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ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE TOURS: TRANSFORMATIVE NARRATIVES OF STRUGGLE, SOLIDARITY, AND ACTIVISM

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Introduction

Toxic tours or environmental justice (EJ) tours have a long history in the environmental justice movement (EJM). More than a form of tourism, EJ tours represent an important movement strategy. The practice of sharing stories, memories, and experiences of place has always been an integral part of many social justice movements, particularly place-based struggles. The political and spatial conditions of marginalization make the act of sharing firsthand narratives and physical locations a powerful form of resistance. This chapter explores EJ tours as a tactic of the US EJM to (1) build solidarity and organize residents, (2) reconstitute and amplify community-centered narratives about EJ, and (3) advance grassroots-led solutions and inspire action to demand accountability. EJ tours' history and purpose are examined from the perspective of activists who, over several decades, worked with the Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC), a community-based EJ organization in Newark, New Jersey.

EJ tour reflections in this chapter are grounded in my experiences as a protagonist for EJ tours in the Ironbound where I grew up, lived, and worked for many years, and the insights from other EJ tour guides at ICC such as Nancy Zak, who has worked at ICC for over four decades, and Maria Lopez-Nunez, who currently leads ICC's EJ work. We supported each other in learning how to conduct EJ tours and in leading EJ tours in different eras of the EJM within the organization. I have also had the privilege of being a participant in EJ tours in communities around the US through my work as an EJ activist and scholar.

Phaedra Pezzullo (2009) examines traditional forms of tourism and their combination or adaptation to EJ cases. Using toxic tours from around the country, Pezzullo discusses the power of tours for amplifying the cultural, political, and democratic

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practices of EJ communities. The form and function of tours are transfigured by EJ activists seeking to reconnect and reclaim the places that modern, global society has sought to degrade and invisibilize. Pezzullo builds her arguments around the notion that toxic tours are political acts of resistance in the way that they reconstitute memory and build communities (Pezzullo 2009). These themes are not unfamiliar to the EJ scholar Giovanna DiChiro (2003) who highlights the important role that toxic tours play among activists trying to draw attention to the realities of polluted environments. DiChiro describes the ways in which activists leading EJ tours use the "act of seeing with one's own eyes" as a means for trans-communal cooperation, an action which she describes as "a method that entails face-to-face contact and mutual trust" (2003, 221). Thus, the act of showing and witnessing is an essential part of making connections between affected communities, allies, and anyone seeking EJ.

Tours are also part of the fabric of toxic heritage studies because activists and scholars interrogate the creation of places and people that have been deemed "toxic," delving into the histories, traditions, and practices that have shaped the people and places in sacrifice zones so severely impacted by pollution. Toxic heritage studies examine these communities as places of memory and as active terrains for mobilizing action: "Toxic heritage is often the site of resistance, resilience, and social action, as communities mobilize to demand mitigation, embrace citizen science, advocate for environmental causes, and document the histories of homelands and neighborhoods" (Toxic Heritage n.d.). In many ways, EJ tours uncover the "slow violence" of environmental injustice buried over time and hidden from most of society (Nixon 2011). Donna Houston describes EJ storytelling as, "Environmental justice storytelling provides a framework for understanding how multiple realities of environmental injury come together in ways that are not always readily discernible through policy or scientific practice" (2013, 419). The practice of EJ storytelling is embedded in tours and provides insights into the lived experiences of residents at the fenceline and frontlines of polluted environments. EJ tours go beyond sharing toxic injuries, recasting EJ communities as rich, culturally important places that are abundant in treasures amid the toxics. This recasting, via the act of storytelling on tours, can be transformative but it is not without risks.

While the literature examining toxic tours often comes from the perspective of outsiders who see the power and potential of tours, this gaze misses the painful experiences that tours elicit. Tours highlight historical and current conditions of violence and suffering, which often engender feelings of despair and surface trauma, conflicts, and unsettled histories. Additionally, tours place affected residents in direct contact with perpetrators of harm or in vulnerable positions with institutions of power, which expose activists to injurious comments. Moreover, in many places around the world, the act of exposing toxic conditions puts activists' lives at risk. Thus, it is important to note that EJ tours are not removed acts of sharing statistics or highlighting destinations on a map. Rather, tours are acts of resistance that take a physical and mental toll on the people living the everyday reality of environmental injustice.

