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Clean as White and Black as Ugly: Environmental Racism and Environmental Injustice as reflected in African American Short Stories

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Abstract

Environmental Racism is a term that indicates the disproportionate environmental burdens imposed on groups or communities as a result of their minority status. The history of environmental discrimination in the United States of America is approximately 300 years old. There has been a perennial injustice and exploitation of the people of African ancestry. They have not only been marginalized politically and socially but also environmentally. America has deliberately and mischievously created the binaries of white and black, clean and dirty, order and disorder, and beautiful and ugly. The present paper aims to decode the acts of Environmental Racism as presented in African American short stories. These stories are selected randomly to argue how American whites have excluded blacks from environmental benefits. The paper also argues how these stories demand environmental justice, sometimes covertly and overtly.

KEYWORDS: Environmental Racism, Blacks, African Americans, America, Segregation, Deprivation, Cleanliness, Dirt.

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> "Goddamnit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. they do things and we can't. it's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence…every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me…why they make us live in one corner of the city?"
>
> (Wright, *Native Son* 50)

> "He looked round the room, seeing it for the first time, there was no rug on the floor and the plastering on the walls and ceilings hung loose in many places. There were two worn iron beds, four chairs, an old dresser, and a drop-leaf table on which they ate. Here all slept in one room; there he would have a room for himself alone. He smelt food cooking and remembered that one could not smell food cooking in the Dalton's home; pots could not be heard rattling all over the house. Each person lived in one room and had a little world of his own."
>
> (Wright, *Native Son* 134-35)

Dr Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., Executive Director of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, coined the phrase "Environmental Racism" in 1987. This term "indicates the disproportionate environmental burdens imposed on groups or communities as a result of their minority status" (Rhodes 14). Though, according to Robert Bullard's Preface in *Dumping in Dixie*, "the terms 'environmental justice', 'environmental racism', and 'environmental equity' have [now] become household words" (xiii), the history of environmental discrimination in the United States of America is approximately 300 years old. In *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*, Carl Zimring argues that America has not treated its Black citizens fairly. There has been a perineal injustice and exploitation of the people of African ancestry. Blacks, as Zimring relates, have not only been marginalized politically and socially but also environmentally. He charts the chronological history of Environmental Racism in the United States and concludes that America deliberately and mischievously created the binaries of white and black, clean and white, order and disorder, and beautiful and ugly. Furthermore, he states that before the revolutionary war and until the end of the civil war, American cities were dirty, unclean, uninhabitable, and unhygienic. It was common, Zimring continues, to come across the waste of humans and animals scattered in industrial neighbourhoods, along with stinking water and foul smells. Due to these very reasons epidemics often attacked cities like Boston, New

York, Philadelphia, Chicago and others. As Zimring retains, it was only after the civil war that a proper system of sanitary hygiene was introduced.

During and after Reconstruction, whites got obsessed with cleanliness. As more and more cities developed proper and well-organized waste management systems, the garbage and murk began to go out of sight and mind. Unfortunately, this did not disappear from the American culture. Whites started distancing themselves from waste and dirty work, as they became capable of buying and discarding more material objects because of the industrial revolution. More and more workforces were now required to handle and dispose of waste. Non-white communities filled this gap. These communities were themselves poor and were in quest of work. As urbanization advanced and more industries came into existence, these communities started to get themselves employed in the waste management industry. At this time, as Zimring points out, almost all waste-related professions became community and ethnicity-specific. For example, the migrant Jews became junk collectors, African American and Irish women provided domestic help in the white upper and middle-class families, and African American men became janitors, waiters, elevator operators and potters. Likewise, Slavic men and Black men provided working hands in the mills and mines, and Chinese men and Black women established a monopoly over laundry. Similarly, Italians controlled rag picking for almost half a century until the Second World War. Melissa Chucker states in her book *Polluted Promises,* "Humans create concepts such as 'race,' 'environment,' and 'pollution,' and humans determine how these concepts are used and understood. Often, they serve the ends of people in power" (34).

