



## ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM: HURSTON, WRIGHT, AND THE PANDEMIC

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### Article info

Article Received:17/05/2023

Article Accepted:22/06/2023

Published online:26/06/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.2.248](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.2.248)

### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic painted a picture of global vulnerability by the way that our world had come to a complete standstill. Though the pandemic struck the world as a whole, it has been found that the people who have been impacted more are those who were already being discriminated against. This paper attempts to bring forward the devastating impacts of Covid-19 on the African American community in the United States. It strives to correlate the absence of medical facilities available to Blacks as depicted in the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, with a similar existing scenario that came to light during the pandemic even a century later. There has been either complete literary silence or the voicing of a lack of medical care available to the people of African descent in the works of the said authors and among many others. Covid-19 being taken as a natural calamity is a premise for the present study. According to recent Covid-19 reports, Black counties in the U.S.A. have three times the rate of infections and six times the rate of deaths compared to White counties. This higher infection rate in the Black community can easily be associated with higher poverty rates, lower living standards, limited health care access, etc. People who are ghettoised and compelled to live in cramped circumstances become more vulnerable to natural disasters, like the Covid-19. The fulcrum of this study is the vulnerability of a segment of people. The paper analyses selected fiction by Hurston and Wright with a special focus on shorter fiction, to highlight how the policies of Environmental Racism were prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are, unfortunately, still at work today.

**Keywords:** Environmental Racism, Environmental Injustice, African American Literature, Segregation, Vulnerability

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on societies worldwide, revealing the vulnerability and inequalities that exist within our global community. While the pandemic has affected people from all walks of life, it has disproportionately impacted those who are already marginalized and lacking in material resources. This research paper aims to shed light on the devastating consequences of Covid-19 specifically on Black

communities in the United States. Drawing on the literary works of Hurston and Wright, which highlighted the absence of adequate medical care for Black individuals, this study seeks to establish a connection between the historical struggles depicted in these works and the current realities faced by Black communities during the pandemic. By considering Covid-19 as a natural calamity, the study argues that those who have been historically

marginalized and kept separate from nature are particularly vulnerable to its effects. Disturbing statistics reveal that Black counties in the U.S.A. have experienced three times the rate of infections and six times the rate of deaths compared to white counties. This disparity can be attributed to higher poverty rates, lower living standards, and limited access to healthcare among the Black population. Furthermore, individuals living in impoverished and overcrowded conditions are at an increased risk. Thus, this paper focuses on the vulnerability of a specific segment of society and analyses selected works of fiction by Hurston and Wright, with an emphasis on shorter stories, to expose the enduring prevalence of Environmental Racism from the 1920s and 1930s to the present day.

Environmental Racism refers to the disproportionate exposure of marginalized communities, particularly minority and low-income populations, to environmental hazards and pollutants. It is a form of systemic discrimination where marginalized communities are more likely to live in close proximity to toxic waste sites, industrial facilities, and other environmental hazards compared to wealthier and predominantly white communities. Environmental justice, on the other hand, is a movement that emerged in response to environmental racism. It seeks to address the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and ensure that all individuals, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or other social factors, have equal access to a clean and healthy environment. The Environmental Justice Movement aims to fight against Environmental Racism by advocating for equitable environmental policies, regulations, and practices. It emphasizes the right to a safe and healthy environment for everyone, regardless of their background. The movement strives to empower marginalized communities to have a voice in decision-making processes related to environmental issues that affect their lives. It also seeks to address the intersectionality of environmental justice with other social justice movements, recognizing that environmental inequalities are often intertwined with issues such as race, poverty, housing, and public health. It was started primarily by people of color in an effort to

remedy the disparate access to environmental care in their communities. Numerous studies produced by the movement reveal that exposure to environmental damage is unequally distributed among the people of the US. In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice (UCC) released a document called "Toxic Waste in the United States." It revealed the challenges of race and the environment on a nationwide scale (Chavis Jr. 4). Thus, the UCC kickstarted a movement that brought to light several underlying environmental issues being faced by minorities and paved a way for rectifying them. The Environmental Justice Movement is still as active as it had been during its conception years. This shows how environmental justice is still a dream for people of color and environmental racism is still a practice that is prevalent in America.

