From "Voices from the Grassroots" to Voices from Institutionalization: Lessons for Environmental Justice from the EPA's Urban Waters Federal Partnership

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By
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ABSTRACT:

This dissertation is the result of a two-year research project on the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP) program, which aimed to improve water quality and promote *environmental justice* (EJ) outcomes for marginalized communities. The analyses I present draw from qualitative research conducted in four different US cities involved in the partnership project. My findings reveal specific failures within the UWFP program as well as the frictions between participating organizations and government entities that the project often intensified. My focus on tensions between advocacy groups adds complexity to previous portrayals of EJ activists and of the EJ movement itself. In addition, my reflection on shortcomings of institutionalized environmental justice asks what strategies are needed for engaging more productively with the EPA. As my research draws into focus some of the paradoxes and constraints the environmental justice movement faces, I suggest paths forward for EJ advocates, for EJ scholars, and for EPA staff. Lastly, I include a chapter on research ethics that considers impacts of environmental trauma and better practice for activist research, as a complement to the previous investigations.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH:

Theresa (Tess) Pendergrast received her B.A. in Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She completed her M.S. in Development Sociology at Cornell University before completing her PhD in the department.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I first learned about environmental justice activism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as an undergraduate in the Department of Anthropology. At the time, I did not deeply register how rare and special the faculty and graduate students with whom I worked were; that distinction is now clear. These researchers and educators were committed to collaborating with community-based organizers in the area, to action-research, and to democracy-building, both inside and outside of the university. The activist-scholars I knew in this time propelled me towards my current adventure, and they still influence my direction in this journey. In those formative years, I met Dottie Holland and Arturo Escobar, and these two scholars continued to be my mentors after I left Chapel Hill. One of Arturo's courses provided the bolt-of-lightning type of epiphany that set me on a path of rewarding collaborations, including with local EJ activists in North Carolina. Ongoing connections and correspondence with Arturo and others from this time remind me of the continuous gifts from this seminal period in my life.

While I was at UNC, Dottie invited me to be part of the Social Movements Working Group along with a number of graduate students who would become like big siblings to me. Some of my big sisters from this time include Dana Powell, who came back into my world in 2019—the same year Dottie passed away from cancer. Dana was an incredibly generous friend in this last year of my PhD. I'm endlessly grateful for her ability to see the emerging stories within my work even before I could, and for her willingness to continue to dream with me of "another university possible," a vision Dottie and Arturo helped me first imagine.

Arturo was the one to first suggest I think about Cornell's department of Development Sociology, and Phil McMichael's warmth and humor in our first meeting made my decision easy. In addition to providing exceptional guidance as I trained in sociology, Phil shepherded me through the PhD program with unwavering generosity and kindness, attributes I quickly realized not all my colleagues found in their advisors. Phil consistently advocated for my work and for my well-being, including when I was dealing with a frightening health episode that interrupted my studies. He always ensured I found ways to thrive and applauded the activist-oriented, education-focused aspects of my professional development—even when others in the broader world of academia dissuaded me from these pursuits.

My additional committee members, Wendy Wolford, Rich Stedman, and Noliwe Rooks, have also been exceptional and reliable sources of support. Wendy's encouragement goes back to my Chapel Hill days, as she urged me to apply to the DSOC program, and from my first day on campus, she made me feel welcome and like my contributions mattered. When I was

stumped with writing, contemplating next directions as a young professional, or needing advice on addressing issues in research planning, Wendy always had the answers. Rich and I got to know each other after my MS was complete, but he dove right in to my project and I benefitted from his enthusiasm and his ability to connect me to other researchers on EJ, specifically Sarah Naiman. I admire the way Rich is a community-builder among young researchers like me. Noliwe and I met through my incredible colleague Bobby Smith, and I'll always owe Bobby for that introduction. I left every meeting with Noliwe with an exciting new angle or newfound way to address a problem within the research I previously couldn't wrap my head around. Noliwe helped me find joy in the writing again and again, and her own scholarship and public advocacy deeply inspire me.

Other faculty and staff who have been especially significant in my years here have been Rachel Bezner Kerr, Scott Peters, Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman within Development Sociology and Tracy Hamler Carrick and Kelly King-O'Brien at the Knight Center. I also am grateful for the staff at the Cornell Prison Education Project (CPEP), who have welcomed me in to their advocacy world so warmly. Betsye Violette of CPEP is among the amazing educators working towards justice I aspire to be more like. Relatedly, the many undergraduate students who have worked with me are a main reason I love my job; I owe each of them, too.

Many graduate students have been not only my collaborators but also my friends. I am lucky to find easy camaraderie with the graduate students I've met within Development Sociology, and count myself incredibly fortunate to have warm acquaintanceships with many of these brilliant people. My cohort in particular was a fantastic group of women with whom to learn, and I'm delighted that Ellie, Youjin, Katie, and Holly were the ones with whom I started this program.

The graduate student friends who aided me in tackling this whole project include Bobby Smith, my dear comrade in social movement studies. When Bobby was still at Cornell, he and I would catch each other in hallways of Warren Hall and update one another on the various intellectual questions and excitements on our minds. I loved these moments of our minds meeting, and I'm so thankful that we kept up this spirit and energy even from a distance. I always relish the phone calls in which we talk through writing, life, and activism.

Two of my best friends are women I met at Cornell, and these two humans were among my main lifelines as I finished up. Nikola Kochendörfer was a mighty ally through tough times and kept my chin up as a fellow scientist trying to do things differently. She holds me accountable in all the best ways, because she believes in my dreams (and I in hers). I regularly pinch myself in disbelief that our paths serendipitously crossed, for today I cannot imagine doing my work without her as a confidante. Ellie Andrews, who came in to

the DSOC program with me, has basically become my (taller) work twin: she and I have grown together as teachers and now are beginning our careers as educators. I also cannot fathom a world without her as the person I can turn to for advice on, well, just about anything. She has made me a better teacher, and better person, and she has been a sheer joy with whom to collaborate.

Outside the formal university world, I owe endless thanks to the dozens of EJ activists who have been inspiring me over the last thirteen years, and who push me to roll up my sleeves and get to work. These change-makers keep me humble and keep me grounded. Graduate school would have been much more lonely and isolating had I not felt a sense of purpose and had I not had people in communities always holding me accountable to the bigger project at hand.

For this specific research project, I owe activists in the Bronx, DC, Newark and Atlanta so much. I thank them for their willingness to trust me and to re-orient me when I was lost or needed advice on how to better serve them. And, as a child of the city, I realize how much Atlanta in particular continues to teach me, with all its beauties and brutalities. I am in awe of Atlantans who are fighting for more equity in my hometown. I am indescribably lucky to be included in some of the collective organizing efforts in the ATL.

Two particular Atlantans have shown me what a life of serving others can look like, and have demonstrated to me the power of education: my mom and dad. My mother Callie has never stopped being a learner focused on service; I am so proud of her return to university studies recently and inspired by what she plans on doing with her new knowledges. Her intrepid approach to life is a source of unending amazement and makes me feel able to be braver in this world. Everything I have is the result of her working hard for me to have exceptional opportunities, including when she was a single mom. How lucky I am that she chose Dennis as the partner with whom she'd raise me, as he has been my other main teacher, friend, and role model since he came into my life. Dennis has spent decades serving his communities and working across difference towards greater equity. He continues to be the educator and activist I most admire. I dedicate this dissertation to these two incredible people.

And finally, one of the greatest fortunes of my life was meeting Alejandro after I moved to Ithaca. Alejandro always "got" my work, and that mattered. I love that he is a scientist and global citizen who shares my values and belief in '*another world possible'* for which we have to fight. The home we have made together brings me daily joy and peace, and because of this space, I can go back out and do this work. Gracias, mi vida, por todo.

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Introduction

In March of 2017, prominent environmental justice activist and US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) staff member Mustafa Santiago Ali resigned from his longstanding position at the agency. The moment was significant not just because of the political statement the resignation made, but also because Ali had worked for over two decades in the EPA to put environmental justice (EJ) on the agency's agenda. Ali's resignation came after growing speculation that the Office of Environmental Equity that he helped found and related EJ projects would be dramatically downsized under the Trump administration.

Several activists, city officials, community organizers, and nonprofit leaders concerned with EJ with whom I spoke in the preliminary research phase for this dissertation project separately mentioned Ali's resignation. To some, the departure seemed symbolic of the political chaos and uncertainty under President Trump. To others, Ali's departure was unsurprising and merely a sign of ongoing strife within the EPA (see Harrison 2019). These interpretations revealed contrasting takes on how the government could, or had, served environmental justice over the last decade. One nonprofit sector advocate reported that she felt self-determination was more important than ever: "…as Mustafa Ali says, communities can take care of themselves." Another activist responding to Ali's resignation and the EPA's new direction maintained, "We could never trust the government anyway." Still another lamented this departure as a huge hit to major progress in EJ action. In an online interview, Ali himself spoke in terms of fear for disenfranchised communities, arguing that the reduced budget for the EPA's EJ work would be crushing for the already marginalized in the US. Most simply, he said, more nonwhite poor people would die.

Even in reflecting on one single individual's legacy of work in EJ within a government agency, we can find varying, even contradicting perspectives on the purpose and ideal role of the state when it comes to forwarding environmental justice. The contrasting takes on Ali's resignation reveal the tension many EJ advocates feel when it comes to the EPA and environmental regulation agencies. On the one hand, some community-based advocates argue that EJ action has benefitted from particular government interventions. On the other side, one can quickly find the persistent perception among activists that the government is not trustworthy and communities should be left alone. I claim these differing takes on the merits of government intervention indicate dissonances between the historically grassroots orientation of the US environmental justice movement and the institutionalization of EJ at the state and federal levels.

The Trump administration period has been one of great upheaval for the EPA and tremendous concerns for EJ advocates. This period invites reflection on the ways the state has participated in EJ-related projects in the past and what future engagements might involve for communities. Considering these aspects from a sociological perspective encourages questions about the role of the state in forwarding grassroots action, such as: how do communities affected by EJ issues imagine the role and responsibility of the EPA today, and what does the EPA believe its work to be in these communities? Additionally, we might look to the ways that projects conducted by the EPA have both incorporated the movement's claims while distorting and/or removing the more radical elements of the movement. Such projects reveal the possibilities, limits, and constraints of the EPA and therefore can inform activist action in the future vis-à-vis the state.

While the EPA's work on EJ is sprawling and often nebulous, I argue even one program can hold insights into the complexity of today's EJ movement and its connection to regulatory agencies. Examining the outcomes of one particular EPA program on environmental justice can help illuminate how the state and civil society organizers relate to and shape each other, as well as the consequences of this mutual conditioning. This dissertation is the result of using one such program, a national effort on water justice, as a lens through which to understand some of the complexities of and dilemmas within the US-based environmental justice movement today.

The program in focus came out of a time in which the EPA was poised to have a renewed focus on environmental justice, one not seen since the time of President Clinton's executive order on EJ in 1994. After the Obama administration's 2010 declaration of EJ as an EPA-wide concern, several significant projects sought to create collaborative partnerships between federal and state government, local community action groups, nonprofits, and private sector groups (see Jackson 2010). One of these projects, the Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP), was founded in 2011 and sought to address environmental justice concerns pertaining to waterways. The UWFP grew to support 19 different urban sites, awarded $1.8 million to various entities since inception, and promised some $6.7 million in local support. In the years since it started, the partnership has encouraged citizen-led water quality monitoring, environmental-educational initiatives, and even job growth, among other desired outcomes. However, the observed reactions to this program have been mixed, with some participants, especially community-based EJ groups, noting dissatisfaction and frustration with the project. On paper, many of the claims of this collaborative partnership seemed to "fix" issues of the past regarding the EPA's attempts at forwarding environmental equity. Decades of environmental justice activism have pressured the EPA to take environmental inequality as an agency-wide concern, and many advocates outside and inside the EPA (like Mustafa Ali) have pushed the EPA to expand its environmental equity programs. Put otherwise, the UWFP represents a new form of

approach to environmental management by the state as it has sought to incorporate the environmental justice movement's claims more extensively. As Allen et al. (2007) describe, "environmental justice has become further institutionalized both as a concept and a social movement through new forms of state governance" (111). This dissertation project considers an evaluation of the UWFP as a way to forward understanding of these new forms of state relationships to communities and environmental oversight.

Environmental justice has been studied as a social movement for decades, and the federal government has been evaluated for its efficacy in advancing EJ (Bullard et al. 2007, Konisky 2015, Goode and Keiner 2003; Harrison 2015, 2017, 2019; Holifield 2001, Lewis and Owley 2015), but there is less written about the relationships between the EJ movement and the regulatory state (see Pulido et al. 2016). I conceptualize these complex relationships, in focus in this dissertation, as a result of the institutionalization of the environmental justice movement. This research project has worked to expand an understanding of, in the words of policy scholar David Konisky (2015), what happens when a social movement wins, and the complex outcomes for EJ activists and the movement's goals get subsumed into the environmental regulatory state.

Recent contributions that *do* consider institutionalization include the EJ scholarship from Jill Harrison (2015, 2017, 2019), which this dissertation seeks to complement. Harrison has focused on struggles both within the EPA's institutional walls and those outside. Her examinations within the agency reveal strife between non-white staff who "buy-in" to the concept of environmental equity and those who do not (Harrison, 2017, 2019). According to Harrison, the efforts within the EPA by select staff to forward EJ have been undermined in spite of the fact that many more staff members today at the EPA are nonwhite and/or from communities historically affected by environmental racism. Looking outside of the agency, Harrison (2015) has shown that some EJ leaders are crafting a "new common sense" among EJ proponents, one that legitimizes the state's many shortcomings and moves away from more radical reforms. Harrison (2015) observes "cleavages" between an "old guard and new guard" in EJ over these new rationalities. She concludes her study on fractures by saying that, "because the EJ activists I interviewed are not a representative sample of the entire movement, I am unable to identify how widespread this new common sense is" (2015: 252). Harrison's conclusions in all of the aforementioned work call for more research, both on the ways the EPA institutionalizes EJ and on the related tensions among EJ activists. This dissertation, with its examination of both the failures of the UWFP and the cleavages it deepened between EJ proponents, is in part a response to Harrison's important recent contributions. Examining these cleavages within advocacy spheres also allows me to complicate portrayals of EJ activists, and of the movement itself. As my work draws into focus the paradoxes and constraints today's organizers face, especially in regards to the state, I provide texture to theorization of not only EJ but also of other rights

movements. In my conclusion section, I consider the ways EJ scholars might continue to develop this particular focus on internal frictions, including ways scholars can draw strategically on lessons and literatures on the US civil rights movement and the contemporary abolition discourse.

The current political turn in the EPA makes this project especially timely, given many communities are wondering about how to face daunting environmental, health, and community-related challenges in the face of shrinking budgets (see Harrison, 2019). Many activists today, including those connecting EJ to other equity crises, demand reinvestments in public services. Thus is a crucial time for understanding which dynamics of the state-grassroots relationships can bear fruit and which possibly reinforce existing power relationships, as well as what changes entities like the EPA are simply not equipped to deliver. Lessons from past EPA-EJ projects could help communities think strategically as resource allocations change. Plus, research on the tensions within EJ advocacy worlds may provide insight into how the state and EJ action have influenced each other in previous years, where institutional relationships may be headed next, and whether some approaches may need to be reassessed by EJ activists themselves (see Pulido et al 2016).

Below I detail the specific research questions that guided my study of the Urban Waters Federal Partnership, in addition to the research objectives of this dissertation project.

Guiding research question

> ***What are the consequences of the institutionalization of environmental justice, and how do the processes of institutionalization shape relations and possibilities of today's EJ activism?***

This question connects to the understood need for particular additions to the body of (Critical) EJ Studies,[1] as explained in the above section. Also, this question reflects the use of the UWFP program as a lens through which to understand ways state and non-state actors and projects condition one another's focus on EJ. This dissertation examined the UWFP as emblematic of the current dilemmas related to institutionalization. The first main dilemma this project recognizes is related to the ways that ideas from the grassroots have become integrated into environmental management at the EPA. While this incorporation would seem like a "win" for the movement, as activists explained to me in the case studies for this project, the institutionalization shifted the dynamics of power. The second dilemma is related to the ways the state conditions some types of movement efforts and interactions as a result of their providing funding, resources, training, and other forms of support.

These twin, interrelated dilemmas call for examining the flows between EJ civil society activism and state-based environmental regulation, enforcement, and oversight. The flow "up" of EJ ideas towards the EPA is comparatively obvious: the state agencies came to consider EJ claims as a result of decades of grassroots organized efforts to recognize environmental racism and classism. The flow "down" has been studied less, based on my review of the literature, and involves the ways the EPA shapes EJ projects for community organizations. Therefore, this research aims to examine both "flows" for a fuller grasp of institutionalization. Put otherwise, while conducting fieldwork, I considered whether communities were reshaping their EJ priorities in order to appeal to EPA grants, to partners in the project, to newly engaged NGOs etc., and whether partnership involvement was yielding satisfying results for various UWFP partners. These questions and orientations work towards better understanding entities in and outside the state sector as mutually influencing instead of (just) at times in direct opposition—which shows the development of EJ studies and activist work itself.

In all, the objects of focus for my main dissertation research question were: *a*. *institutionalization*, or the processes by which EJ get incorporated into the EPA; and *b*. *relationality*, or the way the EPA reflects and refracts activism in communities via particular intersections and interactions. Consequently, Chapter 1 in this dissertation is explicitly focused on institutionalization, while Chapter 2 explores relationality as part of the case study on the relationship between grasstops and grassroots EJ organizations within the UWFP.

Additional research foci and objectives

Documenting UWFP outcomes for community groups

On the most practical level, this dissertation research serves to document perspectives and perceived outcomes for participants within the UWFP in order to assess some of the partnership's impacts. The information available to the public about the UWFP describes wide-ranging goals, from working to stimulate jobs to streamlining federal resource use to "reconnecting people with nature" (as described on the EPA's UWFP website). However, it is difficult to find a clear explanation regarding indicators of success and how these were measured. More data is needed on how communities have responded to the initiative, both for building EJ scholarship and for public dissemination. Only a handful of the 19 sites were within the purview of examination for this research project; however, the case studies can stand as an example of what communities need more of when it comes to accountability. At the beginning of this research endeavor, I was told by community-based EJ groups that my

ideal role as a researcher would be as someone who could move between sites and analyze the overall patterns in outcomes across sites. As I describe in Chapter 3, activists in Atlanta, GA pointed out that they understood their own city's struggles, but did not have time to examine whether the failings of the UWFP were about their city's political landscape or a broader issue with the partnership's design. And so, this dissertation research was conducted in hopes of giving community groups more information about the EPA's efforts in other cities, towards a greater awareness for all of why these partnerships fall short.

Most simply, this action research-informed effort to fill in the gaps of information (see Greenwood and Morten 2007, Stringer 2013) is needed because of the lack of built-in accountability with projects like the UWFP. The EPA itself does not often do thorough reviews of community impacts resulting from big programs with the UWFP. In all, assessments of results for communities are scant when it comes to projects like the UWFP, and this has been noted by other social scientists reviewing the EPA's projects. As Harrison (2019) explains, "agencies must create accountability measures to track their progress on EJ" (Harrison 2019: 217, see also Goode and Keiner 2003, NEJAC 2011). Thus, this project comes in part from a recognized need for multi-city assessment of the UWFP in lieu of a formal review by the EPA.

Race, class, and positionalities in EJ activism—and research

Additional investigations in this dissertation research include how race and class dynamics inform dimensions of the partnership "on the ground." I used an intersectional analysis as a lens for understanding different meanings of EJ to different groups affected and/or incorporated by the program (see Crenshaw 1989, Hull et al. 1982, Mollet and Faria 2011). Consideration of intersectional struggles revealed to me how racialization and class-based biases shaped interactions within and between those groups involved in the UWFP.

Data obtained for this research echo findings from other EJ studies on race and class, namely that there is friction between some affluent, white-led environmental groups and predominantly Black citizen-led advocacy. As I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, I found racialized conceptions of what constitutes EJ work, who can claim legitimacy in various spaces, and who assumes leadership to set EJ agendas. These case studies also found that class dimensions are adding to complexity in UWFP partnership relationships, which involve more Black, Latinx, and other nonwhite populations than was the case historically. For example, there are numerous non-white EJ advocates involved in the sites I studied; however, many of these contributors were not from affected communities and not of low-SES backgrounds. Relatedly, in Chapters 1 and 2 I highlight debates I observed regarding who has marginalized peoples' interests in mind, who can represent classed

experiences, what constitutes equitable futures, and whether clean-up will mean cleaning "out" poor people. Therefore, this dissertation works to add nuance into understandings of heterogeneous experiences in Black/non-white organizing involving different class groups. In other words, another objective of this dissertation is to show some of the consequences of class dynamics within racial groups concerned with environmental futures.

Finally, Chapter 3 explores some of the ways that my own reflections on whiteness and class position led to a reconsideration of my research methods and reflection on how researchers can be more cognizant of environmental traumas.

Mapping out future possibilities re: state engagements

In addition to furthering the aforementioned work from Harrison, this dissertation engages with claims from activist scholars regarding the possible de-radicalization of the EJ movement. In considering this consequence of institutionalization, I survey the possible ways forward for the movement. Specifically, this dissertation considers what more transformative future engagements with the state could look like.

Some scholars have been deeply skeptical of any attempt to work with the EPA to forward environmental equity. Pulido et al. (2016) state that,

> The fact that activists continually turn to the state and see it as the only option suggests the hegemony of the state in terms of creating social change: activists cannot readily identify paths outside of the framework offered by the state... What is needed on the part of the EJ movement is a fundamental rethinking of its attitude towards the state. Instead of seeing the state as a helpmate or partner, it needs to see the state as an adversary and directly challenge it. While the early EJ movement did this, over the decades it has been increasingly co-opted by the state and lost much of its oppositional content. (Pulido et al., 2016, pp.26-27)

As I detail in the chapters that follow, my findings concur with Pulido et al. that cooptation and dilution of the most radical aspects of EJ is indeed a pressing concern for the movement. The UWFP clearly exemplifies a particular stripe of "governmentality"-or governmental rationality—of environmental justice within the EPA: with state adoption of EJ ideas, the more radical claims of the EJ social movement have faded in favor of those that more basically appease citizen groups (see Foucault 1991, also Agarwal 2005). For example, the clean-up days in which local citizens come together to pick up trash from rivers are both the increasingly preferred project under the gaze of the EPA and innocuous types of work for state agencies to encourage. The more radical requests made by EJ

activists, like those against privatization and towards democratic reform, are notably absent from the UWFP.

