Introduction

The Biopolitics of Waste

Waste is a social process. We usually consider waste as material we discard, relying on public and private systems to remove unwanted materials from our homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces. These practices are consequences of our decisions to classify particular materials as waste, employ people to handle those materials, and develop systems to dispose of them. Waste informs the construction of our social and cultural values. In her 1966 study, *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas defined dirt as “matter that is out of place,” threatening the social order. Dirt and other waste matter derive their power not simply through being waste or having a kind of negative value. Rather, as “matter out of place,” things deemed dirty, spoiled, or noxious carry polluting effects, by touching. In the introduction to the 2002 edition of *Purity and Danger*, Douglas remarked that classifying dirty things “reduces intellectual and social disorder . . . The concept of dirt makes a bridge between our own contemporary culture and those other cultures where behaviour that blurs the great classifications of the universe is tabooed. We denounce it by calling it dirty and dangerous; they taboo it.”

The social dimensions of waste are visible in recent American history. The Environmental Justice movement emerged in the 1980s as a response to hazardous waste siting in or near communities of color across the United States. The term “environmental racism” entered widespread use after the Reverend Benjamin Chavis used it to discuss the results of *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, a national study of hazardous waste siting that the United Church of Christ published in 1987. Chavis defined environmental racism in 1992 as “racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the
life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership in the environmental movement.”

Chavis expanded on his definition in a 1993 *Ebony* interview celebrating his appointment as executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: “It is the deliberate targeting of people-of-color communities for hazardous waste facilities, such as landfills and incinerators. One of the responsibilities of the Civil Rights Movement is to define the postmodern manifestations of racism. We must not only point to overt forms of racism, but also to institutionalized racism.”

In the three decades since the *Toxic Wastes and Race* report identified a strong link between race and hazardous waste siting, identification of environmental racism has produced actions in urban and rural locations across the United States. A defining characteristic of these actions is the battle against exposing vulnerable peoples to hazardous wastes in nearby land, air, and water. Even in attempts to broaden the definition of “environmental justice,” activists note that much of their work relates to battles against waste siting. “Waste facility siting battles are but one aspect of the movement for environmental justice,” Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster argued in 2001. That one aspect, however, “is the arena in which a great deal of grassroots action takes place.”

The United Church of Christ recognized that the dimensions of environmental racism predated Chavis’s use of the term. United Church of Christ Environmental Justice Program member Carlos J. Correa Bernier noted: “People of color, individually and collectively, have waged war against environmental injustices that predate the first Earth Day in 1970.”

Historians have responded with assessments of environmental inequalities evident between the mid-nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth century. These studies include monographs about African American experiences in Northern and Southern cities, African American fights against rural waste dumping in the South, indigenous protests against radioactive waste siting in the interior West, and Hispanic demonstrations against polluted agricultural lands in the West. These studies provide valuable understandings of how environmental racism affected the lives of particular communities at particular times.
Less well understood are the historical factors shaping environmental racism in the United States. Too often histories of environmental inequalities treat race and ethnicity as static constructs. A binary construction of race serves to determine inequalities, leaving unconsidered the dynamics of race and racism. Considering changing constructions of race allows for a greater understanding of how environmental racism has evolved over time. Studies of whiteness in the United States have focused on the roles of the law, economics, literature, and science in the changing social construction of race over time, but little attention has been paid to how environmental factors have shaped perceptions of race. One notable exception is Conevery Bolton Valenčius’s work on how frontier settlers in the nineteenth century considered frontier life as transforming perceived racial characteristics, but beyond this study little attention has been paid to theories of public health as they relate to racial constructs in American history.

Historical analysis of environmental racism should consider how boundaries between the body and environment need to become foci for our historical inquiry. This book presents a history of environmental racism in the United States, using the lens of dirt. In doing so, it proposes the following: Although racism has been a structuring factor in creating environmental inequalities concerning waste, American constructions of race, of waste, and of their interactions have evolved since the nation’s founding. Increasing scientific definitions of waste as hazard and of racial categories in the immediate antebellum period established a foundation for later racist constructions that posited that white people were somehow cleaner than non-white people. This assumption defined white supremacist thinking. Its evolution shaped environmental inequalities that endure in the twenty-first century, including in the marketing of cleaning products, the organization of labor markets handling wastes, and the spatial organization of waste management and residential segregation in the United States.

By focusing on whiteness, this book aims to examine not only how people of color have been exposed to environmental dangers but also how contested minorities such as Southern and Eastern Europeans successfully adopted American notions of hygiene to achieve white identity in the twentieth century even as African Americans who engaged in
rigorous hygienic practices were denied white privilege. Attending to hygiene and waste is central not only to understanding environmental inequalities in communities of color but also to understanding modern constructions of whiteness. White identity’s conflation with cleanliness has a long and largely unexamined history. Understanding the dynamic relationship of whiteness and hygiene is crucial for understanding environmental racism in the nation’s past and present.