All this work, as Zimring maintains, was relegated as dirty, and people who did this work were regarded as dirty. Likewise, poor whites were regarded as trash because of their affinity for dirty work and dirty workers. From the emancipation of slaves until the end of the Second World War, White imagination created graphic and non-graphic images that perpetuated the ideas of clean as white and black as ugly and dirty. Until the end of the Second World War, as Zimring observes, the European and Asian migrants were characterized as waste and discarded, thus outsiders. Science, religion, politics, history and anthropology were used and misused to promote black and other non-white communities, including Native Americans, as impure, dirty and racially inferior. It was extremely common to come across advertisements in which products like soaps, creams, shampoos, and others were promoted and presented as capable of removing

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blackness and dirt. In this way, to bring Zimring again, whiteness was shown next to godliness, and non-white skin was perceived as diabolical, dirty, and impure. As whites were no longer exposed to dirt and dirty work, they enjoyed a healthier lifestyle. And since blacks and other ethnicities were exposed to unclean working conditions, they became more vulnerable to sickness, disintegration, and imminent death.

However, this situation aggravated with the arrival of the suburban culture. As Zimring records, more and more whites started to relocate into these neat and clean suburbs just before the Second World War, which gave them more authority to declare themselves as cleaner and purer. Their vacated houses soon began to be filled by other whites like Jews, Italians, Russians, Irish, Slavic and Polish migrants. After the end of the Second World War, European migrants disappeared from the category of dirt and waste. With half a century of hard work and government schemes related to home loans, these migrants, whose grandfathers, and grandmothers had begun literally from rag picking in America, moved upwards on the social ladder. Unfortunately, blacks could not escape dirt and waste because of their colour. From the 50s onwards, they were joined by Hispanics, South Asians, and Mexicans. Their integration into mainstream white culture presents the narrative of, as Zimring remarks, from rags to riches story.

As America advanced into the last three decades of the 20th century, a new problem surfaced. There were tons of toxic, nuclear, and chemical waste to be disposed of and huge piles of industrial waste too. The neighbourhoods of blacks, Hispanics, Mexicans, Asians, and Native Americans became the dumping grounds of the said waste among many other things. As Bullard states in the Preface of *Dumping in Dixie*:

> Limited housing and residential options, combined with discriminatory facility practices have contributed to the imposition of all types of toxins on African American communities through the siting of garbage dumps, hazardous-waste landfills, incinerators, smelter operations, paper mills, chemical plants, and a host of other polluting industries. (xv)

Bullard also states that “Historically, toxic dumping and the location of locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) have followed the ‘path of least resistance,’ meaning black and poor communities have been disproportionately burdened with these types of externalities” (3). These communities gradually took to demanding environmental justice in the 80s and 90s. They took to the streets, demonstrated ecological rights, and argued that everybody had an equal right to a

clean and healthy environment; they pleaded that their kith and kin were dying because of discarded waste dumped into their communities. The colored people asked to be treated equally and justly as per the constitution and demanded political representation so that their interests could also be addressed during policymaking. They said no to Environmental Racism. Moreover, they asserted their human dignity by demanding clean air, fresh food and a healthy environment. The blacks demanded environmental justice. The present paper aims to decode the acts of Environmental Racism as presented in African American short stories. These stories are selected randomly to argue how American whites have excluded blacks from environmental benefits from the beginning to date. The chapter also contends how these stories demand environmental justice, sometimes covertly and overtly.

Before the analysis of the individual short stories is undertaken, it is pertinent to state that it is impossible to chart the proper beginning of the movement called Environmental Justice in the United States, as Luke Cole and Sheila Foster have argued. Still, it is noteworthy to refer to some of the landmark struggles which have shaped this demand for Environmental Justice.

Some Native American activists and others regard the first environmental justice struggles on the North American continent to have taken place 500 years ago with the initial invasion by Europeans. Many observers have pointed to protests by African Americans against a toxic dump in Warren County, North Carolina, in 1982 as the starting of the movement. They further point to African American student protests over the drowning death of an eight-year-old girl in a garbage dump in a residential area of Houston in 1967. In contrast, Others note that Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. travelled to Memphis to support striking garbage workers in what is now considered an environmental justice struggle when he was assassinated in 1968. As Cole and Foster continue, the United Farm Workers' struggle against pesticide poisoning in the workplace, beginning in the 1960s (and continuing to date), is the starting point for this movement.

No one tributary made the river the force today; indeed, it is difficult to point to the origin since so many tributaries have nourished the movement. However, rather than an incident-focused history of the movement, one can theorize it as Cole and Foster relate; this movement can be thought of metaphorically as a river, fed over time by many tributaries. Particular events can be seen as high-water marks (or perhaps, to push the metaphor, exciting rapids) in each stream or the main river.