In addition to the above, the EJ proponents I interviewed requested more complex options for engagement. In other words, the voices I heard did not fall neatly into either advocating for an adversarial opposition or for acquiescence into the state's frameworks. As described in the case studies that follow, activist perspectives suggest the need for multiform strategies. I heard an interest in cautious collaboration in select instances, including some strategic engagements with the EPA as a way to hold the state accountable for past racial and class-based environmental violence[1]. In the chapters ahead, I argue that EJ advocates should be skeptical of partnerships like the UWFP, as promising as these programs might seem on the surface. But at the same time, the EPA should be held accountable for specific work that is difficult for working-class organizers to do, for example, monitoring and reporting environmental health hazards. After all, this is what EJ activists like Mustafa Ali lament when budgets for the offices of environmental equity were cut at the EPA. Lax environmental oversight quite literally costs lives. I argue in this dissertation that ways forward involve *both* finding ways to grow community-environmental health via counter-capitalist efforts *and* working to create systemic reforms to the state in spaces like the EPA.

Another point of focus in considering future engagements with the state is the reality of diverse EJ groups and their varying strategies. While EJ literature can at times characterize the movement as simply composed of "grassroots" entities, this dissertation dives into the diversity of EJ-focused organizations, including those I and those in organizations call "grasstops" and their varying experiences within the UWFP. In doing so, I note that the movement landscape is different today than when researchers were first writing on EJ mobilizations decades ago. Plus, this awareness of heterogeneous groups helps tease out why certain strategies and EPA projects might work for some organizations and not others, further complicating the simplistic binary of "state versus the grassroots."

Thus, this dissertation regards the relationships between the government and activist circles as complex, as well as the relationships *within* grassroots (and, what I deem "grasstops") organizations. Providing more evidence of this complexity is necessary, and I work to contribute this. As Pellow and Brulle (2005) note, the "populist, democratic power structure" of the EJ organizing world is sometimes romanticized, and there can be evidence for and against this romantic view (14). Examining how different groups have fared under the UWFP can deepen comprehension of more "micro"-level differences within EJ

[1] David N. Pellow is among the critical EJ scholars who advocate for conceptualizing environmental injustice as violence (see 2016, 2018).

organizing today, and what's at stake for different groups when it comes to possible future engagements.

Contributions to EJ scholarship

My research draws on and contributes to the following bodies of literature.

Development studies of state, economy, and society

The environmental justice social movement in the United States fundamentally challenges key development practices and goals of industrialized worlds. My training in critical development studies has aided my examination of the environmental justice movements dynamics and ongoing, typically fraught relationships with the state.
Many theorists of development studies argue that the state's work is not just the function within governmental walls, but also the incorporated development rationales within the fabric of societies. Thus, development theories provide a backdrop for my understanding of how the EPA conceptualizes beneficial/healthy development and how these conceptions limit and influence action by various stakeholders. In other words, a focus of this dissertation is on how the EPA projects (claim to) represent a kind of progress in development practice that is not just about economic growth but also sustainability and public health, and justice. Development theory on the state can also provide insight into how some state roles become privileged over others across time and space; in the case of the UWFP, I am interested in the consequences of institutionalization leading to the EPA becoming an arbiter of justice.

Development studies also helps me consider the radical claims of environmental justice and why some of these are in friction with the "development as usual" mindsets of some EJ advocates (see McMichael 2017). Capitalism is constantly transforming across time and space, and by consequence so are capitalist-oriented states (Harvey 2006, Rosenberg 2006, Makki 2015). Many argue that these states will continue to serve the function of elite accumulation unless they, like development paradigms, are dramatically re-imagined and re-configured (see also Pulido et al. 2016). Part of the ongoing issue for resistance movements like EJ has been that development has been reformulated and reworked rather than fundamentally unsettled. Re-thinking development might require *un*thinking development (McMichael 2017: 299, see also Martínez-Alier 2012). Such a paradigm shift is likely beyond any possibility of the EPA's action, but this dissertation offers some grounded observations as to why. Work from development studies on post-development/rethinking development has guided my understanding of the limitations of governmental work in

counter-development projects like EJ at its most radical. And so, as noted above, this project explores what is possible within the current paradigm, and what simply is not.

Finally, I situate this dissertation work within scholarship reflecting on the processes of underdevelopment. Underdevelopment theorists suggest that capitalist economic growth necessarily 'under'-develops certain regions or peoples lacking power to protect their extant livelihoods from extractive forces on the outside (see Frank 1966). This concept of underdevelopment claims that industrialization in the US and elsewhere creates conditions of inequality, destitution, and despair as a consequence of concentrating resources and wealth elsewhere. My research considers EJ-related inequities as a feature of past and ongoing underdevelopment in the United States. The research I present is also a study in persistent poverty, and my work reiterates that in the US modern economic system, nonwhite and poor Americans have been disproportionately underdeveloped via a nexus of environmental-social-economic burdens (see DuBois 1953, Marable 1983). This project finds that difficulties pursuing EJ are related to the challenge for new economic development paradigms (like de-growth or environmental accountability) to overcome dominant ones. In total, the case studies I present build on scholarship that explains environmental burdens as not apolitical, but as among other consequences of development disproportionately suffered by the already marginalized.

Social movement studies

This dissertation project, in being a study of the US-based environmental justice movement, engages with previous studies on why mobilizations begin, grow, and change form over time, space, and scale. The EJ movement can be explained in part through theories of "new" social movements that have broken out of fixations on the attempts to seize state power; these movements instead grapple with a plurality of concerns, from collective identity to autonomy to meaning and emotion (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, see also Foweraker 1995, Goodwin and Jasper 2004, Morris and Mueller 1992). As I describe in Chapter 2, the challenges for many EJ organizations today include debates about authenticity, which can be seen as a result of a fractured central identity as the movement has grown and changed courses. Additionally, much of social movement theory in the last decades has focused on *dynamic* and *process* (Giugni 1998, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, Tarrow 1998); this dissertation argues that the EJ movement is seeing new internal dynamics indeed. As one respondent explained to me, for years, the EJ movement was in a descriptive phase: proponents needed to gather evidence to prove that environmental racism and class-based environmental discrimination were happening. Today, this respondent argued, the movement has been "heard" in more spaces and is working to integrate change meaningfully. What this meaningful change looks like is increasingly the point of debate

within EJ activism, and in my dissertation chapters, I theorize some of the reasons that the "integration phase" of environmental justice has proven so challenging.

Social movement theory analyses have assisted in my work into identity, discourse, and conflict regarding the movement. Environmental justice activism has broadened since the 1980s from protest action on the streets to inclusion as a goal in major nonprofits, government offices, and even corporate planning initiatives. As a growing array of stakeholders and entities employ the term *environmental justice*, it is easy to find the working definition of EJ changes from context to context. The identities of self-described environmental justice advocates are also arguably shifting with the changes in meaning and understanding, as I document in Chapter 2. Claims to "good" EJ activism and activist identity have become more complex—and in some moments even contested (see Allen et al. 2007). Thus, social movement theory-related writing on what motivates actors within a movement has helped me consider what participation in the EJ movement means to various stakeholders.

In addition to these contributions, writings on social movement theory can help explain the ways the state and social movements are not always situated against each other in binary, but rather are often "partially embedded" in one another (Wolford 2015: 55). Work from scholars who think of social movements in relationship with the state has proven especially useful for my research, given this project weighs arguments from Pulido et al. (2016) that advocate for antagonistic relationships with the state as the radical way forward. Drawing on the idea of partial embedding—especially given that today's EPA involves EJ activists of color as staff—adds complexity to the notion that EJ activists can move forward by making the EPA (and the capitalist state) its enemy (see Pulido et al. 2016). I explore this conundrum of the intra-and inter-relationships in Chapter 2.

Lastly, my research adds to scholarship from those using social movement theory to reflect on past and current EJ mobilization. I engage with Dorceta Taylor's (2000) understanding that the "framing processes, mobilizing structures, and political opportunities" are the key social movement features of EJ that made it uniquely transformative (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, cf Taylor 2000). Taylor maintains that the environmental justice movement as social mobilization involved a "master frame" that transcended race and class lines (2000: 562-563). These aforementioned claims have ample evidence to support their validity in some aspects. However, in advance of my dissertation fieldwork, I suspected that these explanations based on social movement analyses would not adequately account for current conundrums of EJ work, and my findings support this preliminary assumption. Taylor's writing is largely looking back on why the movement gained momentum; my work by contrast points to present paradoxes facing EJ activism and its varied projects. Therefore, this work, especially Chapter 2, builds on—and at points contradicts—previous

social movement analyses of EJ in considering why certain frameworks have *not* prevented partnerships from reproducing old power relations and/or creating internal conflicts within the EJ movement.

(Critical) environmental justice studies

The growth of the environmental justice social movement has benefitted from the coinciding rise in EJ-related case studies. These case studies have documented how populations of color and low-SES groups are affected not only by market forces but also by racism and classism in facing ecological concerns (see Bullard 1993, Mohai 1992, Checker 2005, Taylor 2014). Many of these studies note that the struggles of environmental justice involve the politics of inclusion in local democracy (Agyeman 2003 and 2005, Girdner and Smith 2002, Lukasiewicz and Baldwin 2017, Taylor 1993, Cole and Foster 2001, Williams and Collins 2001, Rutt and Bluwstein 2017, Benz 2017). Work from US-based groups gathering data with the EJ framework has inspired international scholarship, thus furthering the array of literature (see Byrne, Glover, and Martinez 2002, Carruthers 2008, Schlosberg 2013). This dissertation adds to this breadth of EJ literature and to the increasingly complex, nuanced analyses of the EJ movement exploring newer foci like emergent tensions and paradoxes (see Hochschild 2018).

The number of researchers engaging with *Critical* Environmental Justice (CEJ) Studies is also growing. CEJ Studies draws on the additional fields of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Political Ecology (PE), which each in turn inform my approach to this project (Pellow 2016, 2018). This literature comes from a desire from scholars of EJ issues to generate more theoretical framings of EJ out of the body of case studies and deepen analysis of the movement's innerworkings. As Pellow and Brulle (2005) argue, a more critical EJ Studies is needed in order to find more theoretical models for evaluating aspects of the EJ movement (17). They implore researchers to take "a more critical examination of the movement's tactics, strategies, discursive frames, organizational structure, and resource base" (2005: 17, see also Pellow 2016). Additionally, Pellow (2016, 2018), imagines Critical EJ studies to be scholarship that considers multiples scales and evaluates state power more extensively. The work of my dissertation research is aligned with these aforementioned goals. In addition to the above, CEJ studies advances understanding of the conceptual impact of EJ in various spaces. For example, Pearsall and Pierce (2010) write on ways the abstract idea of environmental justice becomes incorporated (with mixed success) into city planning initiatives. Still others, like Pulido et al. (2016), critique scholarship that stays within the frame of policy reviews. To Pulido et al., a more radical scholarly approach to CEJ studies scrutinizes the limitations of relying on state interventions or state-based solutions (see also Pellow 2016). Examining state limitations connects to another focus in CEJ studies:

conceptualizing environmental justice as state-based violence. CEJ studies seeks to underscore the economic aspects that buttress oppression, including the persistent environmental inequality. This vein of work within CEJ continues the critical race theory-related critiques of capitalism that describe state-based violence against nonwhite bodies as being wrapped up in particular modes of production. These critiques align with this dissertation project's concern that the EPA—even with seemingly progressive projects like the UWFP—may reinforce certain aspects of the status quo over deep democratic and economic reforms.

In short, this dissertation adds to Critical Environmental Justice studies in its critiques of certain strategies and engagements by movement actors. Ultimately, my conclusions diverge somewhat from those who interpret any state-based solution as inherently doomed to fail (see Pulido et al. 2016, Pellow 2016 and 2018). As I explain in Chapter 1 and in the conclusion to this dissertation, lessons from the UWFP reveal ways that the state can make differences in the welfare of historically oppressed people. Ironically, some of this work to be done by the state might be to actually *avoid* big EJ partnerships like the UWFP, as I explain in my conclusions to Chapter 1. That said, I agree that serious caution needs to be taken with any EJ solution that involves reliance on the EPA, particular in its current form. I also certainly concur with Pulido et al. (2016) that strategic reassessment is needed, as I conclude in Chapters 1 + 2. At the same time, I draw on activist voices to describe the ways the EPA could still be taken to task to do work that would forward equity while avoiding de-radicalization of the EJ movement. As ever, multiple strategies, as well as visions for the short and longer term, are needed in order for environmental racism and persistent inequality to be reduced.

Data Collection and methods

This project employed multiple forms of qualitative research to answer the research questions at hand. Enough time has passed since the UWFP's rollout in 2011 that I was able to do qualitative review of how the partnership had impacted some participants. In other words, participants in the UWFP had had enough time to assess the difference between their hopes at the outset of the partnership and their views on the endeavors after years of involvement. An in-depth assessment of how participants within all of the 19 sites viewed outcomes was outside of the scope of this particular project's timeline. However, the research model employed by this dissertation should be replicable in cities other than those chosen for the purview of this proposal. I also acknowledge that analyzing testimony from participants on their experiences within the UWFP is just one part of evaluating the program's overall impacts and output. However, given the UWFP made promises to

community-based organizations, not just commitments to improving water quality, hearing feedback from organizations and advocacy groups is key.

I conducted case studies of four East-coast city sites that were among the 19 designated by the UWFP. The first was Proctor Creek in Atlanta, GA, which has suffered from decades of environmental issues related to storm-water runoff, combined sewage overflow, and water-borne disease as a result of illegal dumping. This area of Atlanta is historically Black and of predominantly low-socioeconomic status, with persistent issues related to economic exclusion. Each designated city site within the UWFP has its own brief webpage summary, and of all these pages, the Proctor Creek site has some of the most compelling language around economic justice. The UWFP's explanation of Proctor Creek suggests awareness of the interconnections between poverty, public health, and environmental burdens. Thus, part of the interest in Proctor Creek as a case study site was because of the EPA's professed awareness (on paper, so to speak) of particular EJ dimensions. My research sought to understand what this commitment in description meant for the action on the ground; Chapter 1 explores this contrast. Proctor Creek was also of interest as a research site, given I already had connections to EJ activist projects in Atlanta. These organizers helped me figure out my research project plan, as I discuss at more length in Chapter 3.

I also conducted research on the perspectives of outcomes—meaning how the project and its processes were viewed by different participants—for the Bronx and Harlem River watersheds in the South Bronx of New York City. This area has undergone tremendous economic change in terms of industrialization, however the residents of the UWFP's designated site remain some of the poorest in the nation.[3] The language of this UWFP location's webpage—somewhat unlike Proctor Creek's partnership foci—alludes to prioritizing recreation-related "renewal," including greener trail-ways, and restoration of natural habitats. The two major NGOs listed as partners from the Bronx/Harlem River watersheds (The Nature Conservancy and the Friends of Van Cortlandt Park) have a mission statement of "connecting people to nature;" these priorities seem distant from other EJ foci like economic and health justice. The Harlem/Bronx project description on the UWFP page evokes concepts of wilderness under threat and humans detached from surrounding ecologies. Such visions of what constitutes environmental crisis are often found in large conversation-oriented groups that have historically been in tension with some ideas of EJ activism (see Allen et al. 2007 and DeLuca 2007). At the same time, the water quality issues in this area are significant in terms of public health impacts; industrial waste and effluent from waste management are among the concerns. Therefore, studying a site of the UWFP that blends "classic" conservation language with concerns about economic viability was of interest. Put otherwise, the UWFP project descriptions of the Atlanta and Bronx site seemed to have some significant contrasts worth probing.

My preliminary research work started with reviewing impacts of the UWFP in New York City and in Atlanta, GA, and results from the first round of interviews led me to take on two additional study sites. These additional cities were selected in part based on the recommendations and requests of EJ organizers with whom I spoke. The NYC point-people seemed to have overlap with the New Jersey UWFP site, and so I added the Passaic River in NJ as a place to also look at UWFP outcomes. The Passaic River project focused on degraded shorelines and the toxic residues from manufacturing, like mercury and dioxin contaminants (epa.gov/urbanwaterspartners). By contrast to Atlanta's Proctor Creek, this site had very few designated partners; based on my research, only one environmental justice organization was involved. In addition, a couple of conservation groups and a land trust were appointed partners on the site, along with the government entities involved (the EPA and US Army Corp of Engineers). This New Jersey site was of interest as it only had one EJ organization in the mix; I wanted to see if that fact led to different realities regarding relations between organizations.

The final site I chose to investigate was the Anacostia River in the Washington, DC and Maryland areas. Organizers in Atlanta with whom I spoke said they had connected with EJ advocates in the DC area at a meeting, and these individuals reported equal frustration with the UWFP. Consequently, I reached out to organizations on the Anacostia River project, and from there built up my interviews of those involved in that site. This location, by great contrast to the Passaic site in New Jersey, had thirty listed partners. The majority of the organizations were NGOs like the Audubon Society or the Clean Water Fund that had DC-based branches, as another contrast to the other sites. As I explain in Chapter 2 on the interactions between the grasstops and grassroots, the existence of NGOs in collaborative EJ projects has been contentious for some activists. Therefore, the DC location ended up being useful for understanding some of the complexity of having so many different EJ organizations of varying capacities and scales working together within the UWFP.

This research considered the breadth of organizations involved in all four watersheds, not just the DC/Maryland site. I evaluated how various partner entities related to each other via both in-person interviews and participant observation in meetings I attended. The array of organizational interests and ideologies within these groups were at odds in moments, as I discuss in Chapter 2. In Atlanta, the range of partner groups listed on the UWFP site is dizzying: there are wealthy philanthropic organizations (Turner Foundation, Arthur Blank Foundation), historically black colleges (Spelman University, Clark University), global corporations (Coca-Cola), predominantly white environmental groups (American Rivers), black-led community groups (West Atlanta Watershed Alliance), and federal agencies (Housing and Urban Development, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), among others. Consequently, the contrasting concepts of EJ at work along with the varying designs each entity had for Proctor Creek's future was no surprise. I ended up

focusing less on the difference between corporate ideas of change and activist ones, and more on the tensions between EJ organizations that would seem like more natural allies, in part because the latter focus has been studied less. I eventually narrowed my focus in one case study to be on how organizations that are non-governmental, not-for-profit groups fared in the partnership. As mentioned in the above literature review, sometimes the space of non-governmental EJ work can be reduced to simply the "grassroots." In my research experience, this world is much more complicated, as I explain in Chapter 2.

For my case studies on the effects of institutionalization and the interactions between EJ groups, I conducted formal and informal interviews to help answer the research questions. I also used participant observation during group meetings with entities like stewardship councils, nonprofit centers, and city planning groups. I interviewed members from many of the site's respective partners, which included federal, non-federal and non-governmental organizations. These interviews investigated questions like: 1. what a participant's concepts of water and environmental justice were, 2. what they had hoped the UWFP would do and what the project ended up bringing to their advocacy work, 3. what they thought the appropriate roles were for the EPA now and in the future, 4. how they conceptualized the roots of water justice issues and how these could be remedied, 5. how they viewed the UWFP program design and their motivations for involvement, and 6. their overall assessment of the partnership and interactions they had with different organizations. In all, I conducted forty-seven in-depth, one-on-one interviews and gathered testimony from another two dozen individuals in informal interviews during larger gatherings and/or EJ-related organizational meetings. The eventual coding process helped me understand outliers versus patterns in the transcribed interviews; interview findings were compared with what I saw in meetings I was able to attend. That noted, the majority of my data comes from interview content. Patterns I found through coding the interview content were taken to signal particular phenomena within the UWFP, for example class-related frictions between organizations. In this way, findings from interviews were assumed to provide a window into understanding social dynamics between groups collaborating on EJ efforts.

Throughout my fieldwork, I reflected on my own positionality and its effects in my qualitative efforts. Given my work here was attentive to complex race and class dynamics, my own position as a white woman connected to an affluent university warranted reflection. I originally had the goal of being able to conduct more extensive interviews with community members from Proctor Creek, the Anacostia River location, the Newark/Passaic River site, and the South Bronx. However, after consultation with some EJ activists with whom I was previously connected, I revisited this research plan.

As I was told by these activist consultants, places like Proctor Creek had already been studied by academics from wealthy institutions, and some of this work had displeased a few organizations and community members. I was told my energy would be better spent doing work across a few sites to help community groups learn something they knew less about, namely how the project had unfolded in other places. I was dissuaded from doing interviews with low-income residents in the affected watersheds in focus. I was reminded of a collective sense of environmental trauma in particular neighborhoods; some prospective community participants have cautioned me against requesting people share their painful stories of environmental injustice. All this made me recognize the care I needed to take in this project to not re-create problematic extractions. I explain further in Chapter 3 how I re-designed my research to be focused on the perception of the UWFP's efficacy for EJ partners explicitly asked on to planning committees—individuals like community group leaders, nonprofit staff, workers in water NGOs. These individuals were already used to interfacing with academics outside the community like me and, importantly, I was not asking them about their direct experience with environmental trauma. Rather, I asked EJ organizers questions related to concerns like: their perception of the EPA's role, the efficacy of the UWFP, their vision of water justice/environmental equity, how they worked with other EJ organizations within the partnership, and their thoughts on the future of the EJ movement.

I was predominantly based in Ithaca, New York, for the duration of this research project, and I conducted approximately 65 percent of my interviews by phone or by email. Phone interviews were necessary in part because of my working between multiple cities. In-person interviews happened after I'd established some rapport with a few EJ organizations. By late 2018, I was invited to some meetings and able to conduct participant observation. I discuss more details of this research process in Chapter 3.

In addition to the interview collection and participant observation, I used media, discourse, and narrative analysis of the EPA's educational, training, and publicity efforts related to the UWFP. The EPA has created several virtual and community-based educational platforms through which to inform the public about the history, ideas, and main aims of environmental justice action (e.g. the EPA's online "EJ 101"). The agency has also begun disseminating short videos and other updates as testimonials to the UWFP's success. All these aforementioned efforts by the EPA were worth investigating for their concept-use and for which community partners they highlight. Narrative and discourse analysis of these products from the EPA was compared with the discourse and stories at work in the local citizen-led stewardship councils, nonprofits, city planners involved with the efforts, etc.

Preparation for the case study also required historicizing how the EPA came to think about environmental justice. I reviewed archives and interviews conducted by other researchers

with employees (past and present) concerned with environmental equity in order to grasp changing EPA dynamics. My case studies do not involve an extensive historical review of EJ in the EPA, but the UWFP should be thought of as a result of particular historical processes and present-day crossroads. I explain these phenomena in the chapters that follow.

