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The Wrong Complexion for Protection: How The Government Response to Disaster Endangers African-American Communities. By Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright. New York: New York University Press, 2012. 304p. \$35.

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Robert Bullard and Beverly Wright have now fulfilled their 2004 pledge to the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists “to write a book on government responses to environmental and health emergencies in African-American communities” (p. xv). In *The Wrong Complexion for Protection*, the authors seek not only to document past and present injustices but also to explain why and how these injustices occur and to offer a pathway forward: “Our goal was to fill this information void with a readable book about government responses to disasters using a racial equity lens—one that connected the dots and provided a framework for explaining what many African-Americans have seen with their own eyes for decades” (p. xv). This book partly accomplishes these objectives, documenting the devastating effects of government neglect on southern black communities and powerfully articulating the need for greater fairness, justice, and equity. However, it does not offer a persuasive systematic explanation of how and why disaster injustices occur.

Bullard and Wright have contributed to the contemporary environmental justice movement as sociological scholar-activists for more than three decades. The first and second chapters describe their experiences as African Americans who have spent much of their lives in the American South and have experienced the anti-black discrimination and injustices they seek to eradicate. Bullard first researched race and solid waste facility siting for the plaintiffs in the *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management Corporation* in the late 1970s. Although the plaintiffs failed to prevent the construction of a landfill in their mostly black Houston neighborhood, this case brought attention to siting struggles and spurred further research on race, class, and hazardous waste siting including Bullard’s *Dumping in Dixie* (1990). A New Orleans native, Wright has been involved in environmental justice research since the 1970s and was directly affected by Hurricanes Betsy and Katrina. She experienced the disastrous government response to Hurricane Katrina both as a resident and as the founding director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, whose post-Katrina community environmental remediation efforts were hindered by state and federal agencies.

These two chapters are among the book’s most powerful in conveying the emotional weight and long-term effects of quick and “slow-moving disasters” such as racial segregation and government neglect (p. 4). Bullard observes that “[f]or decades, Elba’s segregated black neighborhoods flooded, while white neighborhoods remained high and dry,” and this flooding further impoverished black residents of his home town in Alabama (p. 11). “It’s hard to get ahead when you’re starting from scratch. This house is your scratch,” Wright’s father told her (p. 31). Her family was among the many whose homes were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and whose neighborhoods were then designated to become “green space.” These narratives illustrate how the failure to protect black neighborhoods from predictable events renders these places much more

vulnerable to natural and unnatural disasters and show how government indifference inhibits disaster recovery.

Subsequent chapters describe the adverse effects of so-called natural disasters and inadequate government responses, the implicitly anti-black Katrina recovery and reconstruction process, racialized waste siting and responses to contamination, industrial hazards and accidents, and health inequities. Bullard and Wright present a wealth of case evidence regarding African Americans' disparate exposure to garbage dumps, incinerators, and other locally unwanted land uses; their disproportionate vulnerability to natural and human-induced disasters; and the harms we suffer when local, state, and federal governments respond slowly and inadequately to these disasters. But they do not provide any information on how these cases were selected.

“Race matters. Also, place matters,” write the authors, implicitly asserting that there is not only a strong *correlation* among race, place, and unequal protection but also a *causal* relationship between anti-black racism and unequal protection such that predominantly black places receive less protection from disasters (p. 10). *The Wrong Complexion for Protection* presents ample case evidence that predominantly black places receive poor protection, but it does not offer a persuasive causal argument. Instead, the authors offer a variety of case or agency-specific explanations: They allege that Houston officials used a “PIBBY (Place in Blacks’ Backyard)” landfill siting strategy; assert that the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency “seemed much more interested in justifying their existing position . . . than they were in protecting the public”; and claim that the Environmental Protection Agency’s failure to enforce its regulations arises from “avers[ion] to ‘risking their relationship’ with the states” or “ruffling the feathers of the industry” (pp. 14, 38, 104). These comments do not help us better understand race and racism, government policy and practice, or the causes of unequal protection.

Chapter 6, “Nightmare on Eno Road,” brings these issues to the fore. Eno Road in Dickson, Tennessee, appears to have been a black place since the 1890s, a dumping place in the 1940s, and known contaminated place from the late 1980s. Government officials then repeatedly chose not to measure and address the well and spring contamination arising from the placement of several landfills close to Eno Road in the 1990s and 2000s while they tested and responded to the industrial contamination of white places. This period spans Jim Crow and formal desegregation; the adoption of varied state, local, and federal environmental laws and regulations; and, presumably, numerous changes in government decision makers. Wright and Bullard name Eno Road a “poster child for environmental racism,” but unfortunately do not explain how racism operated in this case or in disaster injustice more generally (p. 148). While one could attribute the contrasting responses to individual prejudice—that is, to racism arising from racists—scattered references to racialized structures, institutions, and the racially disparate effects of race-neutral policies throughout the book that suggest the authors have a broader conception of racism, as do many sociologists (e.g., Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 1994; Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 2010).

Wright and Bullard decry the ill-treatment of Eno Road residents but do not present a theoretical argument regarding the production and persistence of such injustices as David Naguib Pellow, Laura Pulido, and other environmental justice scholar-activists have done. (See Naguib Pellow,

“Environmental Inequality Formation: Toward a Theory of Environmental Justice,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 [no. 4, 2000]: 581–601; Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90 [no. 1, 2000]: 12–40.). Nor do they make use of relevant scholarship on environmental policy, regulation, and enforcement interagency cooperation and conflict and neoliberal governance.

The *Wrong Complexion for Protection* presents a disturbing compilation of disaster injustices past and present. Contra Wright and Bullard’s “The answer is simple,” however, it is *not* simple to “make strategies fair, just and equitable without regard to race, color, or national origin or income status” (p. 173). We need to better understand the causes of injustice to effectively respond to this urgent call for redress and preventative action.