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A Rhetorical Analysis of "Last Week Tonight" Episode "Environmental Racism"

Picture a graveyard the size of multiple football fields: grave after grave. The further off in the distance your eyes reach, you're met with another wave of concrete installments of people that have passed. Then, picture them fenced in by giant, looming factories, pumping chemicals into the air. This sounds like a visual metaphor to remind us all of the horrible impacts factory workers suffered from during the Industrial Revolution.

This is 2023, and this is a real place between New Orleans and Baton Rouge called "Cancer Alley". John Oliver, an English comedian from the lineage of Jon Stewart and The Daily Show, is our host. Within the first 30 to 45 seconds of the segment, it's clear John has a bone to pick as he tackles the topic of environmental racism. It's important to be clear about what environmental racism is. Wikipedia defines environmental racism as a form of institutional racism in which landfills, incinerators, and hazardous waste disposals are disproportionately placed in communities of color.

"Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" is an American late-night talk show rooted in political satire. Contrary to the misconception that the show targets a younger audience in their 20s, its primary focus is on socio-political issues, politics, national security, and racism. The intended audience is middle-aged viewers familiar with current events, consistent with the average viewership of late-night comedy. The satire in the show aims to highlight societal hypocrisy and injustice. John Oliver and his team skillfully integrate humor into serious topics, striving to leave a lasting impression through the juxtaposition of contrasting themes. John and his team passionately set up shop, leaning liberal as a counterweight to the Republican-leaning news media, such as Fox News.

This essay will analyze the claims and evidence in John Oliver's segment on "Environmental Racism." First, I will assess the specificity and relevance of the claims. Second, I will evaluate their contestability. Third, I will review the supporting evidence provided, comparing the examples, research, and testimonials. I will conclude by reflecting on my personal connection to the segment and its overall effectiveness.

At approximately one minute eight seconds into John Oliver's introduction we are introduced to the first claim made This Week Tonight. Oliver concedes quote " look, we all suffer from exposure to pollution in this country but some significantly more than others thanks to what's called environmental racism." It's clear that going forward Oliver is going to present evidence to outline this grave disparity and he immediately launches into some powerful

evidence that Black Americans are exposed to 38% more polluted air than their white counterparts. A notable example he provides is the 2008 coal spill in Harriman, Tennessee. Following the cleanup of the predominantly white affected area, 4 million tons of waste was relocated to the majority-Black community of Uniontown. Former Uniontown resident, Portia Shepherd, states, "Taking that from a white area—the white people didn't want it. If white folks didn't want it, why do you think it's good for the Blacks?" (Oliver). Although Shepherd's firsthand account is vital, I believe Oliver could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the disaster. His reliance on visuals, selective information, and testimonials from former (rather than current) residents weakens the clarity of his argument. With that said, Oliver then presents some damning evidence around "Shingle Mountain." Blue Star Recycling, a company owned by a Caucasian man who, upon being interviewed over the phone, was completely disconnected from the area. His plan was to convert roofing shingles into asphalt. His company dumped thousands of tons of these shingles near homes in predominantly Black and Latino areas. The toxic odor emitted caused evident discomfort to interviewer O'Brian. As mentioned, a conversation with the former owner of Blue Star Recycling revealed that Chris Ganta was shocking. His stark lack of empathy and awareness for the affected residents was appalling, considering the due diligence one would assume a company and a person would have before dumping toxic waste. This evidence was particularly compelling, as it addressed and validated the show's claim thoroughly.

Next, John Oliver claims that “Black neighbourhoods in particular can get targeted with incredible precision.” He continues on noting that environmental pollution is one of the driving factors behind conditions like heart disease, asthma, and even death within black communities. The evidence is daunting as John Oliver points out that Black Americans are nearly 3 times as likely to die from exposure to pollutants. Oliver then follows up with even more mind blowing evidence that Black Americans are 75% more likely to live near a factory or plant. He backs this with evidence of "Redlining" housing discrimination practices from the 1930s and 40s. This evidence convincingly illustrates how Black families, irrespective of socio-economic status, were systemically forced into environmentally compromised areas. During the redlining of this decade, African-Americans were not allowed to get the same government-backed mortgage loans in order to purchase houses in other areas that their white counterparts were (Oliver). This is totally shocking. Anyone forced to build a life segregated to a certain area that was then relegated to be industry-friendly, through racist zoning laws, would lose all value in their property and therefore have no way to sell in order to recoup the equity needed to exit the toxicity. John Oliver then reinforces the horrific nature of this claim by adding the comparison of life expectancy between the predominantly white Highland Park (84 years) and the majority-Black area of Joppa—filled with factories—life expectancy (71 years). Oliver finally introduces the audience to the Superfund list—a list of nationally prioritized hazardous waste sites that are known to release or threatened to release hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants. Oliver shows that further digging into the list reveals that 70% of these sites are within a mile of federally assisted housing (Oliver). - 48% of which is occupied by African Americans. By this