This book examines the social and cultural constructions of race and hygiene in American life from the age of Thomas Jefferson to the Memphis Public Works Strike of 1968. Over this long history, eight developments are evident:

1. *American anxieties about race and dirt in the early years of the republic reflect contradictory impulses about slavery and urbanism.* Thomas Jefferson’s ideals valued pastoralism and egalitarianism yet also depended upon slavery and urban trade. The inherent tensions are reflected in the Constitution, in the policies of the nascent federal government, and in Jefferson’s own life.

2. *Justifications for slavery after 1820 relied more upon scientific racism and definitions of purity.* Threatened by the end of the international slave trade and growing calls for abolition within the United States, slaveholders used the language of scientific racism to explain the legitimacy of both slavery and white supremacy. The language used to justify racism at times resembled the language of the emerging public sanitation field.

3. *Although the Civil War marked the abolition of slavery and great advances in sanitation, insecurities about race and dirt endured.* The postbellum period has been described as a search for order amid an era of tumult, and this search is evident in the ways Americans described race and sanitary concerns. The most infamous insecurities involved “redeemers” of white supremacy, such as the Ku Klux Klan attempting to reassert white dominance through intimidation and violence, but a wide spectrum of society used references to pollution to define racial purity.

4. *Between 1865 and 1930, new constructions of waste and race re-defined white people as innately cleaner than any non-white peoples.* Equating non-white skin with dirt, these constructions
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(apparent in popular culture, academic discourse, and repeated tropes in advertising) marked new, emerging constructions of environmental racism.

5. The new constructions of environmental racism had material consequences in the emerging occupational structures to manage wastes between 1870 and 1930. New European immigrants, Asian immigrants, and African Americans participated in “dirty” jobs such as laundry, waste hauling, scrap recycling, and other sanitary services in numbers far above their representations in the general population.

6. The new constructions of environmental racism had material consequences in the spatial organization of residences and of waste handling businesses between 1870 and 1960. Racial residential segregation intensified in the twentieth century, and waste handling and disposal businesses clustered in non-white residential areas. Spatial environmental inequalities emerged by 1960.

7. Some Americans assimilated into white society after World War II by abandoning dirty work and dirty neighborhoods. Many Jews and Italians successfully moved into more reputable jobs and more prestigious residential suburbs. The power of white identity to inform environmental burdens endured; burdens on Hispanics and African Americans in the workplace and in residential neighborhoods intensified in the postwar era.

8. Environmental inequalities produced a new rhetoric of resistance in 1968. The Memphis Public Works Strike of 1968 marked both a culmination of growing environmental inequalities and an articulated resistance to those inequalities that defined the work of waste management as a civil rights issue. The response in Memphis was an important precedent to Chavis’s definition of environmental racism and foundational for the Environmental Justice movement.

These consequences are a product of the changing racial constructions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Racial subjugation existed in the Americas well before the War of Independence, though the language of that subjugation did not use the categories that would become common by the mid-nineteenth century. Power in the English colonies initially rested with those who identified themselves as
Christian. This differentiated them from “savages” and “heathens,” classifications used to enslave or kill. During the international debate over the morality of slavery between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, the historian Nancy Shoemaker has observed, the marker of superiority switched from “Christian” to “white.” Whiteness denoted not only pale skin but also a certain moral superiority that voiced itself in increasingly strident tones by slaveholders as the peculiar institution became harder to justify. By focusing on the most visible aspect of the body, self-defined white people wore their status on their faces and on their hands.¹¹

Skin in the United States became (to use Michel Foucault’s term) a technology of power, a marker connoting any number of traits from intelligence to virtue to sexuality, depending on the insecurities and fears of those seeking to gain power from racial superiority. The biopolitics of the nineteenth century had skin color emerge as marker of purity and pollution. In the first half of the century, skin color marked boundaries between freedom and slavery, with heightened emphasis on whiteness as strength. After abolition, color did not wane in importance; instead, it actually increased during the struggle for a new social order. In a period of great social insecurity, white identity gained increased significance, attaching itself to another great concern of the era, cleanliness.¹²

This cultural shift has a history, one that is less obvious than contemporary perspectives on race might assume. In nineteenth-century constructions of race, white supremacists stained Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans with assumptions that their skin, bodies, and behaviors were somehow dirtier than the skin, bodies, and behaviors of “white” people. Similar pejoratives were used against Jews, Slavs, Italians, Hungarians, and a host of people Americans now uncritically identify as being white. These were people who were entrusted to keep American society clean; these were the people who got their hands dirty to do so. When Americans of Southern and Eastern European heritage began to become identified as white ethnics in the twentieth century, they did so as they left sanitary occupations to African American and Hispanic workers. Understanding the historical dynamics that produced these inequalities requires examining the ideals on which the United States was founded.