F. Data Collection Ethics, Timeline, and Analysis Process

The data collection process protected the identities of those concerned with social, political, and/or economic ramifications of their involvement in the project. In advance of my fieldwork, I did not anticipate any participant being at tremendous personal risk with any prospective disclosure of information. However, I acknowledged that the questions I was going to ask were political, contentious, and sensitive. All names of interviewed subjects therefore were coded, and my research received approval from Cornell University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I ended up finding that interviewees were more nervous about their names or affiliations being known, in part because many were working in coalitions or other partnerships and were concerned about the impacts of their critiques on relationships with collaborators. Because of this fact, I have made even more strides in ensuring anonymity, including referring to respondents simply as "interviewees." After all, the EJ advocacy world is small once you start working within it; for example, were I to use a pseudonym for, say, an energy equity nonprofit leader in Atlanta, people would likely know I was talking about one of three people.

Though preliminary research for this project went back to 2016, I collected the key data for this project from approximately November of 2017 to June 2019. The data gleaned from media analysis, archival research, interviews, and participant observation required multi-stage analysis. I went back and forth between obtaining content and transcribing, coding, and writing up results over the research months. Interviews were transcribed using ATLAS.ti, and I also used this software for locating and interpreting patterns, themes, as well as anomalies in the research. In Chapter 3 and in the Conclusion section, I explain how I have worked—and will continue to work—to return my findings to EJ advocates inside and outside of the EPA.

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CHAPTER 1: Constrained Possibilities: Lessons for Environmental Justice Advocacy from the EPA's Urban Waters Federal Partnership Program

Introduction

This paper engages with the claim that the institutionalization of environmental justice (EJ) has simultaneously been a major success and a significant loss for the activists involved in the US-based EJ movement. Testimony from EJ activists and EJ scholarship makes clear that institutionalization has been complex. Many have celebrated government recognition and incorporation of EJ, considering institutionalization a "win" (see Bullard, Mohai, Saha and Wright 2008; US EPA 1992). However, some researchers and movement proponents claim that incorporation of the movement into state regulatory spheres, especially by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was problematic, as it changed the locus of power in the movement. For example, Barb[2], an activist in an EJ organization in North Carolina, has argued that EJ's institutionalization was in fact the "death" of the movement. In her paraphrased words, the EJ order was a huge mistake; it decentered the power into something that appeared progressive but was not (personal correspondence, January 2020). Based on my findings from a multi-city case study on an EPA EJ project, I argue that institutionalization has indeed displaced and de-radicalized parts of the movement, and this aspect of today's EJ power relations is a central reason that the EPA continues to disappoint so many EJ advocates. Additionally, I use the case study to engage with previous EJ literature, some of which has suggested that by simply increasing stakeholder representation and improving their understanding of environmental justice, the state could more effectively work with EJ groups to reduce unequal exposure to environmental ills. My data shows that increased participation and a shared understanding of EJ do not do enough to mitigate the downsides of institutionalization. These negative consequences should be weighed by activists as they reassess future engagements with the state (see Pulido et al. 2016). Lastly, this paper examines the EPA's vulnerability to political appointments, given the changes to the agency under the Trump administration.

EJ scholars in recent years have added to critical environmental justice studies by evaluating the state's response to the environmental justice social movement (see Bullard et al. 2008, Konisky 2015, Goode and Keiner 2003; Harrison 2015, 2017, 2019; Holifield 2001, Lewis and Owley 2015). Most recently, they have shown that the EPA's efforts in environmental justice have not substantially reduced environmental disparities or increased the participation in decision-making (Harrison 2017). These scholarly assessments of the EPA's inability to deliver on EJ are helpful for understanding today's

[2] This and all other names in this paper are pseudonyms, coded to ensure confidentiality.

conundrums, but should be more grounded in long-standing claims from EJ activists that the EPA's inadequacies in reducing environmental inequality stem in part from the process of institutionalization. Taking this critique seriously would help both scholars and activists advise individuals in the EPA and the agency's projects to better meet the movement's main aims. In other words, this paper does not reject outright the EPA's ability as an institution "to do" EJ, but rather considers how well the state and federal government do particular types of interventions.

In short, I argue that the power relations in institutionalized efforts to forward EJ, and not *just* programmatic issues like a lack of stakeholder participation, are at the root of why recent EPA-led projects on environmental justice have not met local communities' hopes. The EPA project that I examined was led by individuals who had ostensibly learned lessons from the failures of the previous decades and who seemed to take seriously environmental equity. The project, which was a multi-city partnership effort to stem water injustice, checked many of the EJ boxes. And yet the project was disappointing to many participants. This particular project should be seen as emblematic of both the EJ movement's historical success but also of the ways in which the EPA is ill-suited to lead collaborative endeavors in equity. In addition, this research suggests the UWFP is the type of initiative that occurs in lieu of deep reinvestment in public works. In other words, UWFP is a lens on what is allowable when "leaned down" state services and privatization have been repeatedly incentivized in various cities with persistent poverty and pollution struggles (see Holifield 2004). [3] demanded for decades that the EPA take the claims of environmental injustice seriously; now that the agency has recognized and responded to the movement, the way the recognition is made and the power given to the EPA for some forms of movement support need to be re-examined.

Background: **Critically Assessing the State's Response to EJ**

Critical examination of the EPA's response to environmental justice has grown alongside the EJ movement's own incorporation into more "mainstream" environmental organizations and state agency agendas and initiatives. This body of critical EJ literature reflects a growing depth of analysis in EJ scholarship. As policy researcher David Konisky (2015) notes, much of the past three decades of environmental justice research has worked towards legitimizing the activist claims of injustice and disproportionate burdens on low-income, nonwhite people, often documenting sites of hazards (252). At the same time,

[3] This phrase, while commonly used in activist spaces, is a nod to a seminal work of EJ literature, *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* edited by Robert D. Bullard.

recent literature shows how EJ action and strategy, "mainstream[4]" environmental organizations, and state-led responses have changed: the present-day landscape of relations between state agencies and civil society advocates in the work of environmental justice looks very different than it did in the 1990s.

More and more EJ literature on the US-based movement scrutinizes the EPA in particular, especially as enough time has passed to assess the consequences of the Clinton administration's Executive Order on environmental justice, EO 12898. This literature considers institutionalization as the adoption of EJ policies, programs, and practices by regulatory agencies and as a result of decades of pressure from EJ advocates (Harrison 2019: 33). In addition to disappointment with the outcomes of EO 12898, scholars chronicling EJ have also noted the more recent shortcomings under the Obama administration. The Obama administration brought a renewed energy to the EPA's work on environmental justice, as evident in Lisa Jackson's declaration to the EPA that EJ was an agency priority (see Jackson 2010). The EPA under Obama was comprised of more diverse staff including those trained in equity issues, and some researchers argue that as a result, more within the agency "bought in" to the EJ commitment (see Harrison 2015). A number of different EJ-oriented programs (including the case study at hand) were developed, and, on paper, funding, staff, and federal resources were directed at a revitalized push towards greater environmental equity. However, even newer EPA efforts on EJ have been relatively toothless, although some Obama administration-era EJ projects are still being assessed for impact (see Harrison 2019, Konisky 2015). It seems the refreshed focus on EJ within the Obama administration was indicative of liberalism that promotes inclusivity and multiculturalism without deeply addressing roots of economic injustice and (environmental) racism. Thus I argue that even the latest round of EPA projects to address environmental inequity still failed to meet hopes due to paradoxes related to institutionalization and to dominant economic development paradigms.

Critical assessments of the EPA's attempts to reduce environmental injustices and inequalities have overall concluded that the EPA has been largely ineffective. Reviewing the literature on the EPA and environmental justice, there are four main arguments explaining the lack of transformation and action: 1. the EPA is susceptible to industry pressure and its EJ policies are therefore weak (Harrison 2017, 2019); 2. agency employees come from different "figured worlds"[5] than affected communities, which often makes them insensitive

[4] EJ scholars who have chronicled the rise of the US movement, such as Robert Bullard, often compare EJ to conservation and preservation-oriented environmental movements, and call the latter either "conventional" or "mainstream." Environmental justice as a movement diverged from these other mobilizations, namely in its attention to ways that environmental pollutants could worsen inequalities and how environmental burdens disproportionately affect poor, nonwhite populations.

[5] I draw here on Allen et al (2007) and their use of the concept of figured worlds to describe difference between environmental organizing spaces and identity-formation.

to, or skeptical of, the importance of justice and equity (Harrison 2017, Ottinger 2013, see also Allen et al. 2007); 3. the EPA does not consult low-income and minority community members affected by environmental injustice in creating programs or in decision-making (Konisky 2015: 248); 4. the EPA has a different conceptual framework of environmental justice than EJ activists and affected community members (Holifield 2001). In terms of subjects of analysis, scholarship on the role of the EPA in advancing EJ has predominantly focused on programmatic constraints, communication struggles, strategic mismatches, funding issues, and problems with staff.

This paper maintains that the above explanations are sound, but more is needed to explain other realities, especially from Obama administration-era initiatives. The case study presented in this paper is an assessment of an EPA program, the Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP) program, that, unlike the evidence other authors draw from, seemed to get "right" much of what previous endeavors had neglected or designed poorly. The UWFP checked a number of EJ boxes, from the array of non-governmental community groups included in the city projects to the visioning process being noticeably more bottom-up. And yet this study shows that the issues presented by other researchers present were less important, and instead, key power relations and dynamics constrained the possibilities for deep transformation within the EPA. The majority of community organizers, city planning officials, and nonprofit leaders reported being frustrated with the outcomes of the UWFP and skeptical that the EPA should ever form another environmental justice partnership again. This data brings up a core tension over the role of the state, and reveals the downsides of institutionalization of the EJ movement.

Case study: The Urban Waters Federal Partnership

Overview of the partnership project

This study focused on one EPA project from the last ten years, a multi-city federally-initiated endeavor meant to improve environmental conditions (here, with watersheds) while simultaneously addressing socio-economic and racial disparities: the Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP). The UWFP was started in 2011 under the Obama administration to 1. provide fiscal incentives and matching grants for projects on water equity issues in designated US cities and 2. encourage collaboration between federal, state, non-governmental, and local organizations all working towards improved environmental justice. By the time of this study, 19 different US cities had been awarded funds, program support, and had been granted watershed "ambassadors" to help co-create visions for improved water health and equity in the respective urban contexts. The UWFP was supported in 2011-2016 by 14 different federal agencies and 28 different

NGOs/nonprofits[6] that were identified as connected to water justice aims (epa.gov). By 2016, $1.3 million had been granted via the Urban Waters small grants program to 22 organizations across 18 states. Matching grants were also made available for cities, nonprofits, and community groups involved in the UWFP.

The Urban Waters Federal Partnership project was ideal for testing the claims around institutionalization, for a number of key reasons. For one, the UWFP incorporated key arguments from decades of EJ advocacy and scholarship, namely that environmental burdens are disproportionately placed on poor, minorities communities which are typically not included in environmental decision-making (Agyeman 2003 and 2005; Bullard 1990; Bullard, Mohai, Saha and Wright 2008; Checker 2005; Cole and Foster 2001; Mohai 1992; Pellow 2016 and 2019; Taylor 1993 and 2000). The project on the surface seemed to take seriously the criticisms about federal regulatory sluggishness and inefficacy. As described by the EPA website, the UWFP sought to "[reconnect] urban communities, particular those that are overburdened or economically distressed, with their waterways by improving coordination among federal agencies and collaborating with community-led revitalization efforts to improve our Nation's water systems and promote their economic, environmental and social benefits" (source: epa.gov). The partnership committed to doing each of the following, as cite from the UWFP website:

- Break down federal program silos to promote more efficient and effective use of federal resources through better coordination and targeting of federal investments.
- Recognize and build on local efforts and leadership, by engaging and serving community partners.
- Work with local officials and effective community-based organizations to leverage area resources and stimulate local economies to create local jobs.
- Learn from early and visible victories to fuel long-term action[7].

These stated goals reflect the state's acknowledgement of social movement organizing and EJ principles. Community organizations, nonprofits, EJ-promoting philanthropic entities, and environmental foundations concerned with environmental inequality and poverty were among those involved in most of the 19 different sites across the United States. Every designated site's web page shows awareness of key environmental justice concepts, such as how ecological degradation compounds persistent poverty. Each of the 19 sites[8] across the United States designated by the EPA to be part of the partnership project included in

[6] This number does not, by my count, reflect additional community groups that were at times identified as nonprofits. The 28 here refer to larger entities with a multi-state, regional, and/or national reach.
[7] See epa.gov
[8] Between the partnership's inception in 2011 and 2014, 19 total sites were designated.

project planning an array of federal, state and city level, and non-governmental organizations. Examples of federal agencies ostensibly assisting in some of the 19 sites included the US Forest Service and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), while state level entities included entities such as city watershed management and public works (see epa.gov). Reviewing the lists of partner entities in each city, one can find a substantial amount of heterogeneity from designated site to designated site. For example, in Atlanta, several corporations are listed on the website as partners (e.g., the Coca-Cola Foundation); the Green-Duwamish watershed of Washington state has *only* federal partners listed; the Lower Passaic River/Newark watershed site has no partners listed at all. This wide variety shows the very different politics at work in the designation process at different sites.

The partnership's goals of collaboration; its stated awareness of intersecting race, class, and environmental inequalities; and its effort to recognize local, non-governmental/community-based EJ organizers seemed to attend to issues previously identified by EJ scholars. Research from Harrison (2017) and Allen et al. (2007) suggests that "buy-in" is necessary for agency workers to be effective, and, as mentioned previously, actors' provenance from contrasting "figured worlds" have thwarted mutual understanding and effective shared strategies. Participating partnership groups applying to the UWFP for matching grants and inclusion in the project were required to demonstrate a commitment to equity groups and a goal of environmental equity. Hence "buy-in" seemed to be less of an issue than it was in EPA projects with no explicit attention to social dimensions.

The unique nature of the UWFP and its explicit orientation toward EJ were applauded also by the grassroots, nonprofit, and philanthropic foundations, at least at first. One public land trust director was quoted in 2013 in a local paper as believing that the partnership project had "created a groundswell of cooperation none of us had expected"; journalistic coverage also stated that the partnership was "revolutionary because of its coalition of oft-adversarial agencies—federal, state, local—along with environmental nonprofits, city planners, and private investors" (Rehagen, 2013). Other media in the first two years of the UWFP's unfolding also suggested that many participants were optimistic that this project would mobilize dollars, break down barriers for collaboration, and help put more groups into productive communication.

At the beginning of my research, the sentiments clearly had shifted in the four sites under review. Out of 47 interviewed participants, only one described the partnership's efforts as being overall positive. So, what happened to the optimism at the outset and why in the eyes of so many interviewees did the project fall apart? Unlike Harrison's (2015) findings, agency groups did not thwart the EJ projects by doubting the merit of studying race and class. By contrast to what Allen et al. (2007) found, the figured worlds of difference were not divided by social equity concerns versus environmental conservation; everyone agreed

that environmental equity was the shared aim. No corporate or private sector takeover happened, many grassroots groups were allowed to be "at the table" and help design and define the UWFP vision for their site, and a collective recognition of overlapping urban issues (housing, environmental, public health-related) was clear. However, those interviewed overwhelmingly expressed their dismay, calling it a disappointment and even a disaster. This paper analyzes the data for a post-mortem of the UWFP to speculate on why the partnership, in spite of fixing past oversights, still ended up falling short of the hopes of so many. In so doing, I argue that scholars in critical EJ studies should continue to attend to the broader conundrum of institutionalization and its ongoing effects for the EJ movement.

Methods

This case study on the UWFP is the result of my orientation towards participatory action research (Chevalier and Buckles 2013, Greenwood and Levin 2007, Stringer 2013): EJ activists with whom I spoke in Atlanta, Georgia in 2017 suggested someone investigate how participants across a few sites in the UWFP felt about the project. Put simply, this project comes out of listening to direct requests from those in community organizing spaces that I *not* focus on one site but look at broader phenomena across multiple cities.

I initially went to Atlanta to learn more about the partnership in Proctor Creek, an area of Atlanta dealing with chronic environmental blights. I planned to continue work I had done in the past on water, environmental justice, and social movement strategies, especially as these strategies related to engagements with the *state* (in the US, namely the EPA). However, after conversations with activists in West Atlanta, I was told that work from a university-based researcher focused solely on Proctor Creek was less needed. "We know our own struggles," one community member put it, "But I don't know how these issues compare to those in other cities; are our problems with water management just about Atlanta or something bigger?" After hearing many such comments regarding how my work would most be helpful, I turned away from a single-site study model and sought out a way to understand comparative outcomes with the UWFP in cities similar to Atlanta. Because the partnership involved a number of different cities, I would be able to take advantage of my geographic mobility as a researcher—something EJ activists in Atlanta pointed out—and compare and contrast across sites. This approach would also work towards making up for the fact that many EPA programs are not externally evaluated after they are rolled out.

The four sites chosen for this project were the Harlem and Bronx rivers system of New York City, the Passaic of New Jersey, the Anacostia River of Washington, DC and Maryland, and the Proctor Creek watershed of Atlanta, GA. Taken together, these four had enough similarities and contrasts to ask certain research questions of them all. The heterogeneity

of the sites allowed for comparisons over whether the breakdown of the UWFP was due to particular local politics or personalities[9].

All of the sites were in urban regions of the East Coast of the US, and the affected communities in each were mostly low-income/low-socio-economic status and Black or Hispanic/Latinx. All four sites faced EJ issues that stemmed from economic development projects, e.g., the solid waste processing that contributes to pollution along the Bronx and Harlem rivershed, the combined sewage overflow that plagues West Atlanta, and industrial manufacturing that generates effluent in the Passaic and Anacostia Rivers. As the water issues in each site differed, the action plans in each place varied. Differences in the four sites included the number of partners involved in the project: the Passaic site had only one major EJ organization involved in the partnership, while Atlanta and DC had numerous EJ groups of different scales and fiscal resources. Each site also had different local histories of EJ organizing and relations to the state when it came to EJ action. As one organizer of the Anacostia watershed explained, Washington DC/Maryland has many overlapping levels of government, making coordination an exceptional challenge. In Atlanta, histories of Jim Crow mandates show up in how older generations of local activists perceive the city versus the federal government, as the federal government in the mid-20th century enforced desegregation in opposition to some local authorities. In the end, all sites shared a vision for: 1. importance of "citizen science" (see Bonney et al 2009), 2. a renewal of greenspace, 3. increased recreation on or by waterways, 4. improved public health, and 5. education as a core part of EJ advocacy, especially for youth. One of the underlying methodological assumptions for this study was that local politics and heterogeneity of each site's environmental context would have affected how the UWFP rolled out and impacted dynamics on the ground, but that overall assessments would still be possible when it came to the efficacy of the partnership.

Research for this case study began in 2017 and over the course of two years, I employed qualitative research methods to gather data on the efficacy of the partnership program for various participants. Forty-seven formal interviews were conducted and an additional two dozen individual perspectives were recorded in informal interviews during participant observation. Such observation happened at activist meetings, city watershed management offices, and events that brought together key players, including philanthropists, nonprofit leaders, and EPA equity ambassadors. Individual interviews were typically conducted in offices or over the phone. Most of those I interviewed (~40 out of 47) expressed concern about their opinions being shared with anyone else involved with the partnership program; the atmosphere surrounding the program was palpably uneasy and many interviewees felt

[9] The question of "certain personalities" was presented to me by a scientist who works for the EPA when they heard of my emergent findings. Their guess was that tensions had arose in one site because of 'difficult' individuals; however, the data ultimately does not support this theory from this EPA staff person.

concerned about having their name attached to their candid sentiments. In addition to coding the respondents' names, I have also committed to relaying the data in a way that further obscures any individual or group's connection to their statements. This commitment to anonymity means that a deep dive into the ways the program caused friction between specific groups is not possible; to do so would likely reveal the parties' identities since the EJ networks, even in cities as large as New York, are not that large. Therefore, this paper focuses more on the overall lessons from the outcomes across four different sites and is sensitive to how organizations are portrayed, even accounting for my attempts to anonymize them.

In the section that follows, I describe different types of participants as being part of various "spheres" of EJ advocacy drawn into collaboration through the project. As the above comment from the director of a land trust suggested, individuals within these worlds have at times been in adversarial relationships, though some individuals have moved between different types of advocacy spaces and are sympathetic (for example, some regional EPA staff have worked in nonprofits or city government). The people interviewed for this study can be lumped into categories of non-governmental or government entities, but within these groups there is substantial diversity in capacity, funding, and demographics. Some groups can be described as non-governmental EJ advocacy organizations, and these range from small and under-funded nonprofits to private charity foundations. This case study's observations of the state are of work from the EPA and local city governments, especially city development and planning offices. Citizens who had taken part in historical EJ protests were also interviewed. This array of entities and spaces in many ways reflect the major objects of study of most environmental justice scholarship; EJ literature has focused on cities, federal government interventions (or lack of), protesters of environmental burdens, and environmental advocacy organizations. The unique aspect of this case study, compared to many previous critical EJ case studies, is that all of these entities were joined together collaboratively. This unusual feature of this case makes the study a way to draw conclusions about broader consequences of institutionalization.

Key findings

Reinforced grievances

Interviewees reported a number of frustrations with the UWFP, and though the blame fell on different parties depending on who was being questioned about the program, all felt the EPA had not set the project up with power dynamics in mind. The diversity of opinion on those power dynamics reveals competing ideas about who does EJ work best, among other points of friction. Taken together, these grievances with the EPA partnership project were

concerning, as the discontent was not only with the agency but also other participating organizations. The data suggest that when an EPA program is not carefully designed, collaborators can revert to finger-pointing and, in the worst cases, to reinforcing stereotypes rooted in class and race differences. Below, I describe how different groups, which started on seemingly positive terms, found themselves infighting over the future of justice and reform in their city contexts.

As mentioned above, those interviewed for this research in the different sites reported feeling optimistic as the project launched and that the UWFP had felt like a "win" for activists. But by the time of the interviews, enthusiasm had worn thin and all but one of the interviewees felt the partnership had far more failures and shortcomings than successes. By the end, many felt that the project simply reinforced existing power dynamics.