History of Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC) and Ironbound, Newark, NJ

The Ironbound Community Corporation (ICC) was founded in 1969 in the wake of the Newark rebellions. It was formed as a community-based non-profit that arose out of resident outcry for affordable childcare. The organization began focusing on EJ issues when affiliated residents and parents organized to fight pollution in the community. In 1981, the organization founded a related group called the Ironbound Committee Against Toxic Waste (ICATW), which focused on the rising cases of industrial accidents and proposals for noxious facilities in the neighborhood.

The Ironbound neighborhood has a long history of toxic facilities. The community is located on the eastern edge of Newark, New Jersey, and is bounded on three sides by rail lines and the Passaic River. The name "Ironbound" itself is a source of diverse oral histories. Some have suggested it derives from the presence of rail lines encircling the community and others suggest it relates to the presence of foundries that once surrounded the area. Whatever the origin, the name recalls spaces that have been intimately linked to industrialization. The Ironbound was built atop what was once a teeming meadowland ecosystem with an abundance that sustained the Munsee Lunaape people that are the living and sovereign Indigenous People of the area. Over time these marshes were infilled with garbage and industries as urbanization expanded throughout the region (Newark Public Library 1996). In the 20th century, the Ironbound was also redlined as the least desirable type of neighborhood (D or 4th-grade) by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (Hagstrom Company Inc. 1939). The city also experienced periods of intense disinvestment, white flight, and deindustrialization. Today, the area, which encompasses four square miles and is home to 60,000 people, hosts the second-largest seaport in the US, the state's largest garbage incinerator and sewage treatment facility, a regional airport, rail yards, and hundreds of polluting industries (City of Newark, NJ 2021). Historically the Ironbound was home to successive waves of ethnic European immigrants. Today the community is very diverse, and the population is comprised mostly of Latinx, Black, and low-wealth immigrant residents (US Census Bureau n.d.).

History & Evolution of EJ Tours at ICC: Building Solidarity and Organizing

Nancy Zak has worked at ICC for over four decades and was likely one of the first people to lead informal EJ tours of the Ironbound along with her partner, Arnold Cohen. In the 1980s, they led visitors to the former Diamond Shamrock herbicide plant situated along the Passaic River. The plant produced millions of pounds of Agent Orange between 1952 and 1968 for the Vietnam war (Bruno 2010) (Figure 16.1).

Agent Orange is a highly carcinogenic compound called dioxin, which can lead to cancer, and reproductive, developmental, and immune system problems (US EPA 2022). By the early 1980s, the facility was abandoned and former factory workers and Vietnam veterans launched class-action lawsuits against corporate

FIGURE 16.1 A photo of Ironbound residents protesting Diamond Shamrock. June 1983, Ironbound Community Corporation (https://picturingjustice.tumblr.com/tagged/dioxin).

owners for long-term health damages suffered over many years of exposure (Parisi 1983, 2). These lawsuits highlighted the malfeasance of corporations that knowingly exposed people to toxic chemicals and the complicity of government agencies that failed to intervene and protect residents living near the plant.

During this time, ICC organized residents to demand government and corporate actors remediate the site and examine the health impacts of dioxin exposure. Zak invited reporters and allies to the neighborhood around the plant, which allowed residents and workers to share how their lives were affected by Agent Orange. She notes that these visits included planned actions: "When we went out to the site, people would start to tell us about when they worked or played near the site and all the health problems that happened to them and it was very jarring to hear how the dioxin really had a terrible effect on ordinary people" (Personal communication, July 20, 2022). While Zak did not have access to detailed technical data about the extent of the site's pollution, she had access to many personal accounts from residents. One of these accounts, which continues to be recounted on EJ tours decades later goes something like this,

> A young woman in her thirties shared that she lived most of her life a block from the Diamond Shamrock plant. Many of her family members worked at the plant and she remembers them coming home covered in a fine orange dust that was ubiquitous around the plant. She recounted children like herself playing on the

dirt piles near the plant. Years later she suffered multiple miscarriages and was diagnosed with a rare form of reproductive cancer that afflicted her and others in the area. In 1983, the plant was listed as a Superfund site and the governor issued an emergency declaration for the areas around the plant (Bruno 2010). Zak describes the shock of residents as they sat on their front porches seeing men dressed in moon suits who were vacuuming the streets and placing the contaminated dirt in drums for removal.

