

01 ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM + THE FORCES THAT PERPETUATE IT

a factsheet by Helena J.

The film *There's Something in the Water* shows how environmental racism persists in already marginalized communities. This factsheet will explain what environmental racism is, how it happens, the forces that perpetuate it, and an example of it.

WHAT IS RACISM?

Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism is "...the state-sanctioned or extra-legal production and exploitation of group differentiated vulnerability to pre-mature death" (as cited in Winant, 2015). When dissected, this definition of racism is narrowed down to the vulnerability of groups to pre-mature death who are actively exploited by the force of the state/government.

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM?

Winant (2015) discusses environmental racism, as not only an issue of **dumping toxic substances** in marginalized communities, but also about **drought, famine, forced migration, corporate agriculture and mining**. Marginalized communities are often facing the **worst consequences of climate change**, they are being **displaced**, all from forces of power, the greed for capital and wealth from colonial forces – governments and corporations.

The film *There's Something in the Water* (2019) directed by Elliot Page and Ian Daniel shows what environmental racism is, through the stories of **three different Black and Indigenous communities** in Nova Scotia **whose lives are deeply affected by industrial sites nearby**. These industrial sites take the lives of so many individuals in these communities, through manipulation and polluted waterways.

THE STORY OF DEVASTATION AND SURVIVAL

In "Imperialism, History, Writing and Theory," Tuhiwai Smith discusses the impacts of imperialism and colonialism on Indigenous people, and talks about how to tell the story of it. She says that **we must balance the telling of devastation with the telling of survival**. If one focuses on the devastation only, it can be **'damage-centered'**; alternatively, if one focuses only on survival, it could **undermine the devastation of imperialism**. The film *There's Something in the Water* does a good job at showing both the devastation that these communities have been through, and how they have fought for their rights and continue to survive and fight on the frontlines for their communities.

THE GRASSROOTS GRANDMOTHERS IN STEWIACKE

For example, the Sipekne'katik Nation in Stewiacke, Nova Scotia – the Grassroots Grandmothers/Water Protectors are leading the resistance. These Indigenous women actively protest the Alton Gas project from happening, which is a proposed underground storage facility that would dump salt brine (with salinity 6x higher than what is considered safe for fish) into their river – which is **their livelihood**. The Sipekne'katik Nation have faced so much disrespect from the **Canadian government**, that permits the Sipekne'katik Nation's territory to be open, **blatantly disrespecting their treaty rights**. The Water Protectors **built a treaty truck house** (a protected treaty based fishing area on the river Shubenacadie) as a way to **actively assert their rights & occupy the area**, and are continuing to protest and prevent this project from happening, they have been successful thus far.

HOW DOES THIS HAPPEN?

Environmental racism continues to persist in these communities. Winant (2015) explains the 'war against the weak' as racism continues from **above** in modern day, as **'dark matter'** – hidden and disguised by the state and government against already marginalized communities.

In "The Dark Matter: Race and Racism in the 21st Century," Winant makes an excellent point when he says, "an **institutionalized forgetting** of the provenance and meaning of race ('colorblindness') **dismisses and disguises** [the **war** against the weak], [the] **coercion and violence**."

This helps to explain how environmental racism continues to persist in these communities: though an **institutionalized forgetting**; *textbooks* and the *rewriting of history*; *new ways of knowledge*. These all contribute to making the racism and colonialism that is occurring **more invisible to others**.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Knowing about environmental racism is important, because it is **actively harming communities**, and taking so many lives through **disregarding** them and their rights, yet **it is not talked about enough**. Environmental racism is often **disguised as 'dark matter'** (Winant) because **governments & corporations** are causing this harm, they have the ability to **hide what is happening**. In order to hold a sustainable future for **everyone (not just some)**, **accountability must be taken by those in power**; such as Canadian corporations who invade unceded territory without consent. We as individuals must **shift our view beyond just ourselves** to a **wider view** of what is happening to communities **all around us**. These communities need to **heal**, and **they cannot heal in the same environment that they got sick in**.

To be neutral is to be on the side of the oppressor. Everyone can either help resist this oppression, or continue to be complicit in letting colonial forces harm Black and Indigenous communities.

One way to support these communities is by **following their fights, sharing their voices, gaining public awareness and outrage** – To follow the Water Protectors' fight against Alton Gas in Stewiacke: **@StopAltonGas** on twitter.

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