All sites showed some level of tension between participants drawn together by the partnership program; in very few instances did any interviewee suggest that collaboration had enhanced local EJ work. By contrast, most interviewees reported being "sick of" certain groups with whom they had been tasked to work. Charitable organizations, land trusts, and other entities that were observably more well-funded and connected to resources in city government reported frustrations with smaller, grassroot groups: one leader claimed that "scrappy groups simply scream the loudest" and therefore were getting funding and more "face time with the mayor." I saw a pattern of larger nonprofits and advocacy foundations accusing smaller organizations of being, in the words of another executive director, "short-sighted and focused on citizen science that goes nowhere." She continued: "I thought we were creating a bold re-envisioning of [our city], but this ends up being a bureaucratic mess that just let's some groups get their kids out to do water samples. Those samples certainly don't even go to the EPA." By contrast, I heard smaller EJ groups complain that larger, "glossy" organizations were getting "all the money and attention after we have been the ones doing the door-to-door work for 25 years." All had hoped that the EPA would function as a long-term steward and proponent of improved relations, but felt instead the partnership had reproduced the status quo.

Some of the anger expressed at various groups seemed to fall along racialized and classist explanations of behavior. For example, several white leaders complained that the project had been "hijacked" by Black-led EJ groups which were also predominantly working class; one such leader said that she was tired of a "lack of professionalism." When pressed on what professionalization meant to her, she replied, "I wish they would show up on time, follow through, and use Outlook like everyone else." When I relayed this to an EJ organizer, he shrugged: "They plan these meetings at like 10 am on a Monday morning; what working person can show up for that?" The call for "professionalism" also ignores how many nonprofits in blighted spaces are run by people without formal nonprofit management

training or historical access to the resources available to other organizations. Race and class-based differences, in some cases, could not be easily fixed by a shared commitment to environmental equity.

Differing ideas of what was at stake in the partnership project and how to use the EPA funding/matching grants also came forward in this research. Those who were interested in using time, energy, and funds mostly larger-scale urban renewal projects and a "green infrastructure overall" were organizations with nonprofit professionals who typically did not live in the affected communities. In all four sites, smaller nonprofits and grassroots organizing by people in the "hot spot" were focused on citizen science, leadership training for community members, health issues, and youth educational initiatives. I asked one woman what she thought about this contrast, and she responded: "Some people ask about how we are taking ownership of our *environmental future*—that's all very nice but I cannot deal with my *environmental today*" (emphasis added). She said that she was fighting for fellow Atlantans who cannot pay water bills and are dealing with chronic health concerns connected to pollution. Thus, data shows that organizations had different foci that reflected their daily interactions with particular environments and participants' proximity to certain crises.

Another grievance the partnership project reinforced was among the EPA, city watershed managers, and concerned citizen groups. Representatives from the watershed improvement department of two different cities expressed frustration with a lack of guidance from the EPA and felt there was "scant funding overall and little guidance for how these broad goals were supposed to get met, and whose responsibility was what task." In their words, the partnership project exacerbated power struggles between "big government people and us city workers"; plus, "too much time was spent on these high level discussions and lofty aims without an understanding of how things actually proceed on lower [city] levels." These same city employees also noted that the partnership project "seemed to not take into account that certain groups will feel a big dread around city involvement because of historical issues with lack of environmental justice done by the city." These interviewees were at once sympathetic and also frustrated: "some of those [community-based groups] involved [in the UWFP] have a very 1970s idea of environmental justice and just write off local government and go to the feds." In other words, there were historical legacies informing interactions and the EPA project had not taken these into account.

Community group organizers and smaller nonprofits based in affected areas echoed this sentiment of the design lending to troubles; many griped that the EPA "smashed us together without recognizing how things have previously worked out when that happens." So, city employees participating scolded the federal level, while community groups

reminded me that cities "behave badly and need to be held more accountable." A number of respondents used the word "accountability," they pointed to a number of different levels of government, as well as nonprofits and community members. Administrators of the program seemed to believe that bringing groups to the table was the work itself, but once "at the table'" old wounds, histories of distrust, and different expectations of how to proceed led to the many of those I interviewed doubting they wanted to work together again.

My qualitative data then suggests that the stakes are high if these partnership projects do not fulfill participants' aspirations. At best, the partnership project brought together groups that realized they had more in common than they had believed: some participants noted that a few of the organizations had splintered off to do their own coalition work separate from the partnership, more "on their own terms." However, even with this recognition of shared goals and collaborative possibility, most groups interviewed for this study left the partnership project disgruntled and cynical. Additionally, some participants adopted explanations that reinforced stereotypes. These storylines of why the UWFP did not meet goals of various parties included: 1. city staff are "only interested in public relations," 2. "community members start nonprofits but don't know how to manage them," 3. "the EPA has no ability to help [affected communities]," and 4. minority groups "ignore the progress made by cities because one narrative serves their ability to get funding." All of these comments are simplifications of far more complex issues. I argue that the fallout from the UWFP is much more based on constraints of institutionalization and flaws in the partnership program's design.

One interpretation of all of these misunderstandings is that the next iteration would go more smoothly; perhaps another round of working all together is needed in each site. However, I argue that without improved program design, thoughtful staffing and leadership, a focus on conflict resolution, and a consideration of the EPA's limits, such projects are doomed to deepen divides among EJ efforts in the grassroots, philanthropic/charity sphere, and city planning.

Lack of effective leadership and conflict management

The bitterness expressed by many participants points to a lack of conflict management on the side of the EPA. Bringing together nonprofits, city watershed management, planners, government officials, investors, and activist groups made for complex meetings requiring an adept negotiator.

Largely absent from the EPA program design was an understanding of the constraints in capacity and historical processes that would lead groups to assess the stakes differently. The UWFP therefore did not appoint anyone versed in resolving conflicts in multi-stakeholder collaborations. One EJ-focused nonprofit employee scratched her head at this lack of a conflict-savvy facilitator. She noted that her training in the EPA's EJ Academy (an EJ leadership development program) gave her specific tools for efficacy in communicating across differences. She referenced a manual called the EPA's EJ Collaborative Problem-Solving Model. Review of the handbook on collaborative problem-solving shows awareness of a number of challenges to "consensus building, dispute resolution, and how to leverage resources for multi-stakeholder partnerships[10]" (epa.gov). Why, she wondered, had this handbook not been used in the program design? I followed up with a number of interviewees and asked if they had seen anything about the collaborative problem-solving model. None had.

Other aspects of the program design were criticized. Dismay at aspects the program design was almost unanimous: only one respondent found it adequate. Criticisms of the partnership program design were predominantly about the lack of incentivization and follow-through, especially when it came to enforcing action for cities, federal agencies like HUD, and ensuring the integration of citizen science meaningfully into the regional or federal EPA. Several interviewees complained that, yet again, "the burden comes down on nonprofits and philanthropic groups to do the heavy lifting" of EJ. The leader of a nonprofit focused on parks and equity-building complained, "there's simply not enough 'public' in this supposed public-private partnership; there's too much reliance on private dollars to fix a public problem." In other words, the state and federal agencies had promised to break down silos and leverage government resources for ground-level action, but according to many respondents, the "bureaucratic mess" of the EPA made this aspiration fizzle. Ultimately, many in the nonprofits and charitable foundations argued that the program design had put too much pressure on local organizations, which were already "weary of the matching grants cycle."

Another complaint with the UWFP was its "one-size-fits-all" approach to facilitating collaboration. For example, a nonprofit staff person expressed annoyance that the blueprint of the UWFP was not flexible enough to incorporate the local political challenges of DC. Complex dynamics are at work in each city; Atlanta's EJ terrain is different from New Jersey's.

[10] As described in the handbook: https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-04/documents/ejproblemcollaborativesolvingmodel.pdf. This handbook was created by the EPA's Office of Environmental Justice, which under the Trump administration's EPA, was substantially reduced in staff and in funding.

Every individual interviewed for this study pointed to the importance of leadership and the issue with too much turnover in the EPA. The EPA has been criticized in its work on EJ for "inconsistent agency leadership" (Konisky 2015: 248), and indeed effective EPA-UWFP leaders on whom partnership participants could rely were lacking. The UWFP did appoint an "urban waters ambassador" in each of the 19 sites, ostensibly to provide more consistent leadership. However, the majority of respondents said the ambassadors alone could not leverage the full power of resources from the federal agency and make everyone work well together.

City representatives were annoyed with the failure to define roles and use skills wisely; they noted that many people were "brought to the table but no one acknowledged we have different strengths." I heard variations of the phrases "they should stay in their lane" and "they should let us do our work" numerous times from all parties; different organizations were equally aware that the assets that different groups brought to the table had not been effectively integrated.

Procedural aspects of the program's design were also negatively received. Even those who expressed an understanding that cooperation among so many different entities would take time seemed unhappy. Respondents from all spheres (governmental and non-governmental) complained about workday-long meetings going nowhere, visions taking years to design, and, once more, agency turnover causing delays. I heard comments such as, "the EPA would ask us to accommodate one group's schedule without understanding ours," and "the communication patterns did not inspire confidence." The EPA-led partnership group in each city often pulled in new people as others left for various reasons; this cycle slowed the decision-making process and led to a collective fatigue from participants.

In all, respondents from city government and non-government groups saw ineptitude in the program design. All wanted more thoughtful discussion of respective strengths and how to use these, most felt meetings became unwieldy and unproductive, many said the communication between entities needed improvement, and most said there were too many moving parts without clear directions for various participants.

Lessons from the observed UWFP sites

Overestimating and oversimplifying participation's merits

Results from the review of some of the UWFP's impacts and outcomes suggest that scholars, activists, policy-makers sympathetic to the goals of the environmental justice movements may have oversold the promise of participation. EJ activists and scholars,

especially those chronicling the 1980s and 1990s mobilizations, emphasized the need for more community voices (Bullard 1990, Bullard 1993, Cole and Foster 2001, Sander and Pezzullo 2007, Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss 2001). However, the results from this study suggest that simply including participants from grassroots EJ groups does not resolve problems with the EPA's engagement in EJ.

Another conclusion is that participation from grassroots groups, nonprofits, and other non-governmental groups working in community does not ensure empowerment on the community-level or a reduction of the constraints that have plagued EJ action. The struggles observed in this case study brings out the complexity of what "meaningful involvement" of non-governmental advocacy groups in collaboration with regulatory and policy spaces can and should look like. The EPA's office of environmental justice acknowledges *meaningful involvement* in addition to *fair treatment* of environmental injustice-affected groups as part of the two tenets of forwarding EJ. The EPA website describes meaningful involvement as:

1. "People have an opportunity to participate in decisions about activities that may affect their environment and/or health;
2. The public's contribution can influence the regulatory agency's decision;
3. Community concerns will be considered in the decision-making process; and
4. Decision makers will seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected[11]"

(source: epa.gov)

The data from this case study supports the interpretation that numbers 1, 3, and 4 were achieved at least in some part by the UWFP sites this study examined. Community groups who lived in the designated sites were invited into visioning processes and received matching funds in some cases. Community concerns guided decisions around the water justice vision for each respective site; for example, in the New Jersey/Passaic River site, I saw evidence of a major EJ advocacy organization from the affected community shaping the agendas and priorities of the partnership there. The fourth point also seems to have been addressed by the UWFP in all four sites. The design of the partnership required the presence of community groups; cities that applied for inclusion in the UWFP had to demonstrate their connection to community groups and nonprofits and philanthropic organizations had to show some form of commitment to community-based service work[12].

[11] See site for more: https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice

[12] Of course, whether such commitments were very deep continues to be the subject of controversy, especially in Atlanta. Some community group representatives repeatedly told me that I should note that a certain individual "did not speak for this community." It seems clear that examining power relations on the community level and careful reflection on how to have communities represent themselves was outside the purview of the UWFP effort.

However, the second point, regarding how public contributions can influence the EPA, does not seem to have been met by the work of the UWFP. Assessing the second aspect of meaningful involvement, this study found that no substantial policy change or breakthrough on the regional or federal EPA-level happened as a result of the partnership. Some successes were indeed reported by the dozens of participants interviewed for this research; these were mainly related to networking opportunities and educational outreach. In Atlanta, respondents suggested the EJ action plan that they had designed through the partnership program was actually helpful; these respondents said as the UWFP had faded from focus, they were working outside of the partnership on their own coalition-building project.

The grievances expressed by those involved in the UWFP can be considered via the critical scholarship on participation, including literature on participatory research (PR). Critical examinations of participatory methods and projects are helpful for understanding the shortcomings of the UWFP (see Cornwall 2011). Sherry Arnstein's (1969) oft-cited "ladder of participation" cautions against tokenistic consultation, which checks boxes of community members' presence but does not invite them to shape the overall project. In contrast to tokenism, Arnstein describes citizen power as involving citizen-led initiatives, citizen delegates, and meaningful cross-organizational and spatial partnerships (ibid). The UWFP seems on paper to have recognized the importance of citizen power in projects: the ambassadors were citizens with experience in multiple spaces (government, planning, community organizing, etc.). However, these ambassadors and other appointed leaders, along with community partner groups, were still constrained by other realities that I describe below. Ultimately, the most EJ-oriented of the professed guiding principles of the UWFP, such as improved waters paving the way for equitable economies, remained very distant goals by the time the partnership lost steam in the sites.

Shared language, shared stakes?

The qualitative data from this study demonstrate that many of the key actors in the stories of Atlanta, DC, and New Jersey/NYC shared more than a surface-level understanding of the movement, which, in spite of the disappointments, was seen by many as a positive reminder of the legacy of EJ activism. The increase in mutual understanding of the importance of equity work in environmental policy-making and planning is arguably a win for the EJ movement (see Bullard 1993). Today's landscape of environmental justice work is different in many ways from when EJ mobilizations began gaining momentum in the 1980s. EJ is on the agenda of more and more environmental advocacy groups, including with predominantly white, affluent leaders (i.e., not composed of citizens from EJ-affected

sites). The stories described by EJ activists and scholars twenty years ago, ones in which environmental planners and policy-makers are ignorant of EJ arguments, are still abundant but significantly less so. These shifts are the result of tremendous work by the US-based social movement over the past three decades.

One concrete example of how movement demands showed up in the UWFP is in the list of guiding principles for the partnership project. In addition to conservation-oriented goals, several guiding principles are clearly imbued with EJ movement claims, including that the UWFP will: 1. "use urban water systems as a way to promote economic revitalization and prosperity," 2. "encourage community improvements through active partnerships," 3. "be open and honest and [know that] listening to communities is the best way to engage them." As stated in the above section, these principles reflect the push from EJ activism in the 1980s and 1990s that demanded meaningful inclusion and equity-focused agendas.

In spite of demonstrations of shared understandings of environmental justice, the partnership project did not bring all the different players into productive collaboration. Many interviewees (30 out of 47) complained that the program was wrangling with organizations of sometimes vastly different capacities and ideas of how to address interconnected socio-ecological issues in their city; managing so many different people with so many different projects they believe in became impossible to coordinate. This case study shows that even a shared language and aims cannot negate the complex dynamics related to the micropolitics of cities, historical traumas of structural inequality, and tensions around race and class. These tensions in particular were augmented through this work. Instead, deep work of changing power relations needs to happen. I argue that while all participants had "buy-in" and relatively similar visions of EJ in their cities, the groups involved were still fighting for monetary scraps.

Additionally, shared professed belief in the merit of equity work in environmental management, conservation, and improvement, does not remove the involved parties from ingrained race and class related struggles. Such a statement may seem obvious, and yet much of EJ literature is *not* on cases in which the groups, individuals, and organizations in tensions *agree* that environmental equity is an issue. In research from the 1990s from sociologist Robert Bullard and other seminal scholars, as well as in more recent studies on EJ in the global South, the storylines often involve groups fighting for recognition of their plight. In the UWFP, the plight was known, but participants could not agree on *how*, especially given resource constraints, the work should be done, what projects should be prioritized, and who should be held accountable for what tasks. Eventually, failures in the respective action plans were attributed to shortcoming of particular individuals, the innate issues with certain scales of organizations, or as somehow indicative that low-income, nonwhite community groups are not reliable. But my data points to a different conclusion:

that the program design and the EPA's leadership and form of guidance were responsible for the disappointing outcomes of the UWFP.

Conclusion: Re-thinking the EPA's engagement with EJ

Many improvements in environmental equity have been made as a result of EJ activism over the decades, and today's EPA projects like the UWFP reflect increasing interest in environmental justice. Other impacts of the movement are clear when examining today's EPA. According to those interviewed in examined sites, staff in the agency are much more racially diverse than in the 1980s, when EJ work was gaining visibility. As one interviewee also pointed out, in all spheres, from the city government divisions focused on environmental clean-up to the philanthropic foundations, one finds more racial heterogeneity and more inclusion of low-income perspectives. Race and class-related biases did show up in the data when it came to organizations' explanations of why the project failed; classist observations were more observed than racial stigma. Yet the general interactions between agency staff, city employees, and nonprofit and philanthropic groups was far more complex than the picture from previous decades. Scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s on environmental justice suggested rather homogenous racial/class groups in opposition to one another (see Chavis, 1987; Chavis, 1993; Bullard 1990 and 1993; Goldman and Fitton 1994; Mohai and Bryant 1992; Taylor 1993). For example, numerous case studies from the 1990s describe nonwhite, working-class groups fighting against the environmental racism of white, affluent organizations, or, white city council people making rules for nonwhite community members. The city staff, nonprofit leaders, and philanthropists involved in the four sites were of more diverse backgrounds, racial identities, and socio-economic classes than previous literature on EJ would have anticipated. This demographic change should be celebrated; the increased diversity has made a palpable difference. At the same time, improving diversity did not remove the issues of power, conflict between stakeholders, or the state's (in)ability to meaningfully incorporate the work from community groups.

The UWFP was exciting to those aware of the history from which it had been born. The partnership program harkens back to a different time for EJ organizing and EPA engagement with EJ: now, more people "get" that EJ matters, both in more mainstream environmental advocacy (see Allen et al. 2007) and in the EPA itself. As I have argued, unlike other environmental policy/reform/advocacy processes by federal agencies, the UWFP adopted a community-focused approach, with community participation and citizen leadership. Some of the problems documented by previous studies in critical EJ literature were not present in the UWFP. There was a strong focus on equity and demonstrated understanding that ecological problems connect to social, including those historically disadvantaging racial minorities and low-income groups. In all the UWFP is exemplary of incorporation of the EJ movement's stated goals, and, in much of the project design, the

UWFP on the surface attempted to more deeply institutionalize EJ. Therefore, the outcomes of the UWFP can serve as lessons on the limitations of institutionalization.

The four designated UWFP sites that were examined for this case study show overwhelming dissatisfaction with the partnership program, and the unhappiness was shared by the sometimes-adversarial players. In other words, all so-called "sides," including those often at odds with one another (say, city watershed management and some community-based nonprofits that tended to place blame on one another) were dismayed by the program after years of involvement. So why, in the words of one interviewee, had this "big picture, silo-busting effort simply fallen apart"?

Part of the issue, I argue, is that the process of institutionalization granted the EPA the power to shape the actors in the movements. In the words of anthropologist Dana Powell, the state cannot be the arbiter of justice and the organizer (personal correspondence, 2020). Institutionalization means that movements are constrained by the innate politics of the EPA as a federal agency that is bound to changing administrations and realities around frequent turnover of staff. According to some EJ activists, institutionalization has also effectively de-radicalized the aspects of the environmental justice movement that were most counter-capitalist and focused on alternative development paradigms. After all, many read the US-based EJ movement as a fundamental challenge to racial capitalism, structural inequality, and what Robert Bullard qualified as an internal, "toxic colonialism" (1993, see also Ture and Hamilton, 1967).

The data from this case study suggest that future partnerships like the UWFP will run into numerous challenges, even if they include more community groups. Perhaps, unexpectedly, after years of pushing the EPA to take EJ seriously, environmental justice activists need to re-think their demands. The UWFP is a cautionary tale.

The following conclusions are suggestions for future collaborative possibilities, cautionary words for next steps for community groups engaging with the EPA, and recommendations for continued research in critical EJ studies.

"Unpopular opinion, but…": limits of the EPA

Many participants left the UWFP feeling deflated and skeptical about any future partnership's prospects. To my surprise, fifteen of the 47 individuals I interviewed for this project suggested that the EPA never do partnership projects like the UWFP again. Ten of these interviewees began this reluctant conclusion by saying some version of, "well, this may be unpopular as a perspective, but I wonder if the EPA should actually run

partnerships like this." Respondents who had been hopeful and enthusiastic admitted they were ending their engagement doubting that the EPA had the capacity or the capabilities to run a future partnership more successfully.

After hearing so little faith in future partnerships endeavors on water justice or any other EJ facet, I asked about alternatives. Respondents with ideas about options preferable to the UWFP design said that *coalitions* worked better than partnerships. *Coalitions* were distinguished from the UWFP in several key ways, according to those interviewed. According to the grassroots, nonprofit, and philanthropic advocacy interviewees, coalitions were made of organizations who *chose* to work together (as opposed to being put together by the EPA), and they more often shared the same concept of a theory of change. In one of the four sites, several organizations who had worked together with the UWFP had backed out of the partnership in order to form a smaller coalition instead. In short, respondents were noting the problems with top-down appointments of partners and speaking of the issue of "uneasy bedfellows," as one nonprofit staffer put it.

Still, a major question from the UWFP remains: should the EPA do this partnership style organizing at all? Is the cost of doing such a partnership poorly too risky? As discussed previously, fallout from the lack of coordination between some partnership participants was in fact quite serious and had implications for future collaboration. Whether or not the EPA does decide to continue such projects on EJ, it seems clear that activists and advocacy organizations need ask if they want a government agency that is so vulnerable to certain weaknesses—with turnover, with susceptibility to political appointments and administrative shifts, with inability to ensure invested staff for the long haul—be the one given the power to designate who does EJ work and where.

Working together, working apart: cautious collaborations

In addition to scrutinizing the EPA as organizer of big partnerships, many respondents reported feeling unsure of the merit of forcing different groups to work together. As previously described, I was struck by the number of respondents who said that they did not want to continue working with the EPA or other organizations with whom they were collaborating in the UWFP. The "stay in your lane" language from community organizers and nonprofits about one another and the city watershed management was startling. After all, EJ scholarship frequently trumpets participation and collaboration (see Martínez-Alier 2014). Perhaps the conclusion from these sentiments is not only that participation has been oversold, as discussed, but also that working together is less optimal for many organizations if respective needs, strengths, and weaknesses of organizations and their approaches is not recognized.

In sum, respondents from city office, nonprofits, and foundations *all* complained the government was not bringing enough fiscal, technological, leadership training or other forms of resources and support, and yet these voices did not suggest that a partnership with more resources to leverage and more collaboration would fix the problem. Instead, many respondents were uncertain about the effective role of the state. In addition to concerns over efficacy, some saw other downsides to the partnership model: "the EPA's partnership doesn't help communities be less caught in a dependency cycle with the state and federal government." This statement and others like it indicate that some "working together" moments could also reinforce the dependency of various groups on the state.