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To begin with a specific example, one can quote from “Uncle Wellington’s Wives” by Charles Chesnutt. The story takes the readers to the South after the failure of Reconstruction. The narrative jumps back and forth from North Carolina in the South to Groveland, Ohio in the North and back to North Carolina. On the surface, it is a story of Uncle Wellington and his two wives. It presents Wellington, a mulatto, who runs from North Carolina to Groveland in search of a new wife and comfortable life. Once there, Wellington encounters a bitter reality when he is jilted by his Irish wife and decides to come back to his old wife in North Carolina. The overall tone of the story is comic and full of sarcasm. If one is not reading between the lines, one may miss the underlying thread of Environmental Racism.

First thing first, all the blacks and European migrants in the story are engaged in specific professions of waste management. For example, Aunt Milly, Wellington’s first wife, is a laundress. She is supposed to clean the dirt from white folks’ clothes. After arriving in the North, Wellington takes up the job of a coachman; he is required to handle horses and drive the family of his employer. Mrs Flannigan, the second wife of Wellington, is a recent arrival from Ireland and working as a cook in the kitchen of Mr Todd, a white man. She is supposed to cook healthy and nutritious food for the wealthy white family and is also required to keep the kitchen clean and organized. Mr Todd also hires a German maid to sweep and mop his house. She is engaged in keeping the dust and dirt away from the white man’s house. Later in the story, Wellington goes into the whitewashing business and again is required to keep the dirt and dust away from the houses of the rich white folks. All these occupations, as Zimring argues, were part of waste management programs after the failure of Reconstruction, and all these tasks were to be performed by blacks and new European and Asian migrants.

One can also compare the setting of white and black neighbourhoods to establish the connection between clean and white on the one side and black and dirt on the other side. When Wellington goes to meet his white employer, he is amazed at the neatness of the white locality. The following lines from the story could be an excellent example of this contrast:

> After traversing several cross streets, they turned into Oakwood Avenue and walked along the finest part of it for about half a mile. The handsome houses of this famous avenue, the stately trees, and the wide-spreading lawns dotted with flower beds, fountains, and statuary made a picture so far surpassing anything in Wellington’s experience as to fill him with an almost oppressive sense of its beauty.

> "His looks lack hebben," he said softly.
>
> "It's a pretty fine street," rejoined his companion with a judicial air. (Chesnutt 20)

The word that requires immediate attention is 'Hebben', the distorted version as part of negro dialect of 'Heaven'. If one examines the literary construction of heaven, in the works of both white and black writers, heaven is presented as a neat and clean place. It is a place with evergreen trees, milky rivers, paved roads, golden gates, and God and Angels with white and shining robes. There is not a spec of dirt anywhere. If the white neighbourhood is equated with heaven by two illiterate negros, it means that they have imbibed the given image of heaven in their mind, and unconsciously when they link it with a clean and untainted place, they are also equating whites with the inhabitants of paradise who reside in absolute purity. With this logic, if whites live in heaven, a clean place, they should be clean. Likewise, blacks live outside heaven; one can call it hell, which is dirty and unpleasant, so blacks should be unclean and dirty. For illustration, the black neighbourhood is thus described in the story:

> They followed one of the least handsome streets of the city for more than a mile, turned into a cross street, and drew up before a small frame house, from the front of which a sign, painted in white upon a black background, announced to the reading public, in letters inclined to each other at various angles, that whitewashing and kalsomining were "dun" there. (Chesnutt 17)

This description of the black locality stands nowhere compared to the image mentioned above of the white neighbourhood. It is without greenery. There are no paved roads. Houses are overpopulated. People are primarily employed in the dust management industry. They are unclean, but they must keep white Americans and their neighbourhoods, offices, schools, hospitals, roads etc., neat and clean.