The first time I heard Zak recounting this story, it painted a jarring picture of the juxtaposition of residents going about their daily lives while government officials donned hazmat suits to protect themselves from something residents were exposed to for many decades (see Figure 16.2). This story continues to be shared on EJ tours today. We do not know the full impact of a lifetime of exposure to these toxins and the story does not definitively state whether the dioxin contamination caused the young woman's health problems, but it points to the devastating impacts that linger over those who are exposed to poison.

This story illustrates the power of memory in conveying the harm of pollution to individuals, families, and communities. Amelia Fiske (2018) points to the ways in which the embodied knowledge of toxins, held by those organizing against corporate polluters, are powerful markers of EJ struggles. She also points to the

FIGURE 16.2 A photo of men from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection in hazmat suits. Ironbound Community Corporation (https://picturingjustice.tumblr.com/tagged/dioxin).

material harm that activists are exposed to in the process of storytelling: "Simply put, there are burdens implied through the engagement of bodily knowledges in the politics of denunciation that require further consideration beyond their potential to disrupt and contest powerful structures – whether in activist work, citizen science initiatives, political campaigns, or as the subject of ethnography" (Fiske 2018, 404).

Toxic legacies are often buried both figuratively and literally. Unearthing them through speech can combat government and corporate obfuscation of the negative impacts of toxins. This oral tradition materializes the bodily harm that scientific risk analysis mostly denies. For instance, Melissa Checker notes, "'But I know it's true', is the oft-repeated refrain of EJ communities across the country … Although these people know that they and their neighbors suffer from uncommon health problems, they have been unable to secure scientific proof that the chemicals are the cause" (2007, 113). Furthermore, Checker discusses the limitations of scientific risk assessments for capturing the impacts facing EJ communities, resulting in environmental decision-making that fails to account for their lived experiences. As a result, EJ communities have responded with their own forms of popular epidemiology and citizen science to reclaim their embodied experiences (Brown, De la Rosa, and Cordner 2020).

The Diamond Shamrock story also connects to storytelling as a tool for political education and collective political framing for impacted people. EJ tours that highlight sources of industrial production and fallout, like Diamond Shamrock, link EJ communities trans-locally, to locations of contestation and facilitate a critique of capitalism and extractivism (Chagnon et al. 2022). Doug McAdam (1982) suggests that the ability of movements to respond to injustices partly rests on a process of consciousness-raising in which oppressed people become aware of the conditions of injustice. McAdam calls this process "cognitive liberation," which is also referenced by Temper et al. (2018) to describe how EJM actors productively use conflict to contest hegemonic power structures and push for social change. In this regard, EJ tours serve as a pathway for cognitive liberation for those living within EJ communities. They also serve as means by which to contest negative stereotypes of polluted communities, reshaping those narratives into sources of power.

While EJ struggles may be viewed as strictly focused on a fair distribution of benefits and harms, the politics of the EJM reach well beyond mainstream reformist environmentalism. For instance, David Harvey (1996) discusses the radical politics of the grassroots EJM, which exposes the contradictions of the neo-liberal state and capitalism. He notes the power of the movement to use moral reasoning and symbolic meaning-making to contest expert-driven discourses deployed by the state and corporate actors that undercut EJ activists' claims (Harvey 1996). In this regard, tours highlight the material contradictions inherent in capitalism and make critical, discursive connections to similarly situated communities, pushing back against global extractivism in its many forms.