Words from activists of color with abundant experience working within the confines of the EPA provide insights on the dilemmas of the institution (see Harrison 2019). At an EJ meeting I attended in Atlanta, Georgia in the autumn of 2019, one of the founders of the EPA's EJ office, Mustafa Santiago Ali, said, "25 years ago our people didn't have the resources to be visible and to leverage power; things have changed and the terrain has changed." Ali went on to explain a number of opportunities and possibilities he saw as exciting for community groups. He himself had resigned from the EPA in 2016 to work for the Hip-Hop Caucus and later the National Wildlife Federation. He noted the limitations of the EPA; after all, he had left as the Trump administration gutted the agency and especially the office of environmental justice. Yet he drew the audience's attention to the grants, scientific expertise, and other resources connected to the EPA. In some ways, his speech produced the tensions that EJ advocates, especially those in the grassroots, feel regarding the EPA. Few on the ground have illusions that the agency will dramatically change the landscape of inequality tomorrow, however, many have said that the agency has the potential to quite literally save human lives. I therefore began to ask what preferred role(s) the EPA *should* and *can* take on for the future of EJ work.

Continued need for enforcement

One major takeaway was regarding the EPA's role in enforcement. Community groups desperately wanted the EPA to make sure regulations were followed. This demand was underscored at numerous activist meetings and partnership gatherings. In a moment of exasperation, one community member said, "If the EPA just enforced the Clean Water Act, we wouldn't have to be sitting here creating this 'vision for equity.'" Weariness with a lack of enforcement by the EPA has left some community groups to take on civic action cases themselves and try to leverage the power of the courts. However, litigation (typically against property owners or corporations) is time-intensive and costly, as many activists and EJ organizers can attest. Hence data the EPA's enforcement is crucial; many community

groups would prefer the EPA demand adherence instead of putting that burden on local organizers.

My interviewees also noted the need of the EPA to push city governments to do better on EJ. In the words of a nonprofit staff member in Atlanta, sewer problems were decades old. The accumulating delay, he said, is the result of discrimination against Atlanta's most poor, and an example of environmental injustice. Therefore, cities needed to be held accountable for their sluggish compliance.

Lastly, crises in the headlines such as in Flint, Michigan show not only failures of enforcement but also the realities of needing more monitoring for hazards. Many participants said that looking back at the UWFP, they wanted fewer requests for collaboration and more information on what pollution caused health problems, and how to mitigate them. In other words, the abundant scientific expertise at the EPA is useful and important. The EPA is well-positioned to monitor environmental hazards and by doing more assessments and more outreach on issues, the agency would be forwarding EJ by another route. And, as several EJ activists working with the UWFP pointed out, they would "rather the EPA's reduced funds go to monitoring issues and enforcement compliance rather than making us sit in 6-hour meetings so they can check an EJ box."

In the section that follows, I articulate this study's contribution to the literature and how the lessons from the UWFP should inform future research.

Lessons for environmental justice studies

Previous scholarship on environmental justice documented a key social movement that has shaped US and global discourse on environmental change and economic development. To explain why the state (primarily the EPA) has failed to deliver change, the literature often points to the inability of agency staff to "buy in" to EJ as a concept and/or inadequate participation from EJ activists and community advocates. But this case study shows that even when there is a common discourse and partnerships based on significantly increased participation, conflict still ensues. Thus, critical EJ scholars need to analyze power and the effects of institutionalization on social movements.

This paper has sought to add to the recent EJ literature that critically evaluates the EPA's efforts on EJ, and in so doing, I have maintained that rooting scholarly studies of the EPA and EJ in questions of institutionalization is important. I agree with geographer Ryan Holifield (2001) and others that government agencies often encourage different ideas of transformation than grassroots groups; at the same time, I caution the interpretation that

the EJ organizations are uniform in their strategies and goals. Activist scholars like David N. Pellows and policy analyst Robert Brulle (2005) reminds researchers, the grassroots spaces of EJ should be treated as heterogeneous and fraught with troubled power dynamics, too; EJ organizing spaces "on the ground" should not be romanticized in critiques of top-down management. This case study has shown that bitter divides and inter/intra-group friction is abundant in non-governmental EJ organizations, even when all participants seem to agree on meanings of equity. I concur with Konisky (2015) that deeply effective policy has still to be generated by the EPA, and I argue that efficacy conversations should be realistic about what the EPA is equipped to do.

There continue to be salient questions about the role of the EPA in the future of EJ. Review of lessons learned from the UWFP shows more nuances in the EPA's EJ efforts. While the case study presented in this paper supports previous critiques of the EPA's work inEJ, people affected by the UWFP give a complex story about the conundrums with the state's involvement. For those in EJ organizations, the issues are less about a particular program design or roll-out and more to do with the consequences of institutionalization itself. In keeping the costs of institutionalization in mind, advocates of EJ should re-imagine and re-define what they ask of the EPA. After all, data from this study show that EPA projects on EJ can indeed either exacerbate existing tensions or pick up slack from cities and take the burden off of the nonprofits and philanthropy sectors who do the bulk of the work. And, as I have argued, those pressuring the EPA to include considerations of EJ should hone in on compliance and enforcement.

The incorporation of EJ into the state vis-a-vis the Environmental Protection Agency has made the agency appear more progressive, and in some ways has created significant shifts, at least tonally. However, institutionalization has also made it possible for the state to show what "good" EJ work looks like by designating some cities over others, some projects and organizations over others via matching grants and other streams of funding. In addition to their concerns that control of the movements is being centralized or consolidated, EJ advocates might also review lessons from the UWFP on the downsides of partnerships (versus coalitions) and the shortcomings of participation. More broadly, activists should re-examine their assumptions about the EPA's ability to contribute to EJ, thinking through which work the agency is equipped best to do—and which work is better led by civil society.

In all, the dynamics of power should be troubling to activists, especially those pushing more radical visions of degrowth and counter-development projects (which, unsurprisingly, often do not make it into EPA-funded endeavors). After all, projects like the partnership demonstrate how the EPA can actually *avoid* being held accountable for undoing or countering the modes of production that result in environmental injustice in the

first place. In spite of all the shared hopes at the outside, the UWFP, whether intentionally or not, largely proved to be a process of placation that neglected core reasons why underdevelopment persists.

A note on activist research and EJ:

Academics have long contributed to documentation of EJ and should continue to document and analyze outcomes from projects from the EPA like the UWFP. Academics were a crucial "contributory stream" to EJ's roots (Cole and Foster 2001: 24); the contributory work for researchers can and should continue. Cole and Foster (2001) state that early on in the EJ mobilization days, academics documented the disproportionate nature of burdens of environmental ills on poor, nonwhite groups. Such research is ongoing and still vital for communities to reinforce their claims, as are other studies that critically assess regulatory agencies' programs. As policy analysts have noted for decades, and as activists in Proctor Creek confirmed, there is little systematic evaluation of the efficacy of EPA EJ programs (Davies and Mazurek 1998: 184). Thus, one partnership I argue does retain major merit is that between researchers and EJ organizations, with researchers working to do whatever is not possible for the organization, given its agenda or capacity.

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CHAPTER 2: Always Greener? Grassroots and Grasstops Environmental Justice Organizations

Introduction

This paper draws on findings from a case study of an EPA project, called the Urban Waters Federal partnership (UWFP), in which I observed a number of nongovernmental, nonprofit EJ organizations conflicting with one another, over several concerns, but particularly authenticity and representation. The UWFP brought together dozens of EJ organizations in 19 different cities, in the hopes that these groups would collaborate to create action plans for improved water justice In advance of my research, I anticipated that the regulatory agencies and city-level government employees would be in tension with grassroots EJ groups; scholarship from EJ studies predicts this outcome (see Bullard 1990, Pellow and Brulle 2005, Pellow 2016 and 2018, Holifield 2001, Pastor et al 2006). In addition to finding these expected conflicts, I found that many nonprofits were often embroiled in conflicts with one another. Many of these latter struggles were between community advocacy groups and nonprofits with larger budgets and more staff, groups sometimes referred to as "grasstops." With my previous professional experience in nonprofits, I was not naïve about the difficulties of coordinating multiple organizations within collaborative projects. Still, the level of discord I observed within and among different EJ groups involved in the UWFP surprised me, and, as I will argue, points to phenomena beyond mere challenges of finding a unifying strategy.

I argue that the tensions I witnessed are representative of a relatively new conundrum in the landscape of US-based EJ mobilizations. As EJ organizing has pushed the state (namely, the EPA), "mainstream[13]" environmental nonprofits, corporations, and philanthropic spaces to recognize environmental inequalities, more EJ organizations have been formed and more environmental advocacy groups have adopted EJ initiatives. As the number of organizations claiming to do EJ has grown, so too have the number of debates over which EJ groups are most legitimate and which groups speak most authentically for affected communities. Therefore, while the US-based EJ social movement has had many successes, the emergence of more EJ organizations mean new "turf" struggles and debates over who most deserves resources, especially when funds are limited. After all, while organizations

[13] EJ scholars who have chronicled the rise of the US movement, such as Robert Bullard, often compare EJ to conservation and preservation-oriented environmental movements, and call the latter either "conventional" or "mainstream." Environmental justice as a movement diverged from these other mobilizations, namely in its attention to ways that environmental burdens could worsen inequalities and disproportionately affect poor, nonwhite populations.

have grown in number, the amount of funding sources to support these groups continuing their advocacy has not risen proportionally.

I also maintain that tensions between EJ organizations reveal ways that the rise of professional advocacy in EJ has created complicated outcomes for the movement itself. EJ organizations staffed by full-time employees with educational and social capital are more abundant than twenty years ago, which might appear to be a positive result of decades of advocacy. However, greater heterogeneity of EJ groups means an increase in debates on which groups best speak for communities and how to divide up particular types of organizing work. The EJ organizers that work primarily as volunteers or for underfunded community groups, who explain that they exist on the "frontlines" of daily injustices, are seeing their funding lost to nonprofits that are read by large donors as more "professional." Biases related to class difference and educational inequalities[14] add to the friction between groups. In short, this study examines how tensions between groups are the result of ongoing opportunity gaps in professionalization and the continuous challenges of meaningfully including diverse people in EJ initiatives.

The case study I present serves to describe the politics of professional advocacy I observed among EJ groups and encourage closer examination of diverse EJ organizations. Some EJ literature demonstrates a tendency to portray environmental justice organizations as monolithic, and this trend can ignore key nuances. For example, in their explanation of EJ's connections to other global social mobilizations, Martinez-Alier et al. collapse EJ organizations simply into "EJOs" (2014, see also Schiedel et al 2020). They write: "EJOs are organizations that constitute networks; sometimes they are formed by members of a community organized ad hoc as a platform or as a coordinating committee for a specific cause, and sometimes they are permanent groups with lives stretching over twenty or more years" (2014: 20). While they detail the many different claims from EJ, these authors do not distinguish between different types of EJ advocacy organizations; scholarship in this vein tends to consider points of convergence in spite of diversity of actors (see Schiedel et al 2020: 3). Other authors reduce the heterogeneity of EJ organizations even further, referring to them simply as among the "civil society organizations" that are "coherent, organic, self-organized congregations" (Hawken 2007: 4, 192) By contrast, my research on interactions between different EJ organizations calls for analyzing the differences in aspects like strategy and forms of capital existing within various EJ advocacy entities. One reason the UWFP failed is because the project undermined possibilities of productive

[14] Through my research on this project, it became clear that individuals who had certifications in nonprofit management and/or formal education in business practices were increasingly attractive to donors and politicians interested in spotlighting a nonprofit leader's work. In other words, some nonprofit leaders were read as more legitimate to donors and those in government based on their educational capital.

collaboration by not taking different organizational capacities into account. Therefore this paper works to provide a picture of heterogeneous EJ organizations and understand why collaborations between different groups were not working and what conditions would have allowed for better outcomes. In adding this nuance to the existent EJ literature, I provide some contrast to claims from earlier EJ scholarship that unifying frameworks of EJ action continue to mobilize organizations across race and class differences (see Taylor 2000: 562-563). My findings do not support this social movement analysis, but rather point to the need for theorizing intra-and inter-group conflicts within mobilizations.

In the sections that follow, I argue that the struggles between grasstops and grassroots organizations in the UWFP show both the complex consequences of the institutionalization of EJ and the politics of professional EJ activism. The problems I describe are symptomatic of a different landscape of environmental justice in the United States today as compared to decades past; today the EPA influences the dynamics of the movement in increasingly complex ways. The roles of the EPA have shifted under institutionalization of the movement and consequently so have the reactions by EJ organizations. In the 1980s and 1990s EJ activists were much more antagonistic in their engagements with the state, while today many EJ advocates are working within state-based projects, frameworks, and organizing principles (see Pulido et al 2016). More EPA agendas and initiatives have worked to incorporate EJ principles, and the agency has hired more EJ-focused staff and created funding pools for EJ organizations. This shifting relationship has consequences for relations on the ground, and my case study shows how one EPA EJ effort reproduced problematic power relations and patterns of exclusion for some EJ organizations. Lastly, this paper assesses the potential for improved relations between EJ organizations working under institutionalization, while also arguing for creating different conditions that would allow for a "pluriverse" of EJ action (see Escobar 2018).

Background

Overview of the UWFP case study

My examination of the relationships between grasstops and grassroots EJ groups came as a consequence of evaluating the EPA projects that brought grasstops and grassroots groups together. In 2016, I learned of the Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP) program, a nationwide effort by the EPA to improve water quality while simultaneously addressing some socio-economic and racial disparities in environmentally degraded city areas. The different locations involved in the project were urban areas with histories of having to absorb industrial externalities like runoff and effluent. The UWFP program also seemed to acknowledge the claims from activists and researchers that water justice involves "disproportionate exposure to water pollution, non-access to sufficient, clear water, and

the inability to participate in water governance" (Perreault, Boelens, Vos 2018). The UWFP sought to address chronic pollution exposure by having governmental and non-governmental partners work together; the idea was that collaboration, in addition to support in the form of matching funds, would yield more extensive improvements. Additionally, the collaboration between non-government entities and the EPA stemmed from the pressure from EJ organizations to be included as consultants and help drive the visions towards great water justice. While including more EJ organizations would seem effective, my findings show that the project design engendered turmoil between groups rather than productive collaboration.

The UWFP began in 2011, creating fiscal incentives and matching grants for local efforts on water quality and related equity issues in designated US cities. Over the last nine years, the project has, at least on the surface, encouraged collaboration between federal and state agencies and other non-governmental organizations focused on EJ. By the time I began to review the UWFP's impacts, 19 different US cities had been awarded funds, program support, and had been granted watershed "ambassadors" to co-create visions for improved water health and equity in the respective contexts. By 2016, $1.3 million had been granted in small grants to 22 organizations across 18 states, and matching grants had been made available for cities, nonprofits, and community groups.

My broader research on the outcomes of the UWFP focused on partners in four cities: New York City, Atlanta, Newark, NJ, and Washington, DC. The data I collected on these outcomes echo other studies on the failures of the EPA around EJ. The UWFP project design was seen as flawed, participation was viewed by community groups as often being superficial—some participants complained of "tokenism"—and many organizations complained about a lack of government leadership and enforcement (see Arnstein 1969). As I recorded these critiques, I noted that many organizations were also describing bitter divides between other EJ groups, rifts that seemed to have been made worse by the very project that was supposed to encourage collaboration. So, I added a dimension to my fieldwork to examine more closely the EJ organizations involved across three sites. In addition to asking EJ organizations about their views on the UWFP project, I inquired about their interrelationships with other UWFP EJ organization partners. This case study is the result of this investigation on why EJ organizations that would seem to be natural allies were often ensnared in conflicts and frustration with one another. Data also show that the model of the partnership actually encouraged in-fighting, in part because the program was so open-ended and roles were ill-defined. Many organizations began with hopes for big visions; these included not only healthier waterways but also communities with greater control over their environmental future and access to resources to improve health outcomes long term. For example, in Atlanta, one hope was to reduce the rapid gentrification of historically Black neighborhoods by making sure that prospective

environmental improvements did not lead to spikes in property taxes; these activists connected EJ and water sanitation to broader housing equity issues. EJ organizations in Atlanta said that at the outset of the UWFP, they were promised that government partners would help make these goals achievable by assisting groups in leveraging funds and resources.

The EJ advocacy organizations connected to the UWFP were diverse, and part of an even more heterogeneous list of partners involved. Each of the 19 sites across the United States in the partnership project included an array of federal-, state- and city-level agencies, and non-governmental organizations. Federal agencies include the US Forest Service and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and state level entities include entities like city watershed management and public works. Community organizations, nonprofits, EJ-promoting philanthropic entities, and environmental foundations concerned with environmental inequality and poverty were additional key players. The latter groups, organizations I qualify as non-governmental advocacy entities, are the focus of this case study. All these diverse partners involved in designated UWFP sites had to apply for participation in the partnership, and consequently for grant funding. Inclusion, I was told by UWFP ambassadors[15], required demonstrating "focused efforts towards improving environmental justice and in particular water improvement in their community." All the organizations in focus in this paper were not-for-profit.

During my research, I grasped for ways to define the organizations that were linked by a common concern for EJ yet which were often remarkably different in terms of their theories of change, operations, annual budget, and number of full-time staff. Much of the literature on the dynamics of the EJ social movements in the United States has investigated the sphere of civil society's organizing efforts *as opposed to* other spaces, namely those of government or corporations. As noted above, such studies often consider larger EJ nonprofit organizations as part of the grassroots, lumping groups together, ignoring the diversity of EJ organizations, and only infrequently addressing how these groups interact. I found little to guide me in the literature regarding this diversity of EJ groups. However, when respondents began using the language of "grasstops" organizations, the term spoke to the emergence of nonprofits that were not private or governmental but also not grassroots, as conceptualized by early EJ literature. In the section that follows, I explain my understanding of grasstops groups and their relationship to those described as grassroots. This conceptualization provides the foundation for how I explore claims of co-optation and the politics of professional EJ advocacy.

[15] Ambassadors in the UWFP, at least the ones with whom I was in contact, were local individuals tapped by the EPA to be representatives for the project.

Conceptualizing grasstops and grassroots organizations

The contrasting groups—grasstops as compared to grassroots—are presented in a binary that is useful, if imperfect. Of course there is no consistent or neat divide between the two; some EJ organizations have features of both. The descriptions I provide are based on my observations. As described above, more nuance on the types of groups that are involved in EJ campaigns and strategy-building is needed. These categories of grasstops/grassroots are a place to start.

Based on both the literature[16] and the descriptions from my respondents, grasstops organizations are viewed in favorable terms by some scholars/activists and pejoratively by others. Scholarship and policy briefs that explicitly refer to grasstops groups display a mix of definitions. In their exploration of farm bill policies and racial discrimination, Spencer Wood and Cheryl Ragar (2012) discuss grasstops as focused on top-down strategies, being composed of local elites, and often involving oversight on projects. Their view of the grasstops is negative. In Wood and Ragar's study, the grasstops helped continue discrimination against Black farmers and reinforce white supremacy. They write that "grasstops implementation leaves too much room for the construction and maintenance of white space and reproductions of systemic inequality" (2012: 17). Public affairs scholar Edward Grefe's (1997) agrees that grasstops can reproduce oppressive structures. He says the grasstops are made up of powerful individuals like the business elite, leaders in academic institutions, even owners of the press; they are assumed to have "a vested interest in the project" of community development at hand (p. 15). Grefe is skeptical that such groups truly represent community groups and says they should be viewed with scrutiny, suggesting that putting stock in grasstops groups is a "gamble" (1997). More recently, historian Elizabeth Shermer (2013), in her discussion of "grasstops democracy" considers the "grasstops stratum" to be a manager class focused on business interests and capitalist development; in Shermer's work, the grasstops is a term to describe groups at a distance from working-class realities and interests. In a 2013 article for *ThinkProgress,* Aviva Shen suggests that progressive groups have "leaned on grassroots organizing tactics to galvanize support on the ground" while others "have made ample use of a more 'grasstops' method—a strategy that relies heavily on the influence of prominent leadership (2013)" At the same time, "advocates alike only stand to gain from a diversified activism strategy that hits lawmakers at multiple points—including the grassroots *and* the grasstops" (Shen 2013). Shen hints at the potential of grassroots and grasstops uniting for effective change; this language of a unified front of "tops and roots" is more prolific in

[16] The literature that discusses grasstops groups today is predominantly in public policy and/or in scholarship on different public affairs strategies. Some references are also found in organizational sociology, drawing on sociologist Philip Selznick's work, among others.

policy briefs and mission statements from advocacy organizations. For example, the minority education advocacy group UNCF[17]'s "Lift Every Voice and Lead Toolkit" for community leaders who are focused on education states that their toolkit is aimed to empower "the African-American community—specifically grasstops leaders, HBCU[18] presidents, and parents—to improve educational outcomes for African American students" (Anderson, 2017: 2). This report explains that the toolkit came as a result of "interviewing 600 African American community leaders (a group of clergy, local politicians, business leaders and education leaders often described as 'grasstops') throughout the country" (Anderson, 2017: 4). These explanations match the language of other briefs and outreach that suggest harnessing grasstops support for low-income populations.

Together, these authors reveal the range of definitions of and sentiments towards the concept of grasstops. To some, the very concept of an elite class of organizers is counter to true democracy-building. To others, such leaders/organizations are necessary go-betweens or bridge-builders. The definition of the UNCF's study is closer to what I heard from the majority of respondents in my case study, i.e. the grasstops are composed of groups and leaders with social influence and educational/political capital. My data further supports that the interpretations of the function of grasstops groups vary within advocacy circles. I heard some grassroots organizers decry those in grasstops groups, while other grassroots leaders appreciated the role of grasstops organizations in "getting the mission done." Some organizers felt that grasstops groups co-opted projects and helped create problematic compromises, like settling for funding for trash clean up days instead of pushing for deeper structures reforms that would reduce industrial waste. Those activists who seemed more comfortable with the grasstops' roles argued that grasstops groups were necessary go-betweens to keep funding existent for more radical future work.

Of the 25 EJ organization staff involved with the UWFP with whom I spoke, ten identified their groups as grassroots, seven as specifically grasstops, and eight simply as EJ advocacy groups. Most of those who identified as grasstops reported that groups like theirs were typically comprised by full-time professional staff and that this staff typically had formal education in nonprofit management or related training. I heard leaders who identified themselves as grasstops saying that they still often "employed grassroots methods" (see also Wood and Ragar 2012). Hence, grasstops and grassroots definitions also apply to different strategies in use by organizations.

