

A River Runs Through Us - Brett Williams (2001)

Williams gives a compelling history of institutionalized racism through legislation and land use decisions in the Anacostia region of Washington DC from the city's very inception. He tracks the rapid post-industrial degradation of the Anacostia River and the effect it has had on the location and quality of life for poor black communities. Present-day conditions in the watershed provide stark contrast to the pristine and plentiful watershed that drew native Americans and early settlers with its deep, clean waters and game. Now, the Anacostia River is highly polluted, too choked with sediment to be navigable, and not receiving the same amount of government restoration attention as similar rivers in the region that pass through suburban and white neighborhoods.

Though often accepted as a necessary part of progress, environmental degradation is not necessarily a burden shared equally or equitably among communities. In the process of developing Washington DC into the nation's proud capitol, the large African American population bore the brunt of many of the negative environmental impacts while benefiting little from the social and governmental benefits supposedly created. Planning was used as a tool to isolate black and poor communities by demolishing and replacing inner city neighborhoods with governmental and commerce institutions, though highway placement, and by public transport systems serving predominantly suburban affluent communities not open to black residents. Williams also shows the importance of the entire history of settlement and government in the region in determining the pattern and extent of injustices. The residual effects of Jim Crow laws and segregated residential developments are enormous in determining where people live today. The more mobile white community has the luxury of using and moving. When the river became too dirty to live near and too shallow to work along, they moved up to the hills and got government support for utility and transportation amenities while leaving those who couldn't relocate (due to race or economics) along the banks of the fetid Anacostia River.

Environmental Justice; Law, Policy, and Regulation: Chapter 3. The Evidence - Clifford Rechtschaffen, Eileen Gauna

Rechtschaffen and Gauna present a series of case studies showing how statistics are used to support or deny claims that environmental injustice has occurred. The basic point to come away with is that results can seem radically different depending on the method of sampling and size of population units used. One point that they don't really touch is how much consistent evidence is really necessary to make a legitimate claim of injustice. If one plant is spewing toxic fumes into a one black community, to what extent does that have to be proven to be a result of racial injustice before the health concerns of the community can be legitimated? Does it matter that there is or isn't an affluent white community 10 miles away not suffering the same ill-effects? Obviously this is peripheral to the real question of institutionalized environmental injustice, but still seems valid to me. There is a tension between a desire to be objective and scientifically 'rigorous,' and a desire to get the right answer, to give the justification for pointing fingers and getting beleaguered communities the reprieve they deserve from environmental ills.

The use of census data is particularly interesting in how the sampling size can change the result. Whether you use a block-tract or a zipcode you can easily manipulate 'scientific' results. I thought the case of the Los Angeles MTA was particularly compelling, because it showed just how inequitably government funding was being used to the disadvantage of the lowest income segments of the population. It steps outside of the argument of market-based hazards sitings.