It's not that blacks are always untidy and unorganized in the story. Chesnutt has also presented some blacks as disciplined and clean as whites. For example, the black minister whose stories about the North inspired Wellington to move thither is presented as wonderfully dressed and with a cultivated appearance. Wellington and his wife back in the South have maintained their house, so it is difficult to relate it to disorder and chaos. As Zimring relates, blacks were highly influenced by the ideas of Booker T. Washington towards the end of the 19th century. Washington used to place hygiene above all virtues, and he was a practitioner of all that he used to preach. Despite that, most of the black population was poor and involved in dirt management occupations. Their work was such that there was hardly any time and space left to clean oneself

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and their neighbourhood. As Zimring puts it, these people were performing dirty work; therefore, they were dirty workers and dirty people.

Likewise, in *The City of Refuge*, Rudolph Fisher gives a glimpse of the same attitude towards blacks with slight variation. The opening of the story is thought-provoking and mind-blasting. As Fisher puts it:

> Confronted suddenly by daylight, King Solomon Gillis stood dazed and blinking. The railroad station, the long, white-walled corridor, the impassable slot machine, the terrifying subway train--he felt as if he had been caught up in the jaws of a steam shovel, jammed together with other helpless lumps of dirt, swept blindly along for a time, and at last abruptly dumped. (Fisher 84)

The words "dirt" and "dumped" attract the ears again. Fisher is talking about the mass migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North, which was popularly classified as the Great Migration. After the first World War, blacks left the South and came to the North in considerable numbers to seek new jobs and better lifestyles. The present story opens at a New York train station where a train has just arrived from the deep South. The narrator examines the entire scene as blacks climb down on the station and overcrowd the platform. Gillis, the protagonist, equates the whole crowd with dirt. As Zimring relates, in the first half of the 20th century, blacks were referred to by mainstream media as "Dirt Niggers", as well. Like one dumps waste into a dumping ground, the trains were leaving Dirt Niggers, waste for the white society, into northern towns.

Further, the accommodation in Harlem, where most blacks headed, was also dirty and overpopulated. The description of the living conditions in Harlem, as described by Fisher, makes one feel disgusted and abominate. The white real-estate industry managed the blacks from the South with extreme racism; they were offered dilapidated houses. The rooms were small with practically no window. As Zimring confirms, approximately 50 blacks were required to adjust within 5-7 rooms in each building. There was no separate kitchen or living room. Cooking and cleaning were done in the same room. There used to be only one washroom on each floor, which approximately five or six families had to share. The rooms were infested with insects and stenches of various kinds. In such an atmosphere, one cannot thrive physically and morally. To move out and survive, something next to impossible, blacks had to pick up drugs, drink, bootlegging, smuggling, mugging, and other criminal activities, making them more vulnerable. It

was impossible for the blacks to stay clean, neat, and healthy in such unhygienic conditions. As Bryand and Mohai write, blacks had to manage within their communities' clear-cut reminders of the image of hell on account of dirt and garbage that remained scattered around their vicinities until very recently.

Fisher also paints such a picture of the neighbourhood in Harlem. He draws a graphic image of his living place of Gillis in such a manner that the entire place comes alive:

> King Solomon Gillis sat meditating in a room half the size of his hencoop back home, with a single window opening into an air shaft. An air shaft: cabbage and chitterlings cooking; liver and onions sizzling, sputtering; three player-pianos out-plunking each other; a man and woman calling each other vile things; a sick, neglected baby wailing; a phonograph broadcasting blues; dishes clacking; a girl crying heartbrokenly; waste noises, waste odors of a score of families, seeking issue through a common channel; pollution from bottom to top--a sewer of sounds and smells. (Fisher 88)

According to Luke Cole and Sheila Foster, "Environmental hazards are inequitably distributed in the United States, with poor people and people of colour bearing a more significant share of pollution than richer people and white people" (10).

Blacks had to manage in such an environment. They had come to the north with dreams and desires, but racism and environmental exclusion damaged them. In the story, too, Gillis is caught red-handed when procuring narcotics for his customers. He wants to be a police officer. He wants to marry, have his own family, and live a respectable life. Unfortunately, racism handcuffs him. He is poor and wants to earn more money. For this, he is forced to sell drugs that endanger him. Contrary to this, had he been white and wealthy, he would have lived in a clean and dirt-free neighbourhood, gone to school and college, and become something in life. In that case, he would not have associated himself with dirt and would not have found himself dumped in an unhygienic neighbourhood.