Evolution of EJ Tours at ICC: Audiences and Movement Goals

ICC's EJ tours have evolved over more than four decades from informal, often site-specific visits by small groups to larger, organized multi-stop events. Today, Maria Lopez-Nunez fields a multitude of requests for tours with a range of stakeholders due to a growing interest in EJ. These requests necessitate a significant amount of time and resources. When asked about how she understands the role and prioritization of tour requests, Lopez-Nunez reflects,

> To be honest, these tours can be a huge drain, but they can also be politically important. If they're done in a way that drives our demands and puts community voices in the driver's seat, then they can showcase community wins and power. I also want people to feel uncomfortable on these tours, to get a little taste of what accountability looks like if we take seriously how implicated we all are in the creation of sacrifice zones. If you walk away from the tour feeling sorry for us then we haven't done our jobs, but if you walk away feeling like communities know best what the solutions are, then maybe it was worth the time.
>
> (Personal interview, September 12, 2022).

When EJ groups curate tours, they include neighborhood maps and descriptive handouts to introduce participants to the history and context of the host organization and the community. It is also a form of counter-mapping, describing the locations of both past experiences or memories of environmental injustices and the active, contested spaces of current fights or victories. The narratives about tour stops differ dramatically from official state or corporate statements about the tour stops. The map itself reflects the changing dynamics of activist campaigns and areas of focus over time.

Figure 16.3 illustrates a map of an EJ tour I helped guide with residents in 2005. The tour included stops at a local park that residents saved from demolition, Chemical Row where many industrial accidents occurred, and an active campaign to clean up the garbage incinerator. It also showcased the community's vision for Riverbank Park, a proposed future park on an abandoned industrial waterfront along the Passaic River. While Riverfront Park was just a dream expressed on the 2005 EJ tour, today EJ tour participants can visit it in its completed form, which is a testament to the power of community visioning and organizing. The importance of mapping counter-narratives and a shared sense of history and place is critical for communities that have been made to feel invisible or disposable in the places they call home. In Rodney Harrison's article on counter-mapping in Australia, he describes the purpose of counter-mapping as a way to "undermine power relations and challenge the dominant political and social geographies of power" (2011, 7). He goes on to describe the value that such counter-mapping can have, "This process has the potential to give voice to politically marginal and subaltern understandings of the past, empowering them by drawing attention to them in the

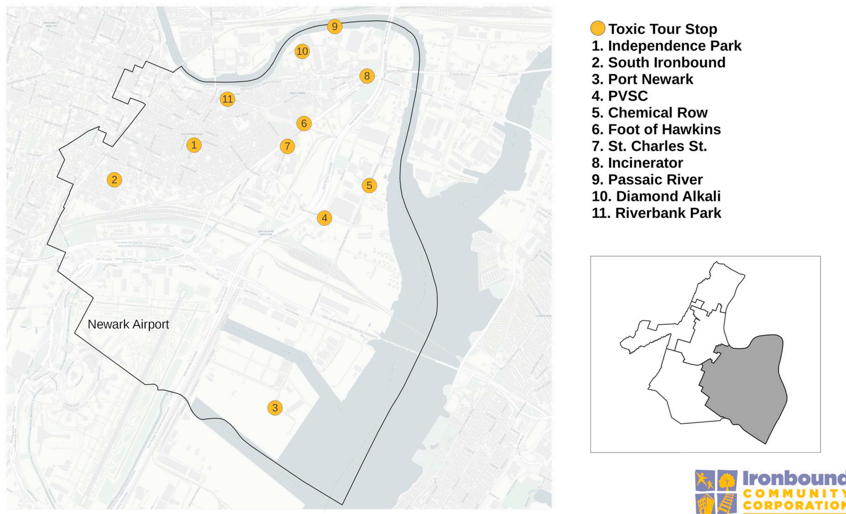

FIGURE 16.3 Map of ICC Ironbound EJ Tour, circa 2005. Prepared by Ana Isabel Baptista.

present … Such intimate, everyday attachments of people to place are at the heart of contemporary approaches to heritage" (Harrison 2011, 10).

