and his research team found that minority students, especially Latinos, were more likely to attend schools near hazardous facilities and face higher health risks associated with outdoor toxics exposure. Although Pastor et al.’s (2002) research is confined to Los Angeles and cannot be generalized outside the study area. ER has been documented in other areas of the country

besides Los Angeles, such as Houston (Bullard, 1983), Detroit (Bullard et al., 2007), Milwaukee (Downey, 2007), Alabama (Bullard, 2000), and San Diego (Lipsitz, 2006).

Bullard (1983) studied the siting of solid waste facilities in Houston, Texas. He found that solid waste sites were not randomly dispersed within Houston, but rather were likely to be found in predominantly black neighborhoods and near black schools.

Bullard et al. (2007) found Detroit having 12 hazardous waste facility sites, second only to Los Angeles, having 17. Their report, *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007*, documents Michigan having the largest difference in the percentage of people of color living within 3 kilometers of a hazardous waste facility compared to outside that radius: sixty-six percent and nineteen percent respectively. Bullard et al.'s (2007) findings are bad for Michigan (and Detroit) since nationally the figures are fifty-six percent and thirty percent respectively. According to Bullard et al. (2007), "People of color are particularly concentrated in neighborhoods and communities with the greatest number of hazardous waste facilities, a finding that directly parallels that of the original UCC report" (p. xii).

Downey's (2007) study investigating environmental racism in 61 large American metropolitan areas found that in the Milwaukee metropolitan area, segregation increased Black and Hispanic proximity to hazardous emissions, but much more so for Hispanics than for Blacks.

Bullard (2000) documents the incredible amounts of ER that take place in Alabama. Emelle, Alabama is home to the nation's largest hazardous-waste dump since 1978, when Chemical Waste Management (Chemwaste) opened (Bullard, 2000, p. 60). Emelle's hazardous-waste dump speaks to the heart of ER. "The large number of cars

with out-of-state license plates tells the story of what this community is getting. We were promised jobs, but what we got was a giant hazardous-waste headache” (Wendell Harris, quoted in Bullard, 2000, p. 62). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2009) indicates that “[l]ow income, and quite often culturally diverse populations, are more likely than other groups to live near landfills, incinerators, and hazardous waste treatment facilities.”

Lipsitz (2006, p. 10) writes how three San Diego neighborhoods—Barrio Logan, Logan Heights, and Sherman Heights—account for slightly more than two percent of San Diego County’s population, yet more than a third of the county’s hazardous wastes are either stored or generated there. According to Lipsitz (2006), “Twenty-eight percent of Latino children in these neighborhoods (and those adjacent to them in Southeast San Diego) have been diagnosed with probable or possible asthma—about four times the national average” (p. 10). Lipsitz (2006) writes that if environmental racism was curtailed, seventy-five thousand fewer African Americans would die each year.

In many states ER has been documented to be associated with acute health issues such as ADHD, asthma (Lerner, 2005; Simmons & DSCEJ, 1997), and lead poisoning (Berliner, 2009; U.S. EPA, 2009). These health imparities have been documented to negatively/adversely impact student learning (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004). Hanushek and Rivkin (2004) deserve to be quoted at length:

Health problems that are unknown in middle-class children exist in epidemic proportions in low-income communities and contribute to low achievement. Untreated dental cavities, uncorrected vision problems, lead poisoning, environmentally provoked asthma are all easily addressed by policies that are more proven than policies to improve teacher quality. (p. 30).

## ***ADHD***

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, it was not until I landed in Milwaukee Public Schools that I saw how widespread environmental racism was. In my very school district's city, Milwaukee, a boy was determined to have ADHD that had either been caused by lead poisoning or had been made worse by it. The five-year-old boy suffered permanent neurological damage that had been caused by lead. This child will never be the child he could have been before becoming ADHD. Instead of a healthy life, he receives \$1,634 a month for life beginning in 2007.

## ***Asthma***

Asthma is a vetted health concern. According to Bloom and Cohen (2007, p. 4-5), in 2006, non-Hispanic black children were more likely to have ever been diagnosed with asthma or to still have asthma (17% and 13%) than non-Hispanic White children (13% and 9%). Bloom's and Cohen's report presents both age-adjusted and unadjusted statistics from the 2006 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) on selected health measures for children under 18 years of age.

In a 1997 health survey carried out by Xavier University's Deep South Center for Environmental Justice in Diamond, Louisiana, "35% of children reported having asthma" (quoted in Lerner, 2005, p. 44; to see the actual report see Simmons & DSCEJ, 1997).

## ***Lead Poisoning***

Lead poisoning has been documented to impact the poor (Berliner, 2009; U.S. EPA, 2009). According to Berliner (2009), "The poor are exposed to lead's toxicity many times more than the rich" (p. 504). "There is a particularly high concentration of lead problems in low-income and culturally diverse populations, who live in the inner city where the

public housing units were built before 1970” (U.S. EPA, 2009). Stevens (1995) states, “Inner-city children are more likely to be exposed to dangerous levels of lead” (p. 88). It does not appear likely that the poor will receive the support and resources it needs: Stevens (1995) states, “Public facilities--where most low-income, urban children seek medical help—usually lack the financial support available to private hospitals and clinics” (p. 88). CRT must get financial resources and education to where it is sorely needed.