In "He also Loved," Claude McKay also represents the same over-crowdedness in Harlem during the 20s, which defined most urban centres like New York, Boston, Chicago, and others. He also paints a neighbourhood where blacks lived and somehow survived. In this tale, too, one waits for fresh and clean air. Here also, crime thrives. One can find children digging into heaps of junk and garbage to find something edible. Here also, rooms are small, and rent is high. This is how he portrays the suffocating environment:

> Every bed space in the flat was rented. I was living in the small hall bedroom. Ma Lawton asked me to give it up. Four men were sleeping in the front room; two in an old, chipped-enamelled brass bed, one on a davenport, and the other in a folding chair. The old lady put a little canvas cot in that same room, gave me a pillow and a heavy quilt, and said I should try and make myself comfortable there until I got work. (McKay 113)

The narrator is a waiter; there are elevator operators, there are pimps, there are prostitutes, and there are junk and garbage collectors. Wine and drugs are typical here. Here also, blacks perform menial jobs. Though environmental racism as a term did not exist when this story was written, this tale, like others created before and after, exposes the discrimination practised by white America in terms of environmental benefits and can truly be hailed as a forerunner in terms of demanding Environmental Justice. This movement defined the last three decades of the 20th century.

In "Condemned House", Lucille Boehm argues against the popular housing policy of the time, according to which blacks were forced to stay in black neighbourhoods and whites were restricted to white neighbourhoods. The story's opening is enough to cite the case of environmental injustice. It is the time of the great depression. Blacks are out of jobs. They reside in industrial neighbourhoods where streets, air and sky are polluted. The narrator focuses on the murky aspect of the surrounding as soon as the story begins:

> Dusk was falling across the Harlem River like a blanket of cold mud. The sky was dirty with fog. You slipped on the freezing carpet of slush once or twice, but you did not notice. You were too tired. A big ache filled your thoughts. You saw the street ahead of you, but it looked small--dingy--like it was far away. You stared at the kids teasing bonfires along the curb, running their fingers through the flames, chasing each other, dashing into the streets between great groaning trucks. Your nostrils widened, sucking in familiar odours--the oily smell of the fish store on the corner, cooking grease, cheap gasoline, "King Kong", garbage. The stale smells of poverty. (Boehm 125)

As the above lines indicate, there is gloom and murk all around. The setting inspires nothing but helplessness. The narrator asks, how can someone live a happy and healthy life here? In such an ambience, one is likely to embrace dirt whether one wants it or not. Immediately after this description, the narrator focuses on the condemned houses in plenty. These houses are old, bleak, and decaying. One such house is there, which is about to collapse. When the narrator realizes that her nephew is trapped in one such house, she runs to save him. When she arrives there, the nephew is already trapped in the debris of the house. She, with much care, is able to

rescue him. She has to untangle herself from plaster and other junk items when she comes out of the house. Finally, after reaching her own home, the narrator dreams of having solid and durable houses for poor people like herself and others.

Covertly enough, Boehm voices against the racist policies of the time by showing blacks in vulnerable circumstances. As Charles Lee observes, toxic waste and race go hand in hand in the United States. He reports how most of the toxic dumping sites are in poor and black neighbourhoods as if to prove that blacks and toxic waste are synonyms and are to be placed far from white settlements. The narrator, in the story, works as a mouthpiece of the author when she desires to have a neat, clean, and robust house of her own and people like her. Boehm blasts the racist policies of white America, which deprived the blacks of the very basics of life such as clean air, fresh water, healthy food, and a durable house. Blacks, in the story, though silently, protest against Environmental Racism almost 40 years prior to the actual protest of the 80s.

It is afternoon, and the Sun is hot. Ralph Ellison in "Afternoon" presents the dirty and stinky area in the black neighbourhoods. Two friends, Buster and Riely, are just walking here and there to kill time. While passing one of the streets in an all-black locality, they come across a dead cat smelling horrible. Their conversation divulges that it is almost a daily occurrence:

> Buster suddenly stopped and grabbed his nose.
> "Look at that ole dead cat!"
> "Ain't on my mama's table."
> "Mine neither!"
> "You better spit on it, else you will have it for supper," Buster said.
> They spat upon the maggot-ridden body and moved on.
> "Always lots of dead cats in the alley." (Ellison 146)

When Riley inquiries about the white folks in the vicinity, Buster informs him that it is a black neighbourhood as whites departed when blacks started inhabiting it. This demonstrates that blacks were forced to stay in a bleak and unhealthy ambience. Whites enjoyed clean and dirt-free neighbourhoods as they could afford to buy better accommodation in better surroundings. It also reveals that whites did not want to integrate with blacks as they regarded blacks as dirty and impure.