The Covid-19 pandemic shook our world. It brought everything to a standstill. It brought chaos, fear, scarcity, and helplessness into the lives of people. But communities of color in the U.S.A., especially Blacks, already had to live like this even before the advent of the coronavirus. Slavery in the United States has been unconstitutional since 1865 and segregation has been legally abolished since 1964. Even though the practice is knowingly unlawful, African Americans are still marginalized in all walks of life. The most evident example of this claim can be found in the statistical data that has been collected during and in the aftermath of the deadly covid-19 waves. Even though the pandemic struck the world as a whole, it was Blacks who were most deeply affected in the United States. "By May 27 2020, the United States had recorded 100,000 deaths from Covid-19, nearly half—48.1 percent of whom were people of color...African Americans constitute only 12 percent of the US population, but 42 percent of Covid-19 deaths" (Washington xi). the American Public Media regularly reported about the Covid-19 statistics by race/ethnicity throughout America. Their reports are evidence that the African American population in most states bore the "brunt of the pandemic's health impact" (Vasquez Reyes 302).

In the initial coronavirus reporting, the black community was often left out with the prime

focus being on white patients and medical staff. This absence gave way to a peculiar myth that the African American community had some “racial immunity” to the virus. This false belief led to large black gatherings and other communal meetings that drastically escalated the already terrible circumstances for the people of color. The cases rose, leading to further deaths and vulnerability. This is what led the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to agree to report “deaths by race and ethnicity after being pursued by activists” (Vasquez Reyes 306). This pretend-immunity of Blacks against deadly diseases had also surfaced during the HIV disease, hepatitis C, Ebola, Zika, etc. It is sure to emerge again if/when any other disease strikes. “A suit of vulnerabilities, including lack of access to health care and treatment, [makes] higher rates of infection among people of color all but inevitable” (Washington xi). Blacks had very little to no access to covid tests and the highest rate of not being medically insured. They had to rely upon emergency departments which do not provide sustained care.

“The overrepresentation of African Americans among confirmed COVID-19 cases and the number of deaths underscores the fact that the coronavirus pandemic, far from being an equalizer, is amplifying or even worsening existing social inequalities tied to race, class, and access to the health care system.” (Vasquez Reyes 304)

Blacks also did not have the luxury of working from home because most of the African American population works as “essential” workers or as frontline employees. They did not have the option to avoid “crowded workplaces and mass transit” (Washington xii) because of the nature of their ways of sustenance. To top it all, there was an acute shortage of protective gear for them in the initial covid waves, thus, escalating the situation. Black residential areas are cramped and shared living spaces where social distancing was also next to impossible. Also, their vulnerability to the novel coronavirus was increased manifold because “they have relatively high chronic disease burdens—specifically diabetes, asthma and hypertension—

and so [were] at a higher risk for developing serious complications” (Blackstock).

Harriet A Washington, in her book *A Terrible Thing to Waste*, gives a detailed account of the said high chronic disease burden of African Americans in the United States. It has been stated in the Preface of her book that it is certain “that every established risk factor for coronavirus can be caused or exacerbated by environmental racism”. She has thoroughly researched the systematic environmental racism prevalent in America and has masterly talked about “its assault on the American mind”. She has documented the haunting realities of the fence-line communities systematically with various case studies and examples from real life. She has also elucidated how and why Blacks were more prone to and affected by the coronavirus because of environmental racism in America. This book vindicates the major findings of social theory by providing research in biochemical and bio-medical fields. It substantiates the operation of environmental racism in America and its impacts on African Americans both individually and severally. This in turn also affects interracial communications and relations. Upon reading the account of Washington, it becomes very clear that the condition of African Americans in the U.S.A. is as deplorable still as it had been during the time when authors like Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright were writing, i.e., the 1920s-30s. The only difference now is that we have factual explanations for the behavior and suffering of the people living on fences, especially Blacks, which we did not have back then. Blacks have been the carriers of innumerable misfortunes and calamities for the same reasons why they had to carry most of the burden of the covid-19 pandemic in America.

Since coronavirus struck like a massive lightning stroke, nobody had the equipment to immediately deal with it. The first safety measure that World Health Organization announced was to keep people away from offices and workplaces and transition to working from home. Blacks did not have the luxury to be able to work from home because most of them are employed in front-line jobs as cleanliness workers, medical staff, postal service workers, waste disposal employees, etc. Frontline