### ***Recommendations Based On Research***

If Berliner (2009) is right, and “Poverty is what drives families into zip codes that are not healthy for children and other living things” (p. 507), then it is important to keep this in mind when carrying out research. Because housing is more affordable in less safe areas, it makes sense that lower-income people live there. Knowing this, it is important to see that while education is important, equally important is ending this social injustice. Redlining, rezoning, gerrymandering, all contribute to this form of residential oppression. This scholastic oppression is an outgrowth of residential oppression: schoolhouses are successfully gerrymandered to allowing the safest and best school-grounds to go to predominantly white schools, while folks of color are relegated to unsafe and uncompromising environmental hazards in their schools.

### ***Critically Raced Teaching and Operations***

Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be used to problematize the way schools teach and the way that school districts operate. Both schools and school districts can function in a critically raced way. According to a CRT line of thought, white interest convergence will do its best to maintain its control and domination in schools and school districts. Bell’s

(1980) theory of interest convergence is a critical component within CRT. Interest convergence is the notion that whites will allow and support racial justice/progress to the extent that there is something positive in it for them, or a “convergence” between the interests of whites and nonwhites.

Understanding interest convergence, critical race theorists must ally themselves with white insiders in order to construct and ratify school policies that can keep hazardous waste materials from seeping into urban and poor school districts. Stevens (1995) interestingly discusses how steps to follow the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) may be unattainable in inner cities because many inner-city institutions do not have the money or the expertise needed. This is why CRT believes that white allies are one component to eradicate environmental racism for minorities.

It is sad when people do not see living in an environmentally safe environment as a human right; rather, they see money. In a letter to the editor in *The New York Times*, a medical doctor identified as J. F. L. (1994) wrote: “Spending a modest sum of money on lead poisoning prevention now will save landlords millions and taxpayers potentially billions down the road.” It is not until interest convergence occurs that environmental justice can begin; in the interim, CRT may prove assistive. William “Bill” Ayers (2004) writes that change must not be waited for; it must begin now. Ayers (2004) states, “The challenge is to act, to build whatever alliances we can, to change this corner of the school right now” (p. 21). Although white allies are important, critical race theory must not foster an overreliance on them.

Many whites have acted: “Guerilla gardening” has gained popularity by environmentalists and has led to sweeping reform. My main concern with those who

guerilla garden is whether it achieves its ends through means that do not evoke substantive change: since it makes the inhabitable habitable, the ugly beautiful, and the unpleasant pleasant, without changing the structure in which folks of color reside. Is guerilla gardening cosmetic change or systematic change? The oft-quoted expression, “The more things change the more they stay the same” holds its weight in gold because small changes are ineffective since larger social forces eat them.

Although populist, guerilla gardening may be helpful in stopping environmental racism; however, geographic information systems technology (GIS) maps may be more instrumental. Anita Earls, director of the Southern Coalition for Social Justice in Durham, North Carolina says, “You’re not up to date in social justice advocacy if you don’t know how to use GIS maps” (quoted in Burtman, 2010, p. 69). GIS has been widely used by institutes and universities to map opportunities and positives. Nevertheless, CRT and GIS maps can also be used to map inequalities, such as environmental racism, in society. Clearly governments have agendas and will resort to using research and data that is most favorable and supportive of their policy positions. Therefore, a bulwark in using GIS to fight environmental racism is that government may be hesitant to release data that can be used against it. Nevertheless, critical race theorists approaching statehouses with GIS maps and white-allies in tow, schoolhouses may become safer and more equitable.

By allying with whites, CRT can seed GIS, and GIS can grow to help curb or eliminate environmental racism. No longer will statehouses be able to hide behind false promises and lost hope. With white allies and irrefutable scientific data, policy will have to change. This means, no longer will minorities attend schools that are festering with air that is noxious and a health concern of the variety Sentilles (2005) documents in her book

*Taught by America: a Story of Struggle and Hope in Compton.* Sentilles (2005) documents environmental racism in the elementary school she taught at in Compton, California. She begins stating, “The special education program was in a tiny room that smelled so bad that the resource specialist called the Environmental Protection Agency” and finishes writing, “They boarded up the room and called in a toxic-cleanup site” (pp. 72-73). Schoolhouses *can* be what they intended to be all along: spaces of endless possibilities, spaces where children can create and cultivate their intellectual capacities. This requires ending “state sponsored child abuse” in the form of environmental racism. Tate (1997, p. 216) writes that “Bell’s interest-convergence principle could provide insightful conceptual guidance” while G.I.S. has the ability to test this concept.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> This article's definition borrows and is derived from the "father" of ER, Bullard (1996), who defines ER as "any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color" (p. 497).