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Waste: One Woman's Fight Against America's Dirty Secret by Catherine Coleman Flowers (The New Press, 2020)

Deanna Warren
University of New Mexico - School of Law

BOOK REVIEW

Waste: One Woman's Fight Against America's Dirty Secret by Catherine Coleman Flowers (The New Press, 2020)

In Catherine Coleman Flowers' *Waste*, the title has a dual meaning. Waste refers to both the raw sewage that flows into large cesspools behind the homes of Lowndes County's poorest residents, and the inescapable, intergenerational poverty of Lowndes—the waste of talent, intellect, and creativity that might otherwise be realized but for the impacts of environmental racism. Ultimately, the latter may be America's more shameful dirty secret.

If the singular focus of *Waste* was the extent of rural Alabama's wastewater problem, Flowers might simply populate its pages with statistical data—for example, an estimated ninety percent of Lowndes households lack adequate wastewater systems. Indeed, the persuasive value of the data cannot be overstated, and Flowers leverages that data to dramatic effect. Instead, Flowers chooses to tell a story—her story. And it is through her unique lens as an educator, historian, and longtime resident of Lowndes that Alabama's raw sewage problem is transformed into a social justice cause.

Through vignettes of Lowndes residents, *Waste* captures and catalogues the daily indignities of being Black at the intersection of poverty and environmental racism. The book opens with a portrait of a problem. It situates the reader in a rural Alabama community with no tax base, failing or nonexistent septic infrastructure, and a Department of Health empowered to criminally cite residents who fail to maintain septic systems. That's right—failure to maintain a permitted septic system is a criminal offense in Alabama.

Throughout the book, Flowers enumerates the many barriers that Lowndes residents face in accessing basic infrastructure, from costly perc tests to even costlier engineering. Beyond the obvious problem of the contents of toilets backing up and flooding homes lies an even more insidious issue. Installing and maintaining septic systems is often prohibitively expensive for the average Lowndes homeowner, who must then turn to makeshift solutions.

When residents are forced to engineer makeshift septic systems out of PVC pipes to relieve the waste from their homes, raw sewage is then drained into fields and forms large cesspools. These pools of raw sewage sit stagnant in the same fields where children play. The ubiquity of such systems has created a dire public health crisis across the southeastern United States—predominantly, the re-emergence of the once-eradicated hookworm. Further, the impacts of climate change are fueling a greater likelihood of exposure to hookworm; as warm temperatures persist, conditions worsen. As Flowers puts it, "the pride and independence of home ownership came to rest there, in that stinking pool."

The wastewater crisis in Lowndes will, no doubt, draw unenviable comparisons to the Flint water crisis. After all, it depicts the same hallmark failures: governmental neglect, a predominantly Black community suffering from illnesses borne of that neglect, and a protracted fight to access basic sanitation. While Flowers points to some similarities between the crises, she is careful to distinguish failing

infrastructure from non-existent infrastructure—a uniquely rural issue. It is the phenomenon of rural bias that Flowers is dedicated to exposing. This is where Flowers the historian comes in. In *Waste*, past is the prologue. For it is understanding the tentacular nature of history and the deep determinism of racial segregation in the rural south that brings into sharp relief why certain people, and places, are subject to waste.

The history of Lowndes County, Alabama—a rural enclave just a few miles outside of Montgomery—likely foreshadowed the current state of affairs and, perhaps, even Flowers' own emergence as a champion of rural infrastructure issues. The two-traffic-light county sits on the famed Selma to Montgomery route. In Lowndes, the legacy of civil rights looms large and Flowers dedicates a substantial portion of the book to detailing its history. She also considers its many ironies. The same soil worked by enslaved people and prized for its ability to shelter the roots of cotton plants is now the chief culprit frustrating efforts to bring septic infrastructure to rural Alabama. The dense soil resists water like Lowndes once resisted change. And while other rural locales make appearances in *Waste*, it is largely to illustrate the breadth of America's wastewater problem. Here, the focus is firmly anchored in the impermeable clay soil of Alabama's Black Belt. And it is here that Flowers brings her fight.

The chief appeal of *Waste* is its defiance of conventional genre classifications—it is part history, part memoir, part activist blueprint. The book's many intersections, from the historical to the scientific, converge to give shape to an unwieldy problem. As Flowers expertly illustrates through the two-hundred pages of science, story, and sounding the alarm, a solution is only as good as the diagnosis upon which it is based. Flowers points to a fundamental flaw in the diagnosis of rural Alabama's raw sewage problem—namely, that it is first and foremost an infrastructure problem easily rectified through dedicated federal funding. Much to the chagrin of Alabama Department of Health officials, Flowers urges a deeper assessment. Rather than a wholesale acceptance that Lowndes', and other rural counties', issues can be relieved by a simple fix to infrastructure; Flowers posits that the answer lies in building political power among rural communities to counteract the campaign of broad disenfranchisement and systemic disinvestment.

Far from a one-dimensional account of why raw sewage is a problem, *Waste* makes the personal universal. Flowers offers up her own story and observations to open a dialogue and to shine a light on this dirty secret. The book is conversational—it feels as though Flowers is engaged with each individual reader compelling concern about an issue that might otherwise garner apathy. While some may quibble with the non-linear nature of the story, its impact is undeniable and its tangents rich with insight. For the uninitiated, it arouses curiosity about the realities of rural America. For activists, it is a study in persistence and seeking out allies across the political spectrum. For environmentalists, it is an invitation to look beyond the science toward interdisciplinary solutions that recognize historical realities as the catalyst for environmental issues. It is a reminder that the reader can be all of these things. *Waste* is an accessible primer on the history, science, and sociology of complicated and multi-faceted rural environmental issues of which the problem of raw sewage is a small but important outgrowth.

Waste is a story about what and whom we sacrifice when we prioritize politically expedient solutions over people; it is about what happens when we waste our greatest resource—our communities.

Deanna Warren
Class of 2023
UNM School of Law