We Speak for Ourselves: Reclaiming Spaces of Resistance and Reconstituting Possibilities

One of the most powerful characteristics of the EJM is the principle of "we speak for ourselves." This very simple statement carries a powerful message about who has a legitimate role in conveying the lived experience of environmental injustice. In *From the Ground Up*, Luke Cole and Sheila Foster describe how "Environmental justice activists usually have an immediate and material stake in solving the environmental problems they confront" (2001, 33). The material experience of being part of a community that is directly impacted by pollution and having an identity or multiple identities associated with a history of oppression, marginalization, or dispossession, determines how you speak in an EJM context. Those with lived experiences who are the closest to the problems are the ones whose voices should be most heard and uplifted. EJ tours, as movement strategies, make the position of the EJ tour leader central to considering whose story is being told and what perspectives and solutions are centered. If you take an EJ tour that is not grounded in or directly accountable to those most impacted by pollution, then you are on a tour, but it is likely not an EJ tour. The curation of tours by activists and residents who are directly affected by pollution is one of the principal elements that connect the tour to an act of heritage-making or

place-making. Without material connections to places and links to community organizing strategies, tours are devoid of political framing and context that make tours part of the EJM.

EJ tours can also bring into focus the interdependence and culpability of the people and places outside EJ communities. In Laura Pulido's article exploring the socio-spatial dynamics of racism, she notes, "… pollution concentrations are inevitably the product of relationships between distinct places, including industrial zones, affluent suburbs, working-class suburbs, and downtown areas, all of which are racialized" (2000, 533). EJ tours with groups that reside outside of EJ communities allow the unpacking of sedimented racism and how this has, directly and indirectly, benefited white people. On ICC's tours, guides pause to point out the garbage incinerator, power plants, sewage treatment, and warehouses that serve the entire region, but whose pollution impacts are felt very locally. Places like the Ironbound cannot exist without the existence of white, wealthy suburbs that have excluded industrial development and people of Color. These white suburbs benefitted from the legacy of racist housing policies while pushing noxious industries into redlined communities (Rothstein 2017). On tours, Maria Lopez-Nunez is careful to point out the complicity of those living outside sacrifice zones. She reminds participants, "Look around, these are the places and people that have been sacrificed to allow you to live a comfortable existence. We have been told we are not valued; our lives don't matter as much. As long as the lights still come on and the garbage gets dumped somewhere else, people take for granted that these places exist" (EJ tour participant observation, October 15, 2022).

While curating EJ tours provides opportunities to surface hidden histories, tours also allow stigma to be transformed into a source of strength. In Carolyn Merchant's critical history of western conservation movements, she points to white supremacy's stigmatization of non-white land: "The control of the wild represented the kind of state that Western societies could export throughout the world to colonized "Other" lands … The "Others" were the colonized indigenous people, immigrants, and people of color who were outside the controlled, managed garden" (Merchant 2003, 389). Sacrifice zones are associated with people whose identities have also been "othered" and exploited along with the land. Tours are opportunities to challenge these stigmatizing tropes of communities as "wastelands" and reclaim them as sources of power and inspiration (Di Palma 2014).

EJ tours also represent powerful accounts of what Alice Mah (2010) discusses as "living memories" of the complex relationships of people living in communities in a post-industrial transition. According to Mah, "many people who have lived through processes of industrial ruination focus on imminent regeneration rather than mourning or celebrating the industrial past" (2010, 398). Places like Newark have experienced hundreds of years of "ruination" or rather diverse formations of capitalist and settler-colonial projects of land development. EJ tours reveal this laden history while also revealing the contemporary processes of global capitalism that are actively being contested (Harvey 1982; Mah 2012). In the narration of EJ tours,

Lopez-Nunez reflects on both the struggles to resist the constant incursions from global commerce, or what she calls "fighting the bad," and the power of contested visions for what the post-industrial landscape could be in the future, or "building the new."

EJ tours can be powerful portals for reclaiming our homes and histories and projecting the futures we want. As a young person working for ICC, my first EJ tours left me with a sense of pride and appreciation for my community. I was able to share the richness of our culture, the beauty of social networks of care among diverse neighbors, the power of resistance and history of organizing and action, and the love of community that made the Ironbound such a formative part of my life. EJ tours as a movement tactic draw inspiration from Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams*, inviting us to imagine the radical possibilities for liberation that come out of intersecting social movements, a feature that is certainly also present in the EJM (Kelley 2002; n.d.).