point in the show, John has already effectively shown the audience that environmental racism is definitely a reality and that its insidious nature permeates back through the history of America.

The final claim that I chose to focus on is John Oliver's claim that black communities are often seen by corporations as the path of least resistance. Oliver's evidence that Black Americans with higher incomes still experience more air pollution than lower-income whites is impressive. He introduces the concept of "sacrifice zones" and cites "Cancer Alley" between New Orleans and Baton Rouge as a prime example. Despite the local government's attempt to dismiss the "Cancer Alley" label, the statistics Oliver provides underscore the gravity of the situation. An interview with Reserve, Louisiana resident Robert Taylor poignantly highlights the personal and economic challenges faced by residents trapped in polluted areas. Robert, in a raw moment of pure honesty, tells his interviewer from CBS Evening News, Norah O'Donnell, "What poor, unsuspecting family would I trick into moving into this death trap?" (Oliver). It's very clear by the end of the interview that Robert Taylor, regardless of his economic standing, has built a life in an area where his property no longer has value. The EPA designates the area that Robert is in, known as Cancer Alley, as having 50 times the risk of cancer compared to the national average (Oliver). By this point in the show, John and his team have gone above and beyond to present multiple claims with several sources, providing very valid evidence that environmental racism is not only a serious problem still affecting us today but that it's systemic

in nature, and its roots go deep, all the way back to slavery. In 2023 the fact that African-Americans and Latinos could live 15 years less than their white counterparts just depending on their ZIP Code, is absolutely appalling.(Oliver).

In conclusion, the lineage of political satire journalism can be traced back to Jon Stewart and "The Daily Show." Icons like Stephen Colbert, Trevor Noah, Steve Carell, Hasan Minhaj, Josh Gad, and Ed Helms owe their origins to this comedic tradition. These shows emerged as essential counters to a relentless news cycle. Such programs, while they must ensure the accuracy and completeness of their claims, serve as vital tools in challenging mainstream narratives. John Oliver, an icon in his own right, is a star among stars in this group. He's established not only a strong comedic reputation but also one in the general public of being honest, reliable, and a truth seeker. Any viewer of the show, even for the first time, can immediately tell that John is extremely intelligent and passionate. His connection to The Daily Show and to Jon Stewart has left him and his team with a consistent, long standing system of gathering and fact-checking valuable information. The genius of the show is in the structure. The writing team build in powerful political messages, intertwined with comedic flair, leaving most of the ethical agenda hidden within the jokes - to detonate in the viewer's mind long after the show has ended. Personally, after watching this segment, even a week later I'm still having "ah ha" bubbles burst in my brain. In analyzing John Oliver's segment on environmental

racism, I appreciate the illumination it provides on systemic racism. Viewing and discussing this episode in class has broadened my understanding of racism and its pervasive influence in various societal spaces. I feel more equipped with the tools and the awareness to help support communities suffering from these issues.

Ultimately, I think that John and his team did a great job defining environmental racism. He provided multiple claims with evidence to back them up. He was effectively able to contextualize the origins of environmental racism and where we stand today. John makes a clear argument that this is a crucial issue for us to address in society immediately. It's also evident through the exploration of the text that this is an extremely complicated issue and requires more than just a total reevaluation of modern-day zoning laws. The issue of environmental racism requires us to step back and be aware of the entire picture of how people in these communities arrived there in the first place and how racism as a whole has built a strong foundation for these atrocities to continue.

Works Cited

Oliver, John. "Environmental Racism: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)." YouTube, 1 May 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v0XiUQIRLw. Accessed 02 Oct. 2023.