

Ellie Goetz

The Refinery Next Door

The article titled “The Refinery Next Door,” published by Linda Villarosa from the *New York Times*, covers the environmental and health consequences that the town of Grays Ferry has endured due to its close proximity to an oil refinery. Despite protests, the big business companies in charge of the refinery continued to pollute the land, causing unsafe living conditions for the nearby neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the lack of caution from the P.E.S refinery led to a series of explosions with “heat was so intense that the National Weather Service was able to capture it on satellite from space, using infrared imagery” (Villarosa 47). After this devastating event, the P.E.S refinery filed for bankruptcy. Villarosa notes throughout the passage that executives received around \$4.5 million in retention bonuses while many of the company’s workers were let go with nothing. “The Refinery Next Door” shares first-hand stories about the substantial loss the Grays Ferry community faced as friends, neighbors, and families were diagnosed with a variety of cancers as a result of the polluted environment. The town's victims consisted of many black Americans and other minority groups, as discrimination created by redlining throughout America has led to many neighborhoods being built both on and near hazardous grounds.

Over the last decade, black church leaders and African American politicians have increasingly connected social injustice to environmental issues. As these problems have become more widely discussed, this type of discrimination has been given the title “environmental racism.” Undoubtedly, an environment that is both safe and clean is a necessity for all people. Situations such as Grays Ferry have raised concerns as both human and civil rights issues. James H. Cone, an American theologian and advocate for black theology, found that “Forty percent of the nation's commercial hazardous waste landfill capacity was in three predominately African

American and Hispanic communities” (Cone 39). This provides substantial evidence to the fact that hazardous environments impact the lives of marginal groups, especially poor black communities, more than other groups. With that being said, Cone would respond to the different forms of injustice represented by the refinery by offering the advice that white politicians and theologians need to realize that a fight against racism is also a fight for the betterment of the human race. Environmental racism is a large issue that deserves attention and understanding by the general public. This is further emphasized as Cone states that “What good is it to eliminate racism if we are not around to enjoy a racist-free environment?” (Cone 42) Cone would further emphasize that activism towards preventing environmental racism is important as racism as a whole is interconnected with the deterioration of the planet. If power stays in the hands of companies such as P.E.S., who fail to take action against the environmental and ethical problems that have stemmed from their corporations, black communities will continue to be severely harmed, and so will the Earth.

Throughout Cones' *Whose Earth is it Anyway*, he stresses the critical need for white people to engage in respectful and knowledgeable dialogue with others about their history, cultures, and religions. As mentioned throughout the Cone reading, “no one racial or national group has all the answers, but all groups have something to contribute to the earth's healing” (Cone 44). As citizens of the Earth, it is essential to understand each other's struggles and work together to make the Earth a better and sustainable home for generations to come. To make this change, it is critical that we first understand how environmental racism impacts communities such as the ones noted in “The Refinery Next Door.” White people need to become more aware and develop a better understanding of the environmental health problems that are prominent in

neighborhoods such as Grays Ferry. The devastating consequences of corporate pollution emphasize the need for political and social action towards policy changes.