Zora Neale Hurston's story "The Conversion of Sam" also begins with a detailed description of a similar dingy black neighbourhood named Poplar Street. It is called "a down-at-the-heel locality such as is found in all American cities…" which solidifies the fact that all

American towns have designated living-working spaces for blacks that are extremely worn down and dilapidated. Their lives, just like our protagonist Sam's, are driven by the intense desire to be able to move out and live in better circumstances. Poplar street is described as such:

> Drab, tottering old houses with grimy doors and broken windows squat along the narrow thoroughfare; heavy wagons lumber over the uneven cobble-stones, and all manner of filth and trash litter the side-walk and gutter. Indeed, the whole width of the street appears to be a gutter. (Hurston 19)

Sam Simpson is a witty good-natured fellow who is determined to better his life for the young and pretty waitress Stella. She was an octoroon and had very recently moved to the area. She was marked as a "stranger" in these parts of the city because she was "fresh-looking and clean" which was unseemly for the people who lived here (Hurston 20). They were used to living a dirty and lowly life and Stella stood apart in all her cleanliness. Zimring's metaphor of 'clean and white' comes into the picture yet again—blacks could not accept the idea that someone belonging to their class could ever be this neat and clean. But Stella's "cleanliness" was an attraction for Sam, and he wanted to be worthy of her. He cleaned himself up, got new clothes, and managed to get a job outside the pathetic vicinity of Poplar Street. The next time he went to see Stella he was a tidy man. One day Sam gets called in by his boss who is very impressed with his work. He offers to help the soon-to-be-married couple by suggesting they move out of Sam's shabby Poplar Street accommodation. He even offers to call up a friend to fix a house for Sam "up-town where the better class of Negroes live." (Hurston 29). Only the affluent blacks could afford houses that were worth living in. Sam and Stella were fortunate to find a white man who was willing to help them prosper in life. His employer, Mr Bronner, blessed the couple by asking Sam to "respect and honour the woman you are marrying. Keep her clean." (Hurston 31). This comment by the boss says volumes about the dire conditions that blacks had to live in. Nowhere in a white neighbourhood would a man bless a newly wedded couple by wishing them to 'stay clean.' Cleanliness was like a gift to the blacks. It sadly did not come to them naturally. They had to either work very hard to attain it or be fortunate enough like Sam and Stella.

The couple thrived in life. They had done well for themselves. They now lived in a decent house with decent furniture. Stella maintained their abode well. She also regularly cleaned up and combed Sam's hair, which he never used to do before getting married. Sam wore clean clothes now. He stopped associating with people from his old life fearing they might lead him

down the rabbit hole again. Their neat way of life had now become an object of jealousy for the people that Sam used to hang around with prior to his marriage. He met one of his old associates on the street once who "noted Sam's neatness, his air of importance, and hated him" (Hurston 32). This hatred was not personal. This was not directed towards Sam but to the whole spectrum of people who were better off. All blacks desired to live a clean life. But only a very small percentage of them could afford it. Jealousy came naturally to many who wanted to jump to the other side, the better side, but could not.

Another staggering example of environmental injustice can be found in Richard Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground." This is the story of a black man who lives in the sewers of the city. He enters the underground "black depths" one rainy night and spends several days living in the tunnels of the sewers before being shot dead by white police officers and left to rot in the same "watery darkness" (Wright 20). This story is an impossibly explicit example where the life of a black man has been equated to everything dark, disgusting, dirty, and dreary. He plunged into the underground because he had nowhere else to go. When he has had enough and cannot take this life anymore, he emerges out of the tunnels and attempts to redeem himself by trying to talk to people. They dismiss him as a mad man, a shadow, a drunkard and/or an insignificant pest. The pathetic description of his 'home' is so dreadful that it forces one to imagine how it would be possible for someone to live down there both physically and mentally:

> Knee-deep in the pulsing current, he breathed with aching chest, filling his lungs with the hot stench of yeasty rot…his feet sloshing over the slimy bottom…[he] saw a huge rat, wet with slime, blinking beady eyes and blaring tiny fangs…a stagnant pool of gray-green sludge; at intervals a balloon pocket rose from the scum glistening a bluish-purple, and burst… (Wright 21-27)

