

RACIALIZED TOPOGRAPHIES: ALTITUDE AND RACE IN SOUTHERN CITIES*

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ABSTRACT. This study examines altitudinal residential segregation by race in 146 cities in the U.S. South. It begins by embedding the topic in recent theorizations of the social construction of nature, the geography of race, and environmental justice. Second, it focuses on how housing markets, particularly in the South, tend to segregate minorities in low-lying, flood-prone, and amenity-poor segments of urban areas. It tests empirically the hypothesis that blacks are disproportionately concentrated in lower-altitude areas using GIS to correlate race and elevation by digital elevation-model block group within each city in 1990 and 2000. The statistical results confirm the suspected trend. A map of coefficients indicates strong positive associations in cities in the interior South—where the hypothesis is confirmed—and an inverse relationship near the coast, where whites dominate higher-valued coastal properties. Selected city case studies demonstrate these relationships connecting the broad dynamics of racial segregation to the particularities of individual places. *Keywords:* *environmental justice, residential segregation, urban housing, U.S. South.*

Do minorities tend to live disproportionately in low-lying parts of cities? The question appears straightforward, yet its determination involves a complex multitude of epistemological and methodological issues pertaining to the social construction of urban space and the dynamics of residential segregation. Although a small body of literature is concerned with the impacts of altitude and topography on urban dynamics—all of it analyzed from positivist or empiricist vantage points—the relationships between altitude and the location of different ethnic communities has remained unexamined (for example, Willie 1961; Montz and Gruntfest 1986; Meyer 1994; Arguea and Hsiao 2000).

This article explores the altitudinal zonation of blacks and whites in southern cities. It opens with a brief review of the pertinent literature on natural hazards, topography, and environmental racism, seeking to overcome the analytical differences that have thwarted the effective integration of these topics. Particular emphasis is placed on the social construction of risk, joining the chorus that seeks to denaturalize “natural” hazards. It then points to the specific context of southern cities, in which residential housing, labor markets, and institutionalized racism conspired to relegate African Americans to the most low-lying, flood-prone, and amenity-poor regions. The article does not explicitly attempt to examine the racial dynamics of floods; rather, it argues that low-lying regions tend to be more flood prone—and historically more likely to be at risk for diseases such as malaria—and occupied by residents in lower-priced housing, who all too often tend to be minorities. The altitudinal distribution of risk is mirrored in the distribution of environ-

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