ICC EJ tours feature important landmarks such as Riverfront Park and Down Bottom Farm (See Figure 16.4) as spaces that have been reclaimed and shaped by the people in the community. These spaces express community culture and identity, where people gather, celebrate, and organize. The spaces are physical reminders of a community that is organized and awake to the possibilities of environmental justice. The act of narrating the tour and bearing witness also creates opportunities to dream about a future with EJ. It invites the participants and guides to be in dialogue about how we engage in the process of liberation and the creation

FIGURE 16.4 Down Bottom Farm, Ironbound Community Corp, EJ tour stop 2018, photo courtesy of Kristin Reiman.

of new spaces that are free from environmental degradation, racism, oppression, and capitalism's rapacious exploitation. EJ tours give us a chance to reflect on the future we can build together.

EJ Tours as Movement Tools for Making Demands for Accountability and Action

EJ tours serve as powerful movement tools for resistance and organizing. ICC's EJ tours have always been linked to direct actions, campaigns, and a set of demands, which are often seen as contentious, especially by those in power. Tours create opportunities to confront decision-makers for their complicity in the harms suffered by communities. EJ tours are also an unmediated way for EJ communities to demonstrate their power and make direct demands through unfiltered interactions that are not typically part of official policy-making processes.

While many EJ activists see through the "liberal illusion" of governments intervening in the business-as-usual of industries, they use EJ tours to challenge the technocratic environmental regulations that leave EJ communities unprotected. On many ICC EJ tours led by Lopez-Nunez, she reminds lawmakers and regulators that "you are not doing your jobs" and that the community must constantly step in to fill gaps. EJ tours also challenge traditional forms of public participation like public hearings because they present a more directly democratic, unfiltered, approach to participation and diminish the distance between residents and regulators by bringing them into direct contact with EJ communities. On EJ tours, organizers can set the agenda, direct the action, and place material realities on display that are difficult to capture in policy briefs or legal complaints.

EJ Tours with politicians and agency officials also allow EJ groups to direct their attention to specific sites and campaigns under active contestation. It is much harder for decision-makers to obfuscate or skirt questions and demands when residents confront them with the material realities of pollution. Maximizing the public accountability potential of tours requires a great deal of organizing, such as securing decision-maker participation and following up with them to ensure accountability. If an EJ group is perceived as a powerful voice with an organized base, decision-makers would be remiss to reject the invitation to a tour. On the other hand, they may also see EJ tours as performative in that they can provide photo opportunities with little accountability. Whether EJ tours are low stakes or high stakes in part depends on the power of the EJ groups to go beyond the tour and pressure decision-makers. This organizing frame is critical to ensuring that tours are not reduced to rituals devoid of power.

Conclusion – EJ Tours as Portals to Environmental Justice Futures

EJ tours are windows into the past and current realities of environmental injustice as well as the richness of the communities that call these places home. They are an important tool for EJ movement organizations to shape policy agendas, make

demands, shift popular narratives, build relationships of solidarity, center frontline voices and solutions, and make tangible improvements in communities that have existed as sacrifice zones for far too long. EJ tours are also part of the fabric of toxic heritage and place-making, opening up portals for connecting subaltern histories, embodied experiences, and contemporary resistance to global extractivism among movement activists around the world. As a movement tool, tours have many benefits such as facilitating firsthand experiences that uncover complex forces that drive environmental injustice and reorienting people, both within and outside the community, to the possibilities for action and solidarity. The public, unfiltered perspective that an EJ tour delivers is also a powerful tool for making demands and holding decision-makers accountable. Despite all these benefits, EJ tours are not without risks, particularly for the EJ activists and movement groups that deploy them. Nevertheless, EJ tours will continue to be an important movement tactic. As the EJ movement evolves, EJ tours will continue to play a role in visioning justice, deepening political education, and building solidarity. Most importantly, EJ tours pass down rich oral traditions to new generations of EJ organizers and residents who will be the future stewards and storytellers of the EJ movement.

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