He survives in the sewers by trespassing through the tunnels to whichever wall he felt like. Once he dug into a church, another time into a jeweller's shop, once into a meat and fruits shop, once into a cinema hall basement, etc. He smelt like a dead person and looked like one too. It was pitch dark under there save for a few damp matches that the man had in his pocket— "he had learnt a way of seeing in his dark world, like those sightless worms that inch along underground by a sense of touch" (Wright 32). For sustenance, he took whatever he could without being seen or noticed by anybody. One time he stole a handyman's sandwiches which he ate "like a dog, he ground the meat bones with his teeth" (Wright 33). This man could be equated to filthy animals

and vermin. His life was no better than that of a parasite in foul water. Even after living like this, he did not feel his life above ground was any better than living in the sewers. He felt the above-ground was the "dead world of sunshine and rain" which had "condemned him… [it was] a wild forest filled with death" (Wright 47-54). The aboveground had not treated him any better than the underground. He was a pest in both worlds. "He imagined that he was a rich man who lived aboveground in the obscene sunshine, and he was strolling through a park of a summer morning, smiling, nodding to his neighbours, sucking an after-breakfast cigar." (Wright 55). His dreams were of bright sunshine, parks he could walk aimlessly in, ample food to satisfy his hunger and a world which was not so bleak and dark all the time. The aboveground society had deprived him of anything clean or fresh and he had now fallen to the depths of despair, quite literally. He was a black man. His mere identity made him feel like even the sunshine that he got was "dark" and "cruel."

The underground man believed that staying in the slimy sewers was "defining the limits of living" (Wright, 58) and the "bright tableau of daylight" did not belong to people like him (Wright 61). Society had forced him and many others like him to live in the dark and remain consistently dirty. He peeped through the holes in the walls into the affluent lives of whites and he thoroughly loved them. It felt like an impossible world to him. He attempts to tell some white police officers about his excursion to the sewers but they waive him off as a lunatic. But even in their joke, they end up stating the harsh dark reality of a black man's life:

> "What do you suppose he's suffering from?" Johnson asked.
> "Delusions of grandeur, maybe," Murphy said.
> "Maybe it's because he lives in a white man's world," Lawson said. (Wright 81)

Both Hurston and Write implicitly and explicitly reiterate Carl Zimring's 'myth of clean and white' through their works. The aforementioned two stories are also clear reproductions of the same debate of environmental segregation that Chesnutt, Fisher, McKay and Boehm have deliberated upon in their fiction. Whites knowingly and readily deprive blacks of a healthy and safe space of sustenance. This premeditated reservation of all good things from the environment for the whites is the backbone of environmental injustice. Blacks have been left to fend for themselves on the fringes of civilized society like rodents and dogs. They have been deliberately marginalized and subjected to unhygienic food, water, air, and place of residence and their entire existence revolves around bettering their filthy surroundings in some way or the other.

To conclude, it can safely be argued that African-American stories are inundated with examples of Environmental Racism. African American writers have been conscious of this environmental injustice as it was heaped upon the blacks. The above-mentioned short stories are graphic illustrations of the appropriation of 'the myth of clean and white' in black lives and how blacks were relegated to the idea of dirty and unclean. These stories also unfold how America perpetuated the symbols of purity and cleanliness and how these symbols damaged the very image of blacks and other marginalized communities. Though, Environmental Racism and Environmental Injustice appear only in the 1980s in day-to-day parlance. The American society however had been practising environmental exclusion since the early 1700s, as is indicated by the terms: "Big House" and "Slave Cabin". The whites continuously inhabited the Big House and were always neat and clean. On the other hand, Slave Cabins were dirty, small, and without windows or any living area, which indicates that the blacks, from the days of slavery, were forced to live in unclean and disordered accommodations. In brief, the whites controlled not only the politics, religion, and literature but even the environment. Everything clean was reserved for the whites while the blacks were subjected to everything dirty and ended up being stuck with being perpetually filthy in the eyes of their white counterparts. The whites got brilliant sunlight and fresh flowers, while dirt, mud, swamps, pollution, contaminated air and soiled water fell into the laps of the blacks.

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