

# Read Up on the Links Between Racism and the Environment

By Somini Sengupta June 5, 2020

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This week, amid a surge of protests over police violence against black Americans, there's been renewed scrutiny on the links between racism and environmental degradation in the United States.

To help readers understand those links, I put together a quick reading list about climate change and social inequities. These suggestions are meant to be starters, laying out a few entry points. I hope you will share these and suggest more.

## Articles and Essays

One notable article this week came from the independent news site Grist. It linked the response to protests against environmental degradation with protests against police violence.

Dany Sigwalt, a co-executive director of an umbrella group of activist organizations called Power Shift Network, argued in an essay published on Medium that “the way that we win on mitigating climate change is to enforce government accountability to its citizens and right now, that means fighting for justice for George Floyd.”

The Twitter list called Green Voices of Color, curated by the writer, Mary Annaïse Heglar, is a good place to find writings by people of color.

The marine biologist Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, writing in the Washington Post this week, urged her white colleagues in the climate movement to challenge the racial inequality intertwined with the climate crisis. “I need you to step up,” she wrote. “Please. Because I am exhausted.”

These connections are not new.

In 1982, in what is widely seen as the dawn of the environmental justice movement, a predominantly African-American community in Warren County, N.C., led a civil disobedience campaign against plans for a toxic dump site. That and other such campaigns were documented in “Dumping in Dixie,” by Robert D. Bullard, with whom we spoke for our climate newsletter this week.

The sociologist Dorceta E. Taylor chronicled several other cases across the country in “Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility.”

In 1987, the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice published a pioneering report documenting the disproportionate number of hazardous waste sites in communities of color across the United States.

And in 2018, we profiled the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, who has made environmental justice and climate change a central pillar of his campaign to redress poverty and racism.

The long attention to the problem doesn’t mean it’s gone away. Lead contamination in Flint, Mich., is regarded as a textbook example, with a long tail of suffering: Its school system has been struggling with a sharp

rise in neurological and behavioral problems among its students, as this story in *The Times* chronicled.

It's worth rewinding to the history of the environmental movement, as well. In the United States, at least one stream of the green movement has a racist history, as Jedediah Purdy wrote about in *The New Yorker* in 2015. And some environmental groups have had to reckon with racism in their membership, as Brentin Mock wrote in *Outside Magazine* in 2017.

Though it's not an article or book, also useful for the discussion about how to rebuild this country is Heather C. McGhee's TED Talk about how racism has driven bad public policy for years in this country. In the era of a hotter planet, she told me this week, we have a chance to rewire the economy in an explicitly anti-racist way.

Beyond the United States, I wrote how a series of crippling droughts had devastated the region's poorest, most vulnerable people in East Africa. My colleagues and I wrote about a massive coal-fired power plant built on land that belonged to some of India's poorest farmers. In coastal cities, how to face a rising sea depends almost entirely on the accident of your birth.

## Books

A deeply human meditation on racism and environmental havoc is Sarah M. Broom's memoir about her family's home in New Orleans, called "The Yellow House."

The writings of Amitav Ghosh have repeatedly explored the impact of environmental degradation on people who are powerless, from the novel, "The Hungry Tide" to his series of essays in "The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable," to his latest novel, "Gun Island," in which wildfires, freakish storms, mudslides and the sinking city of Venice hold a mirror to the climate chaos of today.

The unequal impact of climate change is chronicled in a collection of essays, poems and stories called "Tales of Two Planets." One of its finest pieces is by Mariana Enríquez, who describes growing up in Buenos Aires, on the banks of one of the most polluted rivers in the world, the Matanza-Riachuelo:

In September 2002, a group of policemen who were drunk on power forced nineteen-year-old Ezequiel Demonty, a teenager who lived on the Riachuelo's banks, to jump into the river. They were after him for a false complaint of robbery, and they decided to torture him before they arrested him. The body appeared by the Victorino de la Plaza bridge, the same one I used to cross with my family when I was little.

In 2014, near an offshoot of the Matanza river, seventeen-year-old Melina Romero's body was found. Her murderer and rapist left her in a garbage bag. The newspaper headlines said that she 'didn't go to school' and 'liked to go out at night.' They often illustrated the articles with a selfie of the girl crying in the mirror, her eyeliner running, her cheeks stained with black tears.

Finally, the one piece I go back to again and again is the prescient Earthseed series by Octavia E. Butler, and especially the first book, "Parable of the Sower." Its protagonist, Lauren, feels the pain of others, which is a lot of pain in California in 2024, when the book is set, amid racist violence, government corruption and acute water scarcity.

