

**Review: Uneasy Alchemy: Citizens and Experts in Louisiana's  
Chemical Corridor Disputes**

By Barbara L. Allen

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Barbara L. Allen. *Uneasy Alchemy: Citizens and Experts in Louisiana's  
Chemical Corridor Disputes*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. 224 pp. ISBN  
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paper.

Having grown up in south Louisiana and gone on to specialize in the politics of environmental justice and hazardous waste, it was for me a real pleasure to read Barbara Allen's remarkable book. Like her, I also have childhood memories of "malathion and magnolias" that have no doubt formed the basis for my own impressions of the chemical economy and its relationship to race, class and the environment. *Uneasy Alchemy* is more than a serious, scholarly work, which it is; Allen's writing is also clear, approachable and tells a fascinating story that is filled with insightful observations as she interprets the contradictory landscape of that part of the world. For her, it is a "strange juxtaposition of important architectural artifacts and historic rural communities with ominously futuristic techno-cities of stacks and tanks, lights and towers" (p. xiii).

The book begins with numerous layers of context, each of which is necessary to understand the complexities of environmental injustice. Most fundamentally, Allen explains the historical geography of the area as a way of understanding contemporary political economy and social relations that are somewhat unique in the American context. The 18th century Acadian settlements and the prevalence of property ownership among blacks, even during the antebellum period, are two of the more important distinctions that she elaborates along with the typically Southern injustices associated with the feudal society that formed the plantation economy and, of course, slavery. Moreover, while the postbellum period witnessed the freedom of slaves, it also brought various forms of external control over black property ownership. This continued during the 20th century when transnational petrochemical companies began to purchase former plantations. The result was that black communities became trapped amongst noxious forms of industrial production that ultimately degraded the quality of their only source of economic value, their land, as well as their physical wellbeing. The contemporary environmental justice movement thus emerged within this historical context in south Louisiana.

The core of Allen's analysis focuses on the relationships between and among citizens and experts. While most accounts of environmental injustice emphasize conflict and defeat, and there is plenty of it here, *Uneasy Alchemy* also documents extraordinary successes. She concludes that they generally result from alliances "(1) between local citizens and expert-activists, (2) across lines of race and class, and (3) between local and national organizations" (p. 2). Particular individuals also proved to be critically important in forming these relationships. William Fontenot, environmental liaison with the Office of the Attorney General, Florence Robinson, a biology professor with Southern University, and Wilma Subra, an environmental scientist, were especially important for the ways they worked together to forge change. Subra has one of the most interesting stories in that she had done chemical lab work at Love Canal while on contract with EPA but eventually changed careers out of frustration that "the people were never allowed to know what we found relating to them" (p. 124). Years later, she resumed this work, pro-bono, by collaborating with concerned citizens as well as with Fontenot and Robinson. Allen successfully demonstrates that in spite of the enormity of obstacles to change, there are also reasons to be somewhat optimistic and, even better, useful strategies for success.

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