workers typically work at stores, restaurants, salons, driving trucks, hospitals, construction sites, factories, pharmacies, warehouses, etc. These jobs are not high-paying ones and do not come with benefits like health insurance or paid leaves. Frontline workers had to daily go out in the world and report for duty, thus exposing themselves to the virus on a daily basis. There can be found innumerable examples in the literature of both Hurston and Wright where Blacks work menial jobs that expose them to all sorts of hazards. In Wright's *Native Son*, Bigger works as a driver for the Daltons, Bigger's mother works as a house help in a White household, and so does Bessie. In the story "Man of All Works" by Wright, Carl is laid off from a restaurant where he worked as a cook. The only job opportunities for him now are as a machinist, a bricklayer, a pipe fitter, a mason, or a salesman. In the story "The Man Who Went to Chicago", Richard works as a porter, then as a dishwasher, and then as a waiter in a restaurant. Fred Daniels in *The Man Who Lived Underground* worked as a gardener for a wealthy White family, and Cross Damon from *The Outsider* works as a postal worker. In Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*, a White character Jim employed Black men as woodcutters for his estate. He expresses that "since the colored men did all of the manual work, they were the ones who actually knew how things were done..." (Hurston 666). In Hurston's story "Sweat", Delia Jones is a washerwoman. Apart from these, there can be found a hundred more examples only from the works of these authors that confirm the kind and quality of jobs that were and still are available to African Americans in the United States. These jobs may have changed faces over time, but their nature remains the same.

Another measure that the WHO suggested for impeding the spread of the coronavirus was social distancing. Black Belts in the United States are considered to be the residential areas with the lowest possible living standards. These are cramped spaces with tiny apartments stacked upon each other like boxes with no possible means of cleaning them to make them healthy and livable. Whereas White residential areas are neat, clean, and spacious. Residential segregation "is a major

determinant of racial differences in neighbourhood quality and living conditions." Recent scientific reports have demonstrated that "race poses a strong risk factor for the placement of environmental poisons" (Washington 103). Wright details the plight of African American households of his time in detail in most of his books, like *Native Son*, *A Father's Law*, *The Outsider*, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, etc. An apartment building where ten people live in a flat that is meant for two. Bigger Thomas' flat was so small that in order to get to the other side of the room, one had to climb and step over the foldable beds. They did not have a separate bedroom, a hall, or even a kitchen. Everything was present in one hall. The cooking area was separated by a thin curtain. In the mornings, the boys averted their eyes when the womenfolk had to change clothes, and the women turned their backs as the menfolk changed. Cross Damon's house in *The Outsider* is also in shambles. The room where Marie from *A Father's Law* lives is also depressingly dingy and dark. People who lived in the Black Belt areas had a "locked-in" life (Wright, *Native Son* 11). There were dives and alleys littered with garbage which was a breeding place for mosquitoes and vermin. As Hurston states in one of her short stories "The Conversion of Sam" – "the whole width of the streets appeared to be a gutter" (Hurston 17). Blacks had to live in such ghastly and inhumane conditions while their White counterparts rejoiced in all their affluence and grandeur. It is sad to accept that their living situation has not got much better even after so many years. They still do not have ready access to ample medical facilities, or clean food and water. Blacks in America are still at the receiving end of the residual of Whites. They receive poisoned soils, wastelands full of radioactive spilling from mines, air pollution from White factories, toxic water supply, low-grade food, etc.

African Americans and most other marginalized Americans of color are preferentially affected by environmental poisons because they are more likely to live in areas called "sacrifice zones". A sacrifice zone "is a geographic area that has been permanently impaired by heavy environmental alterations or economic disinvestment, often through locally unwanted land use (LULU)" (Roake).

These zones are most commonly found in low-income and minority communities. It is a place where the sacrifice is not a choice but a compulsion. The community or the land being sacrificed have no say and someone else makes these decisions for them. Certain groups of people may need to be harmed or sacrificed in the name of progress for the benefit of other groups. Their physical location in sacrifice zones puts the people of color more at risk from calamities like earthquakes, floods, and medical emergencies like the coronavirus. These are the last people who are reported about in the news, just like it has happened in the case of the covid-19 pandemic, the last ones to receive aid, and the last ones to be rehabilitated. Such treatment also finds reproduction in literature.

Both Hurston and Wright have written about floods and their aftermath for Blacks in America. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has ample examples of where Janie and her people were the last ones to be rescued from the flood and how little aid was available to them. Tea Cake died of madness because there weren't provisions for these people to save themselves in the face of the horrors of water and incessant rainfall. John Redding from the short story by Hurston "John Redding Goes to Sea" also died because he was building a bridge upon a river that was sure to flood. If John was a young White boy, he would instead have been sitting in the safety of his house while the storm passed. In Wright's short story "The Man Who Saw the Flood", if it were a little White family instead of a little Black one, they would not have had to wander back to their damp submerged house after the flood water had receded because they would have already been rehabilitated to somewhere safe and clean by the authorities (Wright, *Eight Men* 104). They would anyway have had to live in an identified low-lying area to be affected by the floods to such an extent. Post-disaster reconstruction also has a way of worsening the environmental conditions for marginalized people in the affected areas. Debris are dumped near their neighborhood; the building material used to supposedly help them rebuild their houses are substandard and often toxic. For example, Washington has reported in her book that the air and environmental pollution standards were

lowered by the government in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina. Another recent example is the 2017 Hurricane Harvey which hit minority communities located near the Arkema chemical plant the hardest because it exploded after the storm.

