

GUEST ESSAY

# Everyone Will Breathe This Polluted Air One Day

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**By Margaret Renkl**

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NASHVILLE — Something wonderful happened in Memphis last month: Community organizers in the city managed to stop a crude-oil pipeline from running beneath the historic neighborhood of Boxtown, as well as several other predominantly Black communities along its projected 45-mile route.

The Byhalia Connection pipeline was to be a joint venture by Plains All American Pipeline and Valero Energy. As *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis reported in March, Plains All America was already plagued by environmental problems, including a major oil spill on the California coast in 2015. Meanwhile, closer to Memphis, a leak of crude oil and benzene — a known carcinogen — occurred in 2020 near the place where the proposed pipeline was set to join an existing storage site.

Despite these companies' terrible safety records, the proposed pipeline, which was first announced in December 2019, would have routed it directly beneath a fragile sand aquifer that supplies much of the drinking water in Shelby County, Tenn., where Memphis is.

Adding insult to injury were the strong-arm tactics that pipeline representatives employed against holdout neighbors in Boxtown, which was established by formerly enslaved people shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation. When residents refused to sell family land for the pittance they were offered, the companies sued for rights to the property under eminent domain, as reported by the nonprofit journalism sites MLK50 and Southerly. Pipeline representatives even told residents they were taking “the point of least resistance” in siting the pipeline.

That they were not successful is a testament to the power of community organizing. Led by the grass-roots group Memphis Community Against the Pipeline and backed by the nonprofits Protect Our Aquifer and the Tennessee chapter of the Sierra Club, the effort attracted the support of celebrities like former Vice President Al Gore, the actor Danny Glover and the singer-songwriter Justin Timberlake. Legal efforts against the pipeline were led by the Southern Environmental Law Center. Local and state elected officials stepped in to help, as well.

The defeat of the Byhalia Connection pipeline was a rare victory against the forces of a very specific brand of discrimination known as environmental racism. What happened in Memphis is just one of many similar stories playing out in the region.

There's the stench of sewage in a historically Black neighborhood in Louisville, Ky. The proposed grain elevator that would turn a historically Black community in Louisiana into an industrial complex. The natural gas facility in Virginia that would aid the extension of an oil pipeline through a historically Black community in Pittsylvania County. The creosote contamination in a historically Black neighborhood in Houston. The toxic coal ash moved from a predominantly white community in Tennessee and dumped in a predominantly Black community in Alabama.

In every state in the South, people of color suffer more from the effects of pollution than white people do, but it's important to note that this appalling reality does not end at the Mason-Dixon Line. Think of the undrinkable water in Flint, Mich., or the toxic refinery emissions in the Grays Ferry neighborhood of Philadelphia or the new natural gas pipeline in north Brooklyn being constructed directly beneath neighborhoods populated predominantly by Black and Latino New Yorkers. Environmental racism is not a regional poison.

“Black Americans are exposed to more pollution from every type of source, including industry, agriculture, all manner of vehicles, construction, residential sources and even emissions from restaurants,” the Times climate reporters Hiroko Tabuchi and Nadja Popovich wrote in April about a new study in the journal *Science Advances*.



Lucy Garrett

That report confirms earlier findings in study after study, including one in 2018 by the Trump administration’s Environmental Protection Agency. “Race, not poverty, is the strongest predictor of exposure to health-threatening particulate matter, especially for African Americans,” Robert Bullard, a professor of urban planning and environmental policy and administration of justice at Texas Southern University, told Inside Climate News in response to the 2018 report.

In some ways, it makes a kind of grim sense that the people most harmed by environmental hazards are the same people who are most harmed by society as a whole.

“Whenever there’s a question of where to site a polluting facility, there’s a calculus to that decision,” Chandra Taylor, the senior attorney and leader of the Southern Environmental Law Center’s Environmental Justice Initiative, told me in a phone interview last week. “Part of that calculus involves zoning decisions. Part of that calculus involves the price of land. And part of the calculus involves the political power of the communities that are near that property.”

Polluting industries count on the communities they target to be powerless, and they count on people in powerful communities to pay no attention. For wealthier communities, it tends to be an out-of-sight-out-of-mind situation, at least until it creeps close enough to become a not-in-my-backyard fight of their own.

Ignoring distant injustices is not merely an indifference to human suffering; it also reflects a failure to understand how environmental damage really works. Polluted air doesn't park itself over low-wealth communities. Polluted water doesn't stay put in Black or brown neighborhoods. As Ms. Taylor points out, "Anything that causes a devastating harm to people of color is eventually going to happen to everyone."

Efforts to disenfranchise people of color have been going on in the South since Reconstruction. During Jim Crow, disenfranchisement took the form of directly denying the vote. Today, it's more likely to look like burdensome barriers to voting — requiring photo IDs but shuttering the local Department of Motor Vehicles office, closing polling places and limiting voting hours — or gerrymandering political districts in order to dilute the voting power of communities of color.

But political power isn't a static thing. What happened in Memphis this year is an example of how historically powerless people can work together to interrupt a pattern of environmental racism that has been in place for more than a century and a half. It's also an example of why everyone else should care.

Margaret Renkl, a contributing Opinion writer, is the author of the books "Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss" and the forthcoming "Graceland, at Last: Notes on Hope and Heartache From the American South."

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