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**Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution,
and Residential Mobility by Dorceta E. Taylor**

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Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility by Dorceta E. Taylor (New York University Press; 281 pages; 2014)

Most people today are familiar with the basic contours of the environmental justice argument: racial and ethnic minorities and the poor are subjected to greater environmental risks and harm than other population groups. In *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility*, Dorceta E. Taylor offers a much deeper portrait of the environmental justice movement, illustrating how minorities and the poor suffer injustices at the hands of profit-seeking businesses and government.

Taylor marshals an impressive array of research to examine how and why people of color end up living near toxic waste, resulting in greater exposure to toxins and an increase in associated health risks. To rationalize this phenomenon and challenges to the environmental justice thesis, Taylor reviews various theories for why minorities and the poor may end up living near toxic waste for reasons other than overt discrimination. For example, Taylor considers a market dynamics theory, which posits that racial discrimination is not actually a factor in selecting toxic waste disposal sites. Rather, there is a coincidence in what companies look for to dispose of toxic waste and what the poor, including a disproportionate number of minorities, look for in housing: cheap land.

Taylor goes on to explore in detail other questions that stem from the market dynamics theory, including: who is able to leave and who ends up staying in toxic waste disposal areas; which community characteristics offer companies the “path of least resistance” and which characteristics help communities resist disposal facilities; what happens when various racial groups move through the same neighborhood over time; what happens to property values when toxic wastes are cleaned up; and which came first, the toxic sites or the minority residents.

Taylor also examines the internal colonialism theory of how minorities and the poor face higher risks from hazardous wastes. This theory proposes that businesses, which tend to congregate into power bases in “core” urban areas, act to exploit communities with little economic or political power in “peripheral” rural areas by outsourcing their dirty work to these remote places. In particular, Taylor reviews research on health risks to Native American communities posed by years of unsafe uranium mining and radioactive waste dumping on Indian reservations. Environmental justice advocates claim corporations exploit Native workers with low wages, unsafe conditions, and by “splitting” corporate operations such that “clean” administrative functions are

located in major cities or suburbs, while the “dirty” and “dangerous” work happens near less powerful communities far from corporate managers.

Another argument that challenges the environmental racism thesis is that companies only seek out waste disposal areas based on suitable geographical and physical characteristics, and do not intentionally search for communities “willing” to accept toxic waste. Taylor offers case studies of rural communities in the South that sit above a thick layer of dense chalk, creating a barrier that protects the aquifer underneath these communities. Companies have clamored to locate toxic waste facilities near these communities as the chalk layer allows them to dispose of waste with minimal threat to groundwater. The communities that sit above this chalk layer, however, are heavily African American and very poor. Taylor challenges the “unique physical characteristics” explanation for waste disposal designation with studies suggesting that among all sites with physical characteristics suitable for safe waste disposal, the actual disposal still takes place disproportionately near communities with the least ability to resist.

Interestingly, Taylor goes further, offering a broader context to better understand exactly how residential segregation itself occurred, setting up the possibility for the environmental injustices that have arisen in the past forty years. Taylor points out that racial segregation did not happen “naturally,” but was intentionally constructed to restrict people of different races from living in the same neighborhoods. She considers the important role that local zoning laws and private restrictive covenants played in segregating communities by race, noting that segregation was almost always instigated to keep non-whites out of white neighborhoods. Moreover, by concentrating minority communities into segregated housing, these communities are put at greater risk of being targeted for toxic waste disposal sites and are more restricted in their ability to move elsewhere.

A sociologist by training and a professor of Natural Resources, Taylor’s analysis in *Toxic Communities* includes plenty for lawyers and legal scholars to chew on. Throughout the book, she reflects on both the role the law has played in facilitating the actions of polluters and in offering protection to targeted communities. She describes various statutes, ordinances, cases, and administrative actions that have played key roles in shaping environmental justice and injustice. Through the years, some courts have ruled that local ordinances and state statutes that unfairly target minority communities were unconstitutional violations of equal protection and due process. But more often, courts have applied the commerce clause or the takings clause of the U.S. Constitution to instead disallow the application of local ordinances

designed to keep communities free of harmful waste, thereby facilitating and protecting the actions of companies looking to dump toxic waste. Moreover, federal legislation such as the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), are applied disproportionately to protect higher income and white neighborhoods. As Taylor shows, the law often poses a barrier that makes it difficult for minority communities to keep toxic waste facilities out.

Taylor's prose is scientific: terse and declarative sentences that report facts, data, and research results. She meticulously documents environmental justice research from most of the twentieth century to the present, drawing on literally hundreds of sources. *Toxic Communities* is packed with valuable information that will appeal to professional lawyers, sociologists, political scientists, activists, community organizers, and others with a direct interest in environment and social justice. By focusing on facts, however, the stories of real people are at times lost. Much of the book reads like a detailed literature review, and may be difficult and less engaging for environmental justice novices. Those with a professional interest in the field, however, will likely embrace this book as a valuable resource, akin to an encyclopedia of environmental justice research.

In *Toxic Communities* Taylor has produced a comprehensive and thorough overview of environmental justice. Her book truly represents a commendable achievement and a worthy contribution to the literature on racism, justice, and the environment.

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