Even in the absence of these calamities, communities of color are deliberately exposed to environmental poisons. This exposure causes severe medical conditions which are not always detectable. Environmental poisons like mercury, manganese, and pesticides cause behavioral fall-out, impulsivity, and criminality. The rashness of Bigger from *Native Son*, the rage of Johnny from *The Rite of Passage*, the overthinking of Ruddy from *A Father's Law*, etc. can be all attributed to the environmental pollution around them. It is quite possible that Cross Damon from Wright's *The Outsider* would not have become a criminal had he not lived in the Chicago Black Belt, because he would not have been exposed to chemicals which tampered with his brain cells. The pollution-free suburbs of the United States did not have wall paints made of deadly lead that caused their children to lose their minds. Neither do they have lead plumbing in their walls that poison their water. "Nearly two of every five African American homes are plagued by lead-based paint" (Washington 62). It is not the case that the authorities do not know about it. It is just that they do not care about these people enough to attempt to make a difference. Money matters more to them than Black lives. It is a sheer case of industrial greed trumping public safety. But for people in power, the public is White. Blacks are just expendable "hands" that do their menial jobs. Consuming lead causes slowed growth, anaemia, heart disorders, reproductive problems, reduced kidney function, lowered IQ, and learning and behavioral difficulties. Since Black lives are already intertwined with so many health issues, when something like the coronavirus pops up, their medical guards are already functioning at their lowest to be able to fight any new ailments.

African American houses are generally infested with mold, dust mites, rats and vermin, as explicated vividly by Wright in *Native Son* and other stories. This increases the chance of Blacks being at risk of Asthma manifold. The microbes that mold

emit also pose a threat to hypertension. Hypertension is also triggered by rodents that harbor a type of hantavirus that raises blood pressure. These medical conditions stay undiagnosed most of the time because of a lack of regular health check-ups for people of color and are passed on from generation to generation. "African Americans suffer far higher death rates than Whites and die an average of four years younger than white Americans do" (Washington 221). This environmental neglect of the poor communities of color lays out a welcome mat for innumerable diseases. Bodily deficiencies because of an acute shortage of healthy nutrient-rich food also add to their disease-proneness. They either live in food swamps or food deserts—both of which add to nutrient deficiencies, thus elevating the risk of diabetes and obesity. The rate of STDs is also ten times higher among black women than others. Neither proper testing nor proper treatment is properly administered among them. An example of this can be traced to Tommy and Marie in Wright's *A Father's Law*. Marie had congenital syphilis and she had absolutely no clue about it. She only got to know when Tommy had her medically tested before they were planning to wed. Had she not gotten her tests done, they would not know about her condition and their future generations would have had to face the dire repercussions. People of color breathe 38% more polluted air than whites because of their geographical location near Sacrifice Zones. They regularly inhale pesticides, PCBs and other harmful elements that raise heart and kidney diseases.

African Americans have little power to control their exposure to industrial pollutants that frequently poison their workplace and neighborhoods. Robert Bullard, Luke Cole and Carl Zimring talk at length about this in their books. This disproportionate exposure of communities of color to pollution, poisonous heavy metals, industrial chemicals, pathogens, deficiencies and various illnesses, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, in segregated and environmentally hazardous sacrifice zones explains much of their heightened racial susceptibility to ills like the novel coronavirus. When anybody talks about African Americans in the US, the

picture that often emerges is of malnourished, slothful, unhealthy, dirty people with low intelligence. What is worse is that this practice has been prevalent for so many decades and yet only so much has been possible to improve their lives. The environmental justice movement has helped the case but there is a long way to go. Authors like Hurston and Wright wrote about instances of environmental racism prevalent in America in the 1920s and 30s. The fact that there can still be parallels found in people's lives is something that must become a global concern. The practice of systematic environmental racism in the U.S.A. proved to be the ultimate risk factor for people of color in the face of the covid-19 pandemic.

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