[17] Formerly called the United Negro College Fund; the organization today more commonly goes by the initials.

[18] HBCU stands for historically Black colleges and universities.

Grassroots staff who I spoke to frequently described themselves as being "on the front lines," which seemed to mean involvement in the following activities :

- Door-to-door organizing, including gathering signatures for petitions
- Conducting community capacity-building workshops and information sessions
- Campaigning to create awareness through signage in communities, letter-writing to politicians, and more
- Participating in boycotts, direct action protests, or public demonstrations

Individuals involved with grasstops groups were more frequently involved in the following:

- Coalition-building across a region (say, the Southeast United States)
- Speaking to government officials and testifying before state or national congressional bodies
- Traveling to conferences as invited (and compensated) speakers/panelists
- Being called on as expert witnesses
- Contributing opinion-editorial writing to media outlets

My data suggest that the grassroots and grasstops groups have overlapping activities, such as court action to address noncompliance with water ordinances, and even overlapping members. So, while the binary is not always a clean split, I use the grasstops/grassroots categories as a way to compare organizations of different capacities. As I detail in the findings below, these colloquial labels provide a framework for insights into varying perceptions of groups; differing ideas of authenticity, purpose and responsibility; and why friction between different not-for-profit organizations working towards EJ persists. Lastly, I ask in my concluding section whether these groups have to exist in antagonistic relationships like those I observed in this study. My conclusion explores the potential for these groups to combine efforts and confound the binary.

Methods

This case study involved qualitative research on EJ organizations working in three different city sites. These organizations were all involved in the Urban Waters Federal Partnership; some of the groups had previously worked together, and some were working together for the first time. The sites were the Harlem and Bronx rivers system of New York City, the Passaic River of New Jersey, the Anacostia River of Washington, DC and Maryland, and the Proctor Creek watershed of Atlanta, GA.

My research began in 2017 and over the course of two years, I employed qualitative research methods to gather data on how well different not-for-profit EJ organizations were working together. Twenty-five formal interviews were conducted and an additional fifteen

individual perspectives were recorded in informal interviews during participant observation. These were primarily conducted at activist meetings and events in which multiple organization heads were brought together.

Most interviewees expressed concern about their opinions being shared with anyone else involved with the partnership program; the atmosphere surrounding the whole UWFP program and its related collaborations was palpably uneasy. Many interviewees felt something was at stake with their being honest about discontent with the program. Therefore, in addition to coding the respondents' names, I have also committed to relaying the data in a way that further obscures any individual or group's connection to their statements. This commitment to anonymity means that a detailed explanation of logistics of a particular groups' campaign, budget realities, or nature of the political friction between groups is possible, as it would likely reveal the parties' names and identities. The EJ advocacy spaces even in large cities tend to be small worlds. Therefore, this paper focuses more on the overall lessons from the data collected from qualitative research and is sensitive to the portrayal of even coded organizations and leaders.

Key findings

Over two and a half years (2016-2019), I rarely heard comments that suggested the different organizations involved in the UWFP—from the small concerned citizens' groups to the more "mainstream" nonprofits and foundations—were seamlessly collaborating. Instead, I heard frustration from grassroots organizers that larger nonprofits were taking the spotlight, "stealing the dollars we smaller groups deserved and needed." I was told in interviews with staff of larger, better funded organizations that some grassroots groups "whined, because they get attention that way, but we really do the work." Some groups were upset by the mere fact of having to collaborate with other entities, given historical grievances. A few organizational leaders thought the UWFP had done a good job bringing groups to the table, but that after years of work, few could agree on strategies for the work. Disagreements were observed on the small level, in meetings where different organizations disagreed about the agenda. There were also conflicts over broader, more philosophical concerns, for example, whether money and time should be spent on creating green space along polluted waterfronts, trash clean-up, educational projects for youth, or large-scale urban renewal efforts. There was plenty of work to do; the question was less about the project and more about which group was going to lead the way with what funds and towards which vision of water justice.

Visions for water justice were influenced by the EJ organizations' view on which water issues were the most crucial to address. Grassroots organizations I interviewed were often composed of residents who currently or previously lived in close proximity to water pollution issues in the UWFP site. Grasstops groups were more often staffed by employees

who were more middle-class and removed from daily water sanitation/health issues. Grassroots groups tended to speak about immediate concerns, like the fact that household drinking water in Newark was showing spiked lead levels or that children in West Atlanta were having to smell methane from garbage in creeks near their public school. Grasstops groups were not ignorant of issues like the aforementioned, but these groups tended to focus on projects of "green infrastructure." Many of these projects advocated for the creation of a "corridor" of improved waterfronts. In the words of the grasstops groups, the "justice" dimension of creating parks was that they would "improve the quality of life" and promote job-creation for an area with high underemployment. By contrast, grassroots groups I interviewed expressed doubt that the creation of more green spaces would undo longstanding class and race-based inequalities.

Grassroots organizations tended to hold on to the view that the state was their adversary and that the partnership was a somewhat of a "necessary evil." Those I interviewed in grassroots groups explained that they viewed the EPA with great skepticism, especially because seemingly unending environmental issues had not been fixed for years. By the time I interviewed individuals in the grassroots involved with the UWFP, they had seen years of the partnership; any enthusiasm they had felt in the early days of the program had clearly faded. The majority reported that they simply wanted the EPA to "do its job and let us do ours;" many pointed to the fact that if the state just enforced regulation like the Clean Water Act, life for residents dealing with persistent water quality issues would be easier.

My research found that grasstops organizations were warmer to the idea of EPA-led partnerships. In comparison to the grassroots organizations, those in the grasstops noted the imperfections of EPA programs but asked, "If they don't do this work, who will?" This type of question reflected an assumption that the state should organize a number of different organizations in broad, collaborative efforts.

Based on the data collected for this study, there was no programmatic recognition of the different capacities, strengths, and/or constraints of various participating EJ organizations. This lack was a major source of complaint by respondents regarding the UWFP. Participants needed direction regarding what groups should do and where. Entities like local water task forces, community "water watch" groups, and regional water alliances--all of which said they were focused on justice--were being asked to combine forces, but many of these groups rarely worked together. At first it seemed like city administration participants (like city water management) and federal partners (like HUD or US Corp. of engineers) would help organizations strategize how to pool their respective strengths. Respondents informed me that this promise proved to be empty. Governmental partners either failed to show to meetings or agencies repeatedly sent different representatives to

meetings, thus exacerbating inefficiency in meetings and conveying a sense that the state, especially on the federal level, was not actually deeply invested in change.

Unfortunately it seems that the failures by the state to provide necessary guidance, support, and resources served to foment discord between EJ organizations. Respondents explained that debates in UWFP meetings between organizations frequently boiled down to contrasting interpretations of which group was more deserving of or better equipped to use funds. Organizations had ongoing arguments between one another over which should be funded and how those funds should be used. These debates often returned to either: 1. the authenticity of a particular organization, e.g., "are these groups *really* for our community?" or, 2. efficacy of a particular group's approach, e.g., "all that group is going to do is waste the funds on some useless citizen science that will never get incorporated into the EPA's regulation." It also seemed that these struggles prevented conversations from moving into broader reflections on how the EPA could provide more than just matching funds for designated groups.

I also heard explanations of the need for the grassroots and grasstops to work *together* to pool resources, share knowledge and skills, and engage social, educational, or political capital. One leader said that he was aware that many grasstops groups were needed to "take our issues to Washington" since his grassroots group would not be taken seriously there. Grasstops organizational leaders told me of "the importance of door-to-door networking on the grassroots in order to make sure we are in touch with the people" while a grassroots organizer said, "I don't want to hob-nob with philanthropists; I'll leave that work to the bigger groups. We're not really welcome in those spaces anyway." In other words, some organizers felt they needed the grasstops to assist with making their impacts more effective, especially if grassroots groups had historically been less welcome in, say, philanthropic spaces. Grassroots leaders explained that they were not expecting these barriers to change overnight and so, working with those who could navigate these spheres of political influence and charity was key. Several grassroots leaders admitted they were bitter about their reliance on such relationships, saying that even if the terrain changed, grassroots groups would refuse to "play by certain rules; that's not what we do." These statements appeared to be a sort of class defiance; data suggest organizations felt pressure to conform to a sort of class assimilation. Other respondents, particularly those who had been working for decades as volunteers, expressed a desire for more fruitful collaborations with better-funded organizations: "It gets tiresome trying to just keep the lights on in this building; I'm happy to hand over this work to one of the 'slick' foundations or nonprofits." Thus, at their most optimistic, groups involved in their respective spheres of EJ nonprofit work understood their particular roles and felt that the division of labor was productive. At worst, groups lamented not being recognized, being stretched too thin, or not receiving enough resources to continue to do their work.

The UWFP never formally closed, but the semi-regular meetings between organizations eventually changed in terms of number of willing participants and/or stopped altogether in some sites. A couple of organizational staff told me that some groups had splintered off from the UWFP to form their own projects; respondents spoke to the merit of coalitions that are built from the bottom-up rather than top-down. In all, it seems that once many organizations realized that one central promise was not going to happen—that the UWFP would remove barriers to resources, expertise, and tools via state agencies' coordination—groups went their own ways.

Analyzed collectively, there was a range of mistrust and misgivings between the groups involved in the UWFP across the cities. The toughest critiques demonstrated deep wounds, as some organizations felt betrayed by others. The most charitable interpretations of the acknowledged struggles suggested that better project design from the EPA partnerships and other future coalitions was needed.

The majority of the leaders, employees, and volunteers I interviewed were frustrated by realities of EJ organizing but differed somewhat in their view of the best way forward. Their mix of weariness, anger, skepticism, and cautious optimism likely reflects the broader landscape of EJ in the US at present. As one nonprofit leader reminded me, "every environmental justice 'win' is temporary; we have to keep fighting, but the sands keep shifting under us a little bit." How to sustain that fight for underfunded groups, which groups should be fighting where and how, what productive collaboration looks like, and what to do to prevent problematic grasstops takeovers, are pertinent questions for EJ organizations today.

In sum, my fieldwork suggested that an array of organizations with leaders and employees/volunteers were deeply committed to EJ but unsure how best to work together, in the UWFP and other partnerships. This challenge is crucial for scholars and activists alike to analyze. Researchers who collapse the grasstops and grassroots together under the umbrella of not-for-profit, local EJ organizing will miss crucial nuances.

This case study builds on social movement studies that detail the conundrums and contradictions within movements as they change (Giugni 1998, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, Tarrow 1998). The findings add to collections of case studies that provide a more "textured expression" to the challenges today for those working towards environmental equity (see McMichael 2010: 11). Some EJ scholars, like sociologist Jill Harrison (2015), have begun to investigate relations of EJ groups and how co-optation may be creating a new form of "common sense" that de-radicalizes EJ. The analyses I provide aim to augment these emergent scholarly projects. In the sections that follow, I use the following two

explanatory frameworks for understanding the struggles between grasstops and grassroots EJ organizations:

1. Consequences of institutionalization: the state's role in environmental justice movements has at times forced organizations to work within frameworks that foster intergroup tension.
2. The politics of professional activism: today's EJ organizing landscape can penalize groups with less educational, social, and/or political capital and create a problematic reliance on external funding cycles.

Complexities of EJ's new landscape

The partnership project represents the ongoing dilemmas within the institutionalization of environmental justice. In this case study, the institutionalized response by the EPA involved funding organizations in various designated sites and requiring they work together—but without guidance or much assistance in what ended up being an unwieldy project. The processes put in place by the UWFP appear to have worked from the logic that simply recognizing water justice as a pressing concern and organizations as legitimate partners would result in changes automatically happening. By the time of this research, the partnership had mostly produced vague action plans or proposals that put the burden of change once again on underfunded groups. Many of the efforts that came from the UWFP were a far cry from the hopes expressed at the outset. Projects like this included trash clean-up efforts in Atlanta's Proctor creek; in 2016 the "vision" was simply to hire low-income residents to clean up the creek at an hourly wage (Ibata 2016). Grassroots activists were especially dismayed at these types of schemes as they were clearly short-term fixes to structural realities of poverty and environmental inequality. Shortcomings and disappointments across sites are the result of a number of constraining realities of the landscape of institutionalized EJ.

One constraint at work is the EPA's role as a top-down project manager that shapes organizational relations on EJ work. As one activist pointed out, making the EPA an arbiter of EJ has had complex and at times deleterious consequences for social movements: "We have had to work with the enemy instead of making them work for us." Here, the respondent was talking of "the enemy" as the EPA/the state; frustration and anger directed against the EPA goes back decades and was not mollified by the UWFP. Many grassroots leaders and staff dismissed the UWFP as yet another blundering effort by the EPA to "check some boxes by pulling together groups that rarely work together well." Additionally, most respondents in grasstops *and* grassroots groups felt that the UWFP was bringing to the fore old tensions between organizations, and in some cases creating new strife. One attribute of

institutionalization in particular, the EPA naming the partners in a coalition, caused significant dissatisfaction and seems to have increased inter-group friction.

The explanations for why organizations struggled with one another often circled back to failures by the EPA in conflict management and collaboration. Participants from the grasstops largely had different conclusions about EPA leadership than those from the grassroots. In general, grasstops representatives were more neutral, if not positive about the EPA's future ability to reshape partnerships towards improved efficacy and EJ group interrelationship. Some in the grasstops groups pointed out that addressing the UWFP's lack of consistent leadership would be the key to solving the problems; the appointed ambassadors, I was told, were a start but not enough. "'Change moves at the speed of trust' is a popular saying to keep in mind, and the EPA has not worked hard enough to help establish trusting relationships between everyone here," one grasstops nonprofit leader told me. Grasstops respondents maintained that more consistent leadership from the EPA in the UWFP would lead to both improved trust between organizers and the state, and between different organizations "on the ground." As one grasstops leader explained, "Without a consistent EPA staff member, groups dissolved into bickering between one another and felt the desire to police each other, that was the problem." Thus, the conclusion from grasstops leaders—who had often gone through a form of professional leadership training—was that stronger leadership from the EPA was needed to "strongarm some groups into accountability and help us know our respective roles." A couple of respondents went further and suggested that without such leadership, grassroots groups would "run wild" with funding that would "otherwise be put to a more sensible use." These particular voices displayed a form of paternalism toward their grassroots counterparts. In all, grasstops groups I interviewed were less critical of the EPA running partnership programs that enlisted diverse types of organizations; the critique was directed instead at lack of structure, particular leadership models, and the EPA's inability to "keep groups in line."

Institutionalization of EJ appears to have led to less negative fallout for EJ working professionals. Grasstops leaders who traveled to conferences and meetings across regions were less surprised by the lackluster UWFP outcomes; several suggested that activists have to realize the limits of governmental programs. One representative for an environmental equity foundation told me, "The UWFP didn't really work, so we'll just turn our focus to other projects and other collaborators." Other grasstops members told me that they thought that while the UWFP had problems, it was not clear who else was supposed to take on such work—in other words, the UWFP was better than nothing. In all, no one connected to a grasstops group suggested not working with the EPA anymore.

Approximately half of the grasstops organizations with whom I spoke said that involvement with projects like the UWFP did not make or break their budget. But other

grasstops groups told me that while they were staffed by full-time paid employees with benefits, that they were "effectively still hanging on by their fingernails; we're still on a tight budget." However, the gaps in educational and political capital still exist, regardless of budget constraints and grant dependency.

By contrast, many in the grassroots spaces reported that the UWFP failures were more proof that few possibilities for transformative work exist within established institutions. The UWFP had validated their pessimistic outlook. Grassroots respondents appeared overall more dejected and concerned about the future. As one organizer in his seventies stated, "they [at the EPA] are using the [UWFP] partnership to divide and conquer us and to make us part of them; they don't like us to raise hell." To this man, the UWFP was a project simply intended to placate local residents, but one which caused damage long-term. "Oh, they *love* a partnership," another respondent told me, "They [at the EPA] can point to it and the dollars they threw some groups they think look good on paper and say they addressed racism."

In all, the data shows that grasstops and grassroots groups were unhappy with the UWFP project design, but that their speculations about future prospects differed. Additionally, organizations apparently misunderstand, stereotype, and judge other EJ groups. Therefore, this study shows that in addition to reinforcing tense, if not antagonistic, relations with the state, the UWFP in instances encouraged additional conflict between EJ groups of different capacity. In other words, some features of today's landscape of institutionalized EJ include pronounced discord between the grasstops and grassroots, in spite of a government project that was designed to bring them together.

Politics of professional activism

The UWFP also perpetuated local EJ-related politics of professional activism. These politics have consequences for who is and is not deemed legitimate or acceptable as an activist in the EJ movement, and, consequently, which groups are allowed in spaces and which receive the funding to continue to exist. The relationships of the different partners in the UWFP can also be used as a lens through which to understand the politics of professional activism in environmental justice work today.

The struggles between organizations collaborating in the UWFP echo tensions between groups chronicled in earlier literature on EJ. However, the players involved and the nature of the turmoil are different. Previous critical EJ studies literature in the 1990s and early 2000s described conflicts between groups as being mostly between conservation-oriented environmental organizations and those concerned with human welfare, i.e., EJ-focused

groups. Scholarship documenting the contrasts between what was sometimes called "mainstream" environmentalism and EJ groups is still relevant, as many of the tensions this literature explores are still present across the United States today. However, the EJ landscape that much of the literature of decades past described is changed. For one thing, partnership projects like the UWFP did not exist in previous decades. Today many environmental organizations, at all scales, recognize and promote efforts for environmental justice. This includes long-standing environmental conservation organizations that were criticized in the 1990s for ignoring race and class dimensions, e.g., the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation. The large numbers of such organizations has led to conflicts over differing ideas of what constitutes "good" or appropriate environmental work (see DeLuca 2007). Clashes between groups are also increasingly related to which groups are seen as valid fighters for EJ, both by one another and by donors and politicians. Put otherwise, through programs like the UWFP, the EPA could (inadvertently) encourage the state and donor entities to continue to define some groups as being more suitable for major EJ endeavors. Grassroots groups told me that they knew that the EPA, congressional bodies, and philanthropists preferred activists who had "gone through universities and other 'legit' institutions." Many interviewees felt that without formal nonprofit management training or certain educational degrees, they would not have been seen as responsible players.

Interviewed grasstops staff sometimes aligned themselves with attitudes from city planners, philanthropists, and government officials in UWFP with their complaint that grassroots groups were "difficult" to coordinate. One foundation head said to me that they were frustrated with, "the lack of professionalism of some of these nonprofits from affected communities… I get that they want to be seen at the table and have a say, but their vision and impact is limited." Another grasstops leader lamented, "Is this youth education program really all [organizers] think we can dream when it comes to environmental transformation in this city? Is it just having some kids take some polluted water samples and assuming the EPA will care?" These individuals from non-grassroots organizers had very clear ideas about what best practice and appropriate visions look like in EJ organizing.

However, others in the grasstops organizations did have sympathy for grassroots struggles and the bigger dilemmas at hand. Grasstops staff told me they felt demands from the grassroots to deliver on EJ advocacy by using their connections, leveraging resources, talking to state representatives, and so on; somewhat surprisingly, these staffmembers told me they felt the grassroots had more power than they did to make demands for action. At the same time, grasstops members told me they were frequently told by grassroots organizers that the grasstops groups were stepping on the proverbial toes of those who had been working locally for decades. One grasstops employee I interviewed described an uncomfortable scene at an equity summit she had coordinated. She, a Black middle-class woman from the Southeast, had gone into the meeting feeling proud that the panel was led

by activists and nonprofit staff of color. But she observed clashes among these participants, connected to old struggles across organizations that were in part about class; her organization had been accused of diverting philanthropic dollars away from the longstanding EJ work of others. She explained to me that though she was nonwhite and from the South, she did not know how to reckon with her class position or the appropriate way to help low-income individuals to break out of their cycles of poverty. She said she felt uncomfortable taking on some projects because she did not live in the affected communities, and so she felt like an outsider, and yet she knew she had training in business management that might help local grassroots groups engage with important resources. How, she wondered, could she work *for* communities without unintentionally taking up too much space? Her position, which echoed words from others in the grasstops, can be interpreted as evidence that grasstops staff also felt inability to do meaningful, ethical action given constraints and complex realities at hand.

As also indicated by the above anecdote, the demographics of EJ grasstops with whom I spoke deepen the complexity of this story. The majority (65%) were nonwhite, with most identifying as Black American. All but one of the grasstops leaders in Atlanta were Black-identifying, which speaks to the rise of the Black professional middle class in nonprofit spaces in the city. While this diversification of the middle class is a civil rights success story, struggles for Black poor people continue. More Black/nonwhite activists have been allowed to enter the spaces of environmental regulation (e.g. the EPA). However, class mobility remains challenging for working-class nonwhite EJ activists, and thus such activists in the grassroots continue to be unable to get the social and educational capital that would allow them to transcend barriers. These activists are affected by what historian and policy scholar Ibram X Kendi (2017) calls assimilationist paradigms. Nonwhite grassroots organizers continue to be judged for not performing the more acceptable class position; this preference betrays an assimilationist gaze that permits only Black/nonwhite activists of certain class positions to be meaningfully included in action (see Kendi 2017).

Conflicts between grasstops and grassroots organizations in the UWFP can be interpreted as part of a larger question of how poor people's voices are "lifted up" without being erased. The grasstops exist because of decades of poor people's campaigns for EJ. Yet today grasstops groups get legitimized through class dynamics of professionalism within the landscape of EJ organizing, while grassroots groups have to fight to be taken seriously. This reality is a microcosm of ongoing struggles for nonwhite poor populations to be meaningfully included in local political decisions. Plus, these class-based tensions between Black-led and majority nonwhite organizations due to the politics of professionalization may be growing--respondents indicated the nonprofit industrial complex was going to continue to shoulder the burdens of the state's failures on EJ.

The number of leaders and organizations may have grown because donors and government agencies have made it clear that they prefer professional activism of a certain kind, specifically the nonprofit model. The rise of nonprofits has been extraordinary in the last 30 years in the United States and likely reflects these preferences. Rumination over this prolific "nonprofit industry" showed up in my interviews. In the words of one nonprofit director, "The nonprofit complex is uniquely abundant in the United States… and the growth of these forms of organizations is both a positive and a negative." Some activists put the downside more frankly: "I worry that everyone is going to start a nonprofit and it'll be hard for us and for the government and those who give grants to discern the real work from the fakers." The nonprofit model has been attractive for grasstops and grassroots organizers alike, but the abundance of these organizations may have diluted their efficacy and created new forms of stress between otherwise like-minded EJ advocates.

Grasstops and grassroots relationships at worst, at best

Data from this case study show that at worst, grasstops groups can be complicit in the co-optation of environmental justice and reproduce exclusions of more working class organizations. Grassroots interviewees echoed sociologists Wood and Ragar claim that "left unchecked, the roots are often trampled by the grasstops" (2012: 31). However, given institutionalization of EJ is likely going to shape relations for a while to come, I review the feedback I received from activists on what more productive and empowering interactions might involve.

Groups interviewed for this study wished for greater understanding of different leadership styles and for increased room for varying activist strategies. One respondent said that the grassroots job had historically been to "hell-raise," in other words to agitate the state into better enforcement. I was told EJ grassroots groups' role was to "hold feet to the fire while others can do the finessing." Here, the "others" seemed to be the grasstops. Grassroots organizations felt the UWFP limited their ability to do such hell-raising. Requests for projects that incorporate multiple organizing styles also point to bigger conundrums faced by grassroots groups. Some respondents explained the dilemma to me as follows: if grassroots groups acquiesced to the structures that dismiss them, they might make progress, but deeper structural issues would remain. In other words, some activists felt their role was always to challenge the EPA to do more and that the UWFP did not make space for this (see also Pulido et al. 2016). UWFP governmental partners were supposed to do the work of breaking down silos in communication between various entities and leveraging resources, as site descriptions explained. Instead, the UWFP model encouraged the grassroots to acquiesce into bureaucratic models of EJ.

The UWFP model also imposed a class-based assumption that all participants were paid professional EJ advocates. For example, the UWPF meetings between partners reportedly went on for hours; one respondent pointed out that such meetings were only accessible to paid staff and people who did not have second jobs elsewhere or during the day. Such staff are more frequently found in grasstops organizations; this is one way the UWFP design repeatedly seemed to privilege grasstops groups.

The need to improve accountability was a recurring theme. One interviewee said that he felt grasstops leaders appointed themselves as spokespeople even when they did not really speak for the community. Grassroots respondents also suggested that accountability could mean the grasstops asked the grassroots how they could demonstrate solidarity. As one respondent explained, "the litmus test of a real partnership is whether you share power, and that means coming to our level and supporting our actions" and, "I want to know, are you showing up at protests and boycotts with us?" Some other examples of sharing power included attending meetings for working class organizers and delivering reports to community spaces that grassroots members used for organizing—as opposed to the spaces in city government or larger nonprofit conference rooms. The latter types of meeting spaces often felt hostile or unfamiliar to some community members. Grassroots organizations interviewed in the three different cities also frequently reported that they wanted to be connected to the grasstops, but not necessarily work on the same project like the UWFP. This connection could be in the forms of the "sharing power" moments described above. Grassroots groups were largely opposed to having to work across different strategies and familiarities in the UWFP; these interactions felt disempowering.

Grasstops staff often understood these requests, but complying was more complicated. In response to the demand to show up at protests, for example, one grasstops employee told me that the very features that made the grasstops effective as bridges for the EJ movement would be undermined if they were seen as more "radical." For instance, a staff member for a larger nonprofit explained that when she was called to testify in front of Republicans and Democrats, she felt compelled to downplay some more radical requests from community groups; she worried that Republicans would nix the policy change for which she was advocating if she was labeled as far-left. This anecdote suggests grasstops and grassroots groups may have different theories of change in particular moments, or they may simply disagree about what is at stake in various moments of political action. The story also connects to ideas of "stay in your lane," a phrase I heard often during interviews. By the end of their participation with the UWFP, some respondents admitted they thought it was better for groups to work apart rather than together in a partnership led by the EPA.

In spite of their differences in capacity and access to capital, all the organizational staff I interviewed believed that all EJ work was undervalued and underfunded. The lack of

resources for every group continues to be a point of concern and, when groups are pulled together to use scarce resources, as in the UWFP, a point of contention. Interviewees often explained that their organization had fallen short in the eyes of another one due to limited funding: "It takes *resources* for people to be effectively active in their community; we are just working with what we have." It is unclear how to remedy the reality of numerous groups fighting for limited grants. At the very least, philanthropic groups should consider the power they have in shaping the future of organizations' work, individually and collectively; after all, in the words of a grasstops leader, "dollars can unite or dollars can divide." And when groups *do* receive funding from charitable centers, these grants often have many constraints, which made recipients wonder if the donors trusted them with the money. Thus the idea of "change moving at the speed of trust" seems important for donors to keep in mind, assuming they are committed to transformation beyond a cycle of lending. Engendering trust might involve, for instance, the use of paid community-based liaisons that could help bridge divides and stem mistrust.

Finally, some interviewees wondered about the EJ movement's possible overreliance on a particular form of leadership and on the focus on leaders themselves. I heard that the high number of EJ leadership trainings offered was possibly the root of some issues: the more leaders trained, the more individuals vying for power and elbowing over each other. It is indeed remarkable how many EJ leadership trainings and "academies" there are across the United States; all four sites in which I conducted research had such programs. These reflections lead to the question of why so many *different* nonprofits and leadership trainings are needed for the EJ movement to continue to exist.

Conclusion: towards a "pluriverse" of EJ action

Drawing inspiration from the Zapatista social movement, anthropologist Arturo Escobar describes a "pluriverse" of possibility being one in which there are not simply more choices but in which multiple "figured worlds" are allowed to co-exist (2018, see also Allen et al 2007). Escobar's conceptual framework might provide insight into the conundrum facing grassroots and grasstops groups. Right now, EJ's institutionalized landscape is one that is inviting more participation and continues to offer grants for organizations to continue to do the work. However, this case study's data point to conclusions that the EJ organizing world is constrained today by multiple dilemmas, including politics of professional advocacy that are reinforced by the EPA. As more EJ nonprofits get formed, differences increase, and the overall pool of funds, resources, and support stays small. Therefore more conflict ensues. In considering a world in which multiple forms of EJ action were allowed to thrive, I imagine multiple "lanes" of organizing being supported and different strategies working together while functioning apart.

This study on the tensions between nonprofit EJ groups in the UWFP is part of a bigger story of an underwhelming attempt at forwarding water justice. The frictions I documented augment findings from other studies that show the EPA's failed promises regarding EJ (see Konisky 2015). Specifically, this case study shows that asking more EJ organizations to participate in EJ collaboration is not necessarily helpful, or even positive overall. And so, this case study points to some of the paradoxes of participation in EPA EJ efforts too: the EJ movement long advocated for more participation (see Holifield 2012), but the nature of the participation matters, as did the relationships between the organizations in collaboration.

All of these reflections are part of what EJ scholar David N. Pellow considers part of the deepening of the "second generation" of EJ literature, in other words work on EJ that considers intersecting struggles and complex power relations (2016: 223, see also Pellow and Brulle 2005). One of the main aims of this paper is to build on the critical EJ literature for which Pellow and others advocate. Critical EJ scholars are increasingly moving away from assumptions that civil society organizing is somehow immune to power struggles, problematic compromises, and so on. As Pellow and Brulle (2005: 14) note, the "populist, democratic power structure" of the EJ organizing world is sometimes romanticized. Thus, it is imperative to examine EJ groups working in partnerships and coalitions to understand their own internal dimensions, and what these nuances reveal about the movement today. I expound on the additional contributions to EJ literature below, along with practical considerations for EJ activists and activist-scholars.

Contributions to critical EJ studies

The findings from this study continue work from Jill Harrison (2015) and others in critical environmental justice studies who have investigated intra-movement tensions in the US-based EJ movement. In her exploration of "cleavages" between EJ activists, Harrison writes, "because the EJ activists I interviewed are not a representative sample of the entire movement, I am unable to identify how widespread this new common sense is" (2015: 252). Therefore this paper augments claims from Harrison that there are fractures between EJ organizations. These cleavages are crucial for EJ scholars to investigate as part of the broader documenting of new terrains of struggle within EJ today. Early EJ scholarship described antagonism between organizations, but these conflicts were between white-dominant and conservation-oriented "mainstream" groups and those focused on justice (see Sandler and Pezzullo 2007). Thus more on the relations *between* the groups that hold justice as a central guiding tenet contributes to a more critical EJ studies (see Pellow 2016, 2018). Additionally, more critical examinations of assimilationist pressures are needed in EJ studies, especially given EJ groups today look different than they did in the time of early case studies (see Kendi 2017). As I have shown, today's EJ organizing landscape is more diverse in terms of participants than the scenes reported 20 years ago. I saw EJ

organizations, the majority of which were populated by nonwhite employees and leadership, in heated arguments *in spite of* shared agreement that justice and equity should be at the heart of the environmental reforms. In short, my findings complicate conclusions from earlier EJ literature that suggested the dividing lines between environmental groups is based on varying "buy-in" to the idea of EJ, and/or acknowledgement of systemic racism and classism (see Allen et al 2007).

Another contribution relates to literature that specifically examines the EPA's role in environmental justice. The EPA's contributions to EJ have largely been assessed as failures. Scholars have argued that these failures often can be attributed to either 1. government agency people not understanding the concept of EJ (see Harrison 2017, Holifield 2001) or 2. the agency succumbing to lobbying groups or other pressures from external influences outside of EJ advocacy (Harrison 2017, 2019; Konisky 2015). This study maintains that indeed, the EPA fell short of collective hopes for the UWFP, but the observed problems include ones related to intra-movement struggles. For one, the EPA pulled organizations together without awareness of the different strengths—and limitations—each organization brought to the table. The UWFP project design asked diverse EJ organizations to generate strategies that would satisfy everyone, from the foundations that worked across a region to the grassroots groups focused on, say, one part of Washington, DC. Each group's ideas of priorities and the assumptions of best paths forward were often not complementary to one another. The EPA had promised a widely networked partnership that would free up funds and resources for the heterogenous partners, but this promise was largely empty and ultimately just added to the tensions among organizations.

Lastly, this research continues the discussion of the impacts of institutionalization to ask about the process's consequences for the EJ movement today. It is possible that institutionalization has helped EJ be an empty signifier in some cases, and, in the words of respondents, EJ is becoming a box that has to be checked by staff in government agencies and by politicians. Though EJ organization staff came off as earnest when it came to environmental equity, the question of "whether groups are in the EJ business for the organization or for the mission," as some asked, remains important. The mission described by working-class grassroots groups is still one of re-thinking capitalism and underdevelopment of predominantly Black and nonwhite lives. What, then, are the social and lived consequences when EJ has become a more diluted concept? In other words, what happens when a social movement wins (see Konisky 2015)? Do the radical politics have to fall away for the movement to continue, and under what conditions do the radical politics get co-opted? These questions are representative of important scholarly directions for EJ researchers, especially as more organizations and projects take on EJ.

Reflections for activist practice: addressing problematic cycles

In addition to the scholarly contributions, this paper aims to provide information that can be of use to proponents of EJ themselves. In the preliminary research for this project, I was told by activists that they wondered whether the UWFP was working well in other sites. One of the reasons I was compelled to do this project was to be able to answer that question. My findings suggest that not only did the UWFP prove disappointing in multiple sites but that the whole project was ill-conceived. The takeaways from this research also include broader reflections on difficulties EJ activists face within institutionalized EJ efforts.

Both grasstops groups and grassroots organizations I interviewed expressed weariness with the grant cycle, which programs like the UWFP encourage. The organizational model every EJ group had adopted, almost uniformly, relied on government grants or charitable donations. As a few respondents mused, perhaps the nonprofit model had been oversold as the answer to getting a social movement to "last." Looking back, one respondent explained that EJ nonprofit organizations form because "community folks see this money being raised for justice groups but there's no local voice and no local organizations, so individuals say hey—we'll start something that gets recognized by these agencies." There is a top-down impetus too: the EPA supplies grants to nonprofit organizations if they participate in programs like the UWFP. Thus the incentives for the nonprofit model seem obvious. Yet the limits of the nonprofit form of organization were also evident. Community groups with less access to nonprofit management training were quick to be judged as unprofessional and were sometimes elbowed out of projects. This observation points to ways that nonprofit models can feed into the politics of professionalization.

Ways to counter problematic professionalization politics range from short term fixes to radical re-visioning. The simplest remedy to educational/training disparities would be to increase leadership training and have grasstops groups help boost assets like financial literacy with community organizers. Many grassroots organizations are already trying to fill in educational gaps both within their nonprofits and also help young people in their communities find opportunities for education in EJ. The latter was reported to me as attempts to "build the next generation of EJ leaders." But as I have argued, this approach has major limitations. For one, leadership training does not necessarily solve the overreliance on particular professionalization preferences, e.g. the nonprofit model and external funding. A more radical structural power shift would be to encourage regulatory agencies and charitable foundations to broaden their ideas of what professional activism looks like, or to honor activism that is not "professional" in the mainstreamed view. These changes seem necessary to more dramatically alter the class dynamics at hand; professionalism in this context certainly seems to be code for class. Additionally, projects like the UWFP could make better use of the uneven resources that different organizations

bring to partnerships and coalitions. Organizations would not have to choose between strategies or scales of intervention, but implement multiple types and levels of action in partnerships like the UWFP. To be honest, the way towards a "pluriverse" of EJ organizing (see Escobar 2018), a reality that allows for multiple forms of EJ action to co-exist with less debates about authenticity or professionalism, is unclear. But that work of finding pathways forward requires an understanding of the inner workings of and relationships between diverse "grasses" of environmental justice today.

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Chapter 3: Conceptualizing Environmental Injustice as Trauma: Considerations and Consequences for Methodological Approaches

Introduction.

While I was conducting preliminary research for my dissertation fieldwork on environmental justice projects in the United States, I met an activist from Flint, Michigan. Cathy[19], a former union organizer, described what it was like living in a place that had been called the "poster child of environmental injustice" given its massive lead crisis. She was critical of the way a group of social scientists from a major research university had conducted a study "*on,* not with, those affected by poisoned water." She described a scene in which a room filled with parents of ill children had been asked "to recount their trauma while researchers wrote down their words on their notepads." By the end, "almost every Flint resident in the room was in tears and was clearly retraumatized… you have to understand, we have collective PTSD." Cathy's description was unsettling, though the story of a study negatively affecting a research group is hardly new. Much has been written about the ethics of fieldwork in social science (see Brettel 1993, Chatterton 2008, Gibson-Graham 2003, Hale 2006, Kleinmann, Copp, Henderson 1997, Piven 2010, Rose 1997, Thorne 1980). Yet clearly today researchers who are focused on the intersections of poverty, race, health, and environment in the United States still can fall short when it comes to conducting ethical and respectful projects.

This paper draws on experiences from my dissertation fieldwork to examine the shortcomings of certain methodological approaches. In 2016, I began preliminary research for my fieldwork, and encountered several ethical dilemmas regarding my intended research design. In the sections that follow, I explore the nature of these tensions via the genre of autoethnography, specifically a reflexive ethnographic "memoir" or "confessional" approach (see Alkon 2011, Ellis 2004, Van Maanen 1988). As sociologist Sarah Wall (2008) describes, autoethnographic styles and purposes vary greatly, and these texts take many creative forms (see also Ellis and Bochner 2000, Wall 2006). I use autoethnography to link analytic concepts to personal experience and evaluate my own actions to form a critical understanding of methodological issues at hand (see Duncan 2004, Holt 2001, Sparkes 1996).

In processing my experiences in the field, I build on examinations of ethics in qualitative methods, arguing that EJ studies needs more critical review of preferred and appropriated methodologies. This argument draws on two key observations: *1.* case studies of marginalized populations are among the preferred models of research in EJ studies, and *2.*

[19] This and other names used in this paper are pseudonyms; all interviewee's identities have been coded and protected for this study

backlash from marginalized communities on some forms of case studies has grown and demands more thoughtful practices. I also explore ways that EJ researchers may believe that certain qualitative methods, particularly ethnographic[20] ones, are best for gathering data on case studies. My fieldwork experience unsettles these assumptions, as I describe in my findings.

This paper additionally spotlights the importance of conceptualizing environmental justice as trauma within the broader consideration of codes of ethical conduct for qualitative projects in EJ studies. As more recent EJ scholars have maintained, environmental justice can involve traumas that are physical, psychological, and/or epistemic; these traumas are both individual and collective (see Pellow 2019, Peña 2001). Consequently, EJ research requires methodologies that are sensitive to the multiform traumas with which communities facing environmental injustice deal; findings from my fieldwork reinforce this claim. While trauma-sensitive methods are more frequently found in research on psychology, such as in studies on the effects of abuse (see Wilson et al. 2015), I have found little evidence of such methods being incorporated into EJ research. Therefore this paper seeks to contribute to critical qualitative methods in EJ studies, in particular by exploring my own field experiences grappling with realities of environmental traumas.

Background

1. Methodological Trends in EJ Studies

Important scholarly work has been done on experiences of those directly affected by environmental burdens, and much of this research has been conducted in the hopes of creating social change. In their chronicle of the roots of environmental justice, legal scholars Luke Cole and Sheila Foster (2001) note that academics were in fact an important "contributory stream" to the EJ movement (p. 24). They explain that for years, academic researchers have produced studies that demonstrate the disproportionate impacts of environmental hazards on people of color and low-income people, thus reinforcing EJ activist claims (p. 25). Cole and Foster also state that this documentation by academics plays "perhaps a larger [role] than… in any other broad-based social movement in the United States" (2001: 24). This type of scholarship has built a body of literature now generally referred to as "environmental justice studies" (henceforth, EJ studies) (see Pellow 2016). In the twenty years since Cole and Foster published their history of the EJ movement's roots, more generated data has continued to buttress EJ activists' claims of uneven burdens.

[20] A deep dive into all that ethnography is and is not is outside the purview of this paper. As anthropologist colleagues remind me, ethnography can be a methodology, a form of 'imagination,' and an epistemology/position on the production of knowledge itself, among other interpretations and usages.

EJ literatures have a strong vein of qualitative research that uses case studies as a way to investigate the race- and class-based dimensions of environmental inequality (see Pellow 2016: 223). Many of these case studies in EJ are designed by researchers who are looking to document daily life in oppressed communities. For example, Eddie Girdner and Jack Smith's (2002) work on toxic waste begins with a preface that explains, "Mercer County was targeted because the population was poor and politically marginalized… like many others in 'sacrifice zones,' they believed that they should not become the waste dump for the world" (viii). Frequently these qualitative case studies begin either with the outsider-observer describing a tragic scene or having respondents' voices explain the crises (see Checker 2005, Saxton 2015, Schwarze 2007, Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss 2001). Methodological reflections from researchers outside EJ studies offer insights into why EJ scholars are compelled towards certain approaches like these. Sociologist Bruce Western's book *Homeward: Life in the Year After Prison* (2018) presents his belief in the power of qualitative methods, especially regarding topics of inequality studies. He uses qualitative research methods for his examination of consequences of mass incarceration because "a humanizing social analysis answers a politics of dehumanization and improves our understanding of people who are stigmatized by imprisonment" (2018: 25). Western explains that the methods of providing this humanizing analysis include asking people to describe their pain: "In very poor or socially marginal research sites, much of the scientific practice consists of bearing witness, trying to hear voices subdued by poverty, discrimination, violence and the many other troubles that follow" (ibid). This "bearing witness" is intended respectfully, as an effort to broadcast silenced stories. However, this process, which involves asking for personal and intimate details of individuals' lives, is often fraught with contradictions. Bruce Western continues:

> "For social scientists, there is a tension between respecting the private details of the lives of vulnerable people and portraying their full humanity to dispel antipathy and ignorance. The humanity of men and women we talked to was rooted in their specific life histories, the neighborhoods they lived in, their jobs, and their families and friends. Ethnographers have struggled mightily with this conflict" (2018: 25, see also Jerolmack and Murphy 2019)

Some of these concerns about vulnerability can be addressed through IRB-related precautions like coding names with pseudonyms and having respondents review work before it is published. Indeed, these kinds of procedures are more standard practice in qualitative research. However, additional vulnerabilities and tensions arise as a consequence of doing qualitative work in marginalized communities. Research can in some situations be re-traumatizing, as I explore later in this paper. Ethical processes might not always be to simply create more sensitive research questions or guarantee anonymity. In some cases, like in my own dissertation fieldwork, the work may be to review the study

itself and to change core foci like the population/subjects at hand. Empirical evidence from my dissertation fieldwork shows that sometimes asking marginalized people to retell traumatizing stories can be interpreted as an act of aggression. This interpretation is more likely if the interviewer is someone not from the community and/or someone of the positionality of the social group seen to be complicit in oppression. Clearly the qualitative EJ case study helps researchers craft convincing stories. Often these narratives are meant to effect policy change or other tangible outcomes (see Stringer 2004). However, some community groups have objected to aspects of the practices within case studies.

More communities have been asking for improved ethics from researchers, as I discuss in the following section. Those conducting EJ research need to weigh these critiques. Researchers should consider whether their own practices cause suffering in the very communities they are trying to lift up.

2. Responding to Community Pushback: Do No Harm

EJ scholarship has a history of being sympathetic to movement aims and there are many EJ researchers who consider themselves activist-researchers and/or do participatory action research (PAR). Therefore the rising pushback against some forms of case studies should be of interest and concern to many in EJ studies.

As American Studies scholar Elizabeth Hoover (2017) describes, communities with exposure to environmental burdens often have familiarity with institutional neglect, academic extractivism and/or research abuse (134). Scholars in the field of Native and Indigenous Studies in particular have documented this extractivism. Métis scholar Adam Gaudry explains, research is often an extractive process that serves outsiders more than the communities being studied (2011: 113-114, see also Smith 1999). Populations of marginalized peoples have recognized that researchers are interested in their experiences, but also that being researched "on" can be exhausting, time-intensive, and re-traumatizing. Therefore, some community groups have demanded more reflection by researchers on their motivations and increased awareness of the relational aspects of research ethics. Communities facing environmental blights increasingly want methodological orientations like community-based participatory research (CBPR), methods in which they are more in control of research designs and outcomes and prevent future research abuses (Hoover 2017).

CBPR literature provides helpful orientations for scholars concerned with ethics in historically marginalized communities and provides key methodological tools for EJ scholars concerned with impacts on particular populations. The approach advocates for co-learning and capacity building and maintains that ethics and codes of conduct are not static but rather reflexive and relational (Israel et al 2018: 34, Cordner et al. 2012: 162, see also Smith-Doerr 2006, Gidden 1984; Bourdieu 1992). For example, going by Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines alone for ethical orientation is obviously not enough

(Cordner et al. 2012: 162). Instead, researchers with a CBPR paradigm are pushed towards more "self-conscious, interactive, and iterative reflection upon researchers' relationships with research participants, relevant communities and principles of professional and scientific conduct" (Cordner et al. 2012: 163). The bulk of the CBPR literature relates to public health (see Banks et al. 2013, Cargo and Mercer 2008, Collins et al. 2018, Minkler 2004, Wallerstein and Duran 2010, Watts et al. 2008, Wilson and Dickenson-Swift 2018, Wing, Cole and Grant, 2000). There is less on CBPR methodologies and ethics in environmental justice literature, which is surprising since EJ often relates to health equity concerns. This gap speaks to the need for more research from EJ scholars that specifically discusses engagement with approaches like CBPR.

Orientations like those espoused by proponents of CPBR provide helpful departure points for more critical discourse regarding methods in EJ studies. These are utilized by EJ scholars like sociologist Alison Alkon (2011), who pairs community-based approaches with reflexive ones. In Alkon's words, researchers have to go further than simply including community members in the processes of research and work on the power relations within the production of knowledge (2011: 143). This latter effort, she argues, is done through the researcher's self-reflection on their possible complicity in oppression. While this argument is sensible, reflexive processes require that the researcher fully grasp the dimensions of power at hand. Findings from my own EJ case study indicate that more toolsets are needed for conceptualizing realities of disempowered groups, and how these realities influence researcher-subject relationships. More frameworks that pay attention to the unique aspects of EJ as an object of study are still requiered. One of these unique features of EJ is the complexity of traumas resulting from racial and class-based environmental oppression, as I explain below.

3. EJ studies as trauma research

The communities at the center of EJ studies are often there precisely because they have been impacted by trauma and violence and the brutal results of oppressive power dynamics. Thus, it is especially important to do sensitive, ethical research in such spaces. The simple act of documentation of the impact of historical trauma and ongoing institutionalized violence against low-income, predominantly nonwhite groups is perhaps the most important contribution from environmental justice studies. As anthropologist Devon Peña (2011) points out, being excluded from environmental planning and decision-making is both traumatic and deadly (see also Pellow 2016). Peña writes, "systemic denial and insufficiency of sustenance" is representative of the structural violence that those who have faced environmental justice suffer, and these violences continue to impact mortality rates (2011: 207, see also Farmer et al 2006). Much of the early environmental justice scholarship uses language of systemic violence and structural oppression, evoking the idea of collective trauma. For instance, Robert Bullard's (1993) "anatomy" of the environmental

justice movement describes it as a movement responding to the phenomenon of "toxic colonialism," an ill that breaks both bodies and minds over multiple generations. Bullard's concept of traumatic toxicity is defined via Kwame Ture and Charles V Hamilton's work on "internal colonialism," from their landmark book, *Black Power* (1967). Bullard is among the scholars of EJ who have sought to describe EJ as not simply an effort to improve environmental conditions but also as resistance against structural violence and as a movement of people fighting for their lives (see Pellow 2016).

The increasingly diverse studies on EJ and trauma have also expanded the understanding of impacts of environmental degradation from just those related to physical health. For instance, more work has been done on how today's EJ organizing seeks to reclaim belonging, grapple with loss, and make wellbeing and mental health part of the environmental equity agenda (Anguelovski 2013). Ideas of grief, loss, trauma, resilience, resourcefulness, and well-being are more abundant in today's critical EJ literature. This literature is representative of what activist-scholar David N. Pellow calls the "second generation" of EJ scholarship that begins to delve into new terrain of intersecting issues (2016). Researchers have been considering the concept of trauma more explicitly and more extensively, utilizing the idea of environmental violence to deepen their examination of both complex impacts and ethical dilemmas. Devon Peña (2011) describes his unease when asked to be an expert witness for an environmental crisis; he wonders whether serving as such a witness reproduces certain traumas against people historically deemed incapable of expertise. Peña's case study explains this quandary as being related to the ongoing epistemological violence against low-income groups (2011). Researchers are often put in a position in which they have to decide whether their testimony will aid a movement or simply reinforce hierarchies of knowledge[21]. Peña's account is among the more reflexive descriptions from EJ activist-researchers. These types of budding foci regarding reflexivity and ethics within EJ literature is important, and invites more examination of methodological approaches.

Conceptualizing prospective EJ case study sites as involving populations with environmental trauma should push researchers to familiarize themselves with ethics of working with traumatized subjects. I argue this conceptualization has significant benefits for preventing damaging practice; however, the possibility for essentialization does exist. While it is crucial that those involved in qualitative research with traumatized subjects understand our interactions have real impacts on people, EJ researchers should take care not to reduce a population to being simply unable to cope. As historian Ibram X Kendi

[21] I owe the late epidemiologist Steve Wing, from the University of North Carolina's School of Public Health, for explaining this conundrum to me when I was a young student of EJ studies. Steve was a researcher who collaborated with activists to document environmental racism and related public health crises.

reminded me during a public talk of his (2019), researchers should be careful to distinguish between identifying effects of long-standing violences and the error of essentializing a group. In other words, it is clearly not ideal for the takeaway to be a simplistic notion that poor, nonwhite people are unable to tell their stories without feeling acute psychological pain. Of course, those affected by environmental traumas are diverse peoples with heterogeneous experiences and ways of processing structural oppression. Researchers should avoid any blanket statements about social groups, including how communities are coping with collective PTSD. Still, more methodological tools are needed in EJ studies in terms for framing work with trauma-affected communities. In the following section, I relay pertinent findings from trauma research as a resource for more discourse on trauma, EJ studies, and appropriate methods.

4. Lessons from trauma research

Studies on how to successfully treat PTSD provide insight on why community groups have reported negative experiences with certain forms of qualitative methods. When asked to talk about their experience with environmental racism, exposure to toxins, and/or daily experiences with environmental burdens, some participants may have experienced what researchers on PTSD call dysregulation and/or dissociation (see Briere 2006; Carson, Dalenberg and McDade-Montez 2012). These psychological phenomena are the result of individuals with PTSD experiencing an external stimulus that makes them feel as though they are literally re-living a horrific event (ibid). They can subsequently experience severe physical and emotional distress, measurable through MRI screenings and blood tests. Even talk therapy can sometimes backfire by causing re-traumatization[22]. When one group of participants were asked to retell their trauma in talk therapy, the majority reported "PTSD, psychotic symptoms and/or suicidal ideation worsening in immediate reaction" (Tong et al. 2017:1). Those who regularly experience such re-traumatization are more likely to have negative health outcomes like high blood pressure, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Powers et al. 2019).

It is clear that interviews hold traumatizing potential for those who endured a form of violence, are survivors of injustice, and/or have gone through life-altering traumas. This

[22] In response to the growing awareness of talk therapy's limitations, and possible negative effects, some practitioners have advocated for alternatives for treating PTSD like body-based awareness and mindfulness (Van der Kolk 2014). The treatment methods Bessel Van der Kolk (2014) advises for PTSD result from his studies on comparative impact of various treatments on reducing PTSD symptoms. These studies found that somatic approaches (those that focused on encouraging feelings of physical safety) often worked better than asking people to talk through their painful experiences (Van der Kolk 2014). As Van der Kolk argues, talk therapy is helpful for individuals who might not understand what's happened to them or are trying to process how they feel about experiences.

information is pertinent for EJ methodologies, especially because most researchers investigating the impacts of environmental trauma are not there for the long haul, let alone trained in appropriate behavioral therapies. They might think their work to document these violences via qualitative methods like formal interviews and/or focus groups is helpful, when in fact they are asking participants to "perform their trauma," as I have heard the process described. All these observations lead to the question of what ethical and transformative EJ research methods might look like today.

5. Inherent tensions in EJ methods

A recognition of these vulnerabilities brings up core tensions in EJ methodologies, especially in regards to conducting case studies. In my dissertation fieldwork, I was forced to confront these tensions I interviewed predominantly low-income, nonwhite residents affected by environmental injustice. Once in the field, I had to confront my assumptions, as activists with whom I spoke helped me recognize that my positionality as a white woman connected to an affluent research institution was both a concern and a potential opportunity.

Before undertaking the work, I imagined conducting interviews with families that had been affected by environmental trauma. I based my plans on my previous ethnographic fieldwork experiences, and I thought that I would have time to ingratiate myself, gain rapport, and proceed with respect. However, the more basic assumption that I had the right to certain stories ended up being challenged by activists I consulted, and I changed my research design entirely, to be more in line with a trauma-sensitive approach. This experience helped me recognize the possible methodological blindspots and biases that trends in EJ studies might inadvertently encourage. EJ researchers are propelled to study suffering, as explained in the review of case studies on communities facing environmental injustice. However, some researchers might need to consider whether it is appropriate to ask certain questions of particular groups, or whether they should be doing interviews in the community at all.

In the details that follow, I explain how I encountered these ethical dilemmas in my research and found a trauma-sensitive way forward.

C. Findings from the field

1. The UWFP case study and methodological tensions

By early 2017, I had formulated a rough sketch of my dissertation project, and was gearing up for the kind of EJ case study I had read about in books for over a decade. I had worked on EJ, water conflicts, and economic development issues for years, and a water justice project created by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had caught my eye. The

project, called the Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP), was fascinating for a number of reasons, including that the effort seemed on paper to address many of the longstanding critiques of the EPA by EJ activists. The UWFP represented years of activist efforts to get the EPA to incorporate the movement's claims and demands, and, at the same time, the project seemed somewhat byzantine and contradictory[23]. I had not found any description of the outcomes from the giant EPA project. The partnership also included Atlanta and the EPA project page devoted to the city described issues with which I was familiar; Atlanta is my hometown. Although I had not grown up in the neighborhoods affected by the issues the partnership sought to address—namely combined sewage overflow and illegal dumping—classmates from my years in public schools had[24]. My research interest felt both scholarly and personal.

I had originally expected to spend part of my time interviewing project partners, which included nonprofits and charitable foundations, and part of the time with community groups and residents. I expected that an ethnographic case study over the course of a year or two would yield information on the lived experiences of those in underserved areas of one of the UWFP sites. My hypothesis was that while the UWFP looked progressive on paper, it had likely done little to improve the livelihoods of West Atlantans, even regarding exposure to pollutants and hazardous waste. My preliminary research intimated that the UWFP had largely failed the populations it was supposed to serve in Atlanta; documenting the consequences of these failures seemed at first to necessitate words from those who were still facing environmental violences.

For years I had had connections to EJ organizations in the city, and when I began my preliminary research to help prepare my dissertation fieldwork, I contacted a few acquaintances in the nonprofit world who were focused on environmental equity[25]. I ran

[23] For example, the partnership drew together a number of typically adversarial entities. While some of these groups seemed to share enough common ground, other designated partners involved in the local project seemed out of place, like the Coca-Cola corporation.

[24] Not all my peers went home to neighbors that were as safe, green, or well-resourced as mine. My school was a product of the busing efforts in Atlanta that began in the 1960s and carried on through the 1990s. The program, colloquially called the "M2M" initiative ("minority to majority") in Atlanta aimed to help desegregate schools. The public schools I knew were ones with children from a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Through my peers I learned that my Atlanta experience was only one of many that youth could have in the diverse city, for better or for worse.

[25] I use environmental justice, EJ, and environmental equity interchangeably. I have observed that different groups/individuals use a particular term to refer to environmental justice depending on their age and what kind of organization they're part of. Academics and activist-researchers tend to use the phrases EJ and environmental justice, while in the nonprofit and philanthropy spheres, environmental equity seems more popular. The term environmental racism, widely used by seminal EJ documentarians like Robert Bullard, has

my fledgling plans for research by one of them, Andrea. I thought I might work within the community for a stretch of time, conducting interviews to see if the UWFP had served them or not. But Angela cautioned me: "Your questions are important but people are pretty weary of researchers, especially white ones like you, moving in and doing things like focus groups." Others reminded me that it hardly mattered that I had grown up in the city of Atlanta; I was still an outsider. My home neighborhood fourteen miles from Proctor Creek, though diverse, was not historically black nor majority working-class. The more people I asked, the more I heard hesitations and concerns regarding my prospective work. In the words of one nonprofit employee, "Frankly, [residents of Proctor creek] have been studied to death." I was told that researchers from Emory University in Atlanta had done extractive research: "These researchers took information from residents, made them share their horror stories, wrote up their notes and… [community members] never saw them again."

I needed to reflect much more on ways that historical and ongoing traumas were affecting the community members I wanted to interview. I examined some of the research on environmental trauma and re-traumatizing potential of interviews. I came to grips with the fact that even if I adhered to some of the basics of action research, such as sharing my findings with community groups, I was not really serving Atlantans who faced environmental injustices. I was unlikely to be able to solve the sewage overflow problem, or the area's economic exclusion. In short, I had little to offer in terms of solving the water crises beyond the hope that the regional EPA might take my findings seriously and the data would give activists more with which to work. But these hopes were abstract and far-off at best. And so, I began in reviewing my research questions, my hypotheses, and the population I wanted to study. Importantly, I had to re-consider my inherent assumptions around the "suffering subject" and my thinking that I had a right to certain stories (see Robbins 2013).

2. Re-designing the project

There were ways that I could have made the research project more participatory and trauma-sensitive and still involved in-depth interviews with those directly affected by environmental traumas. Many of these specific changes were not possible. For example, I did not have the budget to hire a community member to serve as a co-interviewer, or even to conduct the interviews for me, a tactic that many participatory action researchers advocate (Greenwood and Levin 2007, Stringer 2013). I also did not want to make any person in the community feel tokenized by asking them to hop onto the project briefly (see Monno and Khakee 2012, Arnstein 1969, Manteaw 2008). I concluded therefore that my place was not in those spaces, and I needed to explore other dimensions of the UWFP's outcomes.

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faded, although I found activists of color who had been organizing for multiple decades still referred to EJ as environmental racism.

I started to reassess the idea of interviewing residents in Proctor Creek. I connected with a community-based nonprofit director and a couple of individual activists I knew from previous projects in the city. I asked, most simply, what would be most helpful for me to do regarding water issues and creek. I heard that I should *not* do an ethnographic study of the single-site model in which I did the sort of "deep hanging out" that many qualitative researchers espouse (see Geertz 1973, Pezzullo and de Onís 2018). I was told that it might be more useful for me to take advantage of the privileges of my positionality: I had a socio-economic status and a job that allowed me to travel between cities. People I spoke to in EJ organizations wanted to know how other groups were faring, and whether projects like the UWFP were working in other sites. One activist pointed out, "We know our backyard's troubles, but we don't have time to talk to people in other places to see what their strategies are, or what they are experiencing." I was advised to collect stories across multiple cities regarding work on water justice and report back. One project partner mused, "the UWFP didn't work that well for us, but maybe it worked out in other places; maybe you can help us know if this is a story of Atlanta's politics or more about the project design."

I decided therefore to do a multi-site study of the UWFP's impact in several cities and *not* interview individual residents about life under environmental injustice. I learned more about the other 18 cities in which the UWFP was involved, and selected the Bronx/Harlem Riversheds, the Passaic River, and Anacostia River as three additional sites. I kept the same overarching research question about the consequences of the institutionalization of the EJ movement and whether the EPA's focus on EJ via the UWFP had led to measurable changes for people disproportionately affected by water quality issues. I would continue to use qualitative research methods, particularly in-person formal and informal interviews and participant observation. However, I chose a different population to interview and observe.

Each of the 19 sites within the purview of the UWFP had a range of local partners, including community-based EJ groups, city planners, EJ advocacy nonprofits, philanthropic foundations, corporate entities, and conversation-oriented NGOs. In revising my research plan, I decided to focus on the partners in each of the four study sites. I decided to speak to the main point-people within the organizations who worked with other partner groups and the EPA.

I reviewed and rephrased my interview questions in my research project redesign. I no longer focused on anyone's direct experience with trauma/environmental violence, but rather asked about the UWFP's efficacy and the impacts of institutionalization. Thus, my research project became more about activists' strategies, engagements with the state, and the interactions among EJ organizations. I also added new dimensions, examining the complexity of professional activism, a newer aspect of today's EJ organizing landscape. In short, I found a way to avoid requesting performances of trauma via personal narratives

and still retained an intellectually rich set of research questions related to environmental injustice.

Still, trauma as a concept showed up in my findings. In coding the data, I found that 20 of the 47 respondents used some version of the following ideas: collective trauma, impacts of structural violence, and reduced community mental health resulting from patterns of environmental discrimination. These comments included observations like, "It's as if the city [of Atlanta] forgets that we've been traumatized by their previous negligence." Another interviewee explained, "so much violence against a community, especially when people deny it is in fact violence, has a collective psychological effect on people here." I did not need to be in the homes of those experiencing daily encounters with severe pollution in order to hear testimony on the consequences of environmental violence by the state and other entities.

The story of my methodological revisions is not meant to suggest that interviews towards learning more about plights of impoverished people are no longer necessary or somehow impossible for researchers to conduct ethically. Crucial questions about the well-being of the most vulnerable and whether their livelihoods were being improved by efforts like the UWFP can be examined by activists, community-based researchers, and educators in the area or researchers from different positionalities and commitments to place than I have.

3. Challenges and lessons from fieldwork experiences

I was based in Ithaca while I collected primary data from late 2017 until mid-2019. Over these two years, I made numerous visits to the four sites. At first, in each city, I ran into major roadblocks. Logistical difficulties I had not anticipated were suddenly everywhere. I had been accustomed to the immersive experience of ethnography, and many aspects of this new-to-me research method felt uncomfortable.

My four main sites for examining the UWFP's impact—New York City, Atlanta, Washington, DC and Newark—were easy enough to access from my base in Ithaca, but sometimes when I arrived, interviewees canceled on me. My emails received far fewer responses than I expected, and initial phone calls felt awkward. Establishing trust was difficult. I was dropping in to places as a stranger and my connection to Cornell University loomed large. I spent a lot of time framing emails and thinking about my words over the phone. I found an added challenge of building rapport over remote interactions. Some of the experiences I had enjoyed about ethnographic approaches, like watching the growth of familiarity between myself and "subjects," was largely absent. Data collection went slowly, with numerous dead ends.

Nevertheless, over time, snowball sampling gave the study momentum. Respondents referred me to other individuals or organizations involved in the UWFP, and most said I could mention I had spoken with them. Gradually, I gained rapport with a handful of EJ groups, even remotely. I started hearing comments like, "Oh, you're the one investigating

the outcomes of the UWFP; I've heard about you." After about a year of work calling, emailing, traveling to cities for events, and compiling contact lists, a few people involved in the UWFP contacted me independently. I was eventually invited to meetings, to be a notetaker and write up briefs. I was told by one EJ organization that this was helpful because they were understaffed and overstretched. My role in these meetings worked towards the kind of "sweat equity" effort that Joshua Sbicca describes as providing labor in whatever ways are most useful to resource-strapped organizations (2015: 66).

The difficulties I faced following the revised study design show the challenges of centering community needs. Every aspect of the research project took far longer than expected, but over the course of three years, I gathered fascinating information about the UWFP and how different organizations had been involved in the work. I learned more about the ways that EJ efforts in the three cities overlapped and also differed. I learned about the complexity of more recent EJ activism and the worlds of professional activism, along with challenges like organizations deciding speaks best for a vulnerable community. These takeaways were of particular interest to the groups with whom I had contact—just as my original EJ "consultants" had predicted.

I worked to incorporate community feedback at every stage of the research project, from my data collection to my analysis and writing. The research was therefore an iterative, participatory process; I shared early findings with UWFP community partners and let their feedback shape my work. For example, I had lunch with an EJ organizer in summer of 2019 and ran my findings by her. She pointed out the analyses that seemed to make sense, based on what she had seen, along with what surprised her and what seemed odd or out of place. Whenever possible, I followed up with interviewees, explained what I had been seeing in other places and asked them for their perspectives on my takeaways thus far. I considered EJ community groups my accountability partners, especially because of the awareness of extractivist research they had been exposed to. I also presented my findings to professionals in regulatory spaces who were not based in affected communities. I spoke to staff members at the EPA and with a group of watershed management employees. These conversations also helped me in my analysis. By the end of my dissertation fieldwork, I had professional relationships with a few community organizations that felt mutually beneficial. In some cases, I had made connections with individuals who expressed interest in future collaborations.

C. Conclusion:

1. Limits of, and tensions within, some qualitative approaches

Stories from individuals like Cathy and those I interviewed in Atlanta suggest that researchers have the potential to retraumatize participants. Additionally, EJ researchers may be especially likely to enter into spaces of trauma. I, like other researchers, was

incentivized to go to the apparent heart of the struggle and try to document stories from the frontline. Yet this interest in making the vulnerable visible likely always holds some complexities. For one, researchers might assume they have individuals' best interests in mind and that the act of participation is a sign of consent. The institutional review board (IRB)-related language that researchers consider when getting approval does not focus on more hard-to-see vulnerabilities like consequences of environmental trauma. Researchers are told to ensure that participants will not be subject to the loss of employment, negative political repercussions, or social judgment. Such awareness requires understanding the complexity of PTSD itself.

Given all the evidence above, qualitative methodologies that consider effects of various types of trauma seem crucial to EJ studies. The importance of this consideration is particularly the case for studies involving focus groups and in-person interviews. Such methodologies would require that researchers ask themselves whether interviews with particular social groups include risks to their general welfare. Better options that would reduce the risk of exposing participants to dysregulation, dissociation, or other PTSD-related distresses are clearly possible, as demonstrated by my own research experience. Alternatively, researchers can simply choose to ask different research questions and/or work with different populations. My own version of this methodology meant that I avoided research "subjects" with acute exposure to traumas that were both physical and psychological. This choice was necessary given my inability to hire additional collaborators, among other considerations. However, other trauma-sensitive methodologies might include hiring community liaisons, community-based researchers/interviewers. Instead of arguing for a trauma-sensitive blueprint, I underscore the need for methodologies that take trauma research seriously into praxis.

As I have shown, researchers have the potential to reproduce systemic violence (see Cordner et al. 2012: 162). EJ scholars should consider this potential when working with populations that have suffered environmental violence. EJ scholars may need to go further than simply explaining their positionality and committing to public engagement and action research. EJ researchers would be better equipped to ask what particular positionalities can—and cannot—bring to the projects of knowledge-building and forwarding EJ goals. Put simply, the trauma-sensitive approaches would develop aspects of CBPR and other reflexive orientations for improved application in EJ research.

2. *Need for more critical discourse on EJ methods*

By the time I approached my dissertation fieldwork, I had had multiple endeavors in qualitative methods, particularly in ethnography. I was not a stranger to the complexity of qualitative fieldwork and the potential for ethical dilemmas while in the field. I had had to negotiate with government representatives in Vietnam, been in ideological arguments with NGOs in Tanzania, and weighed the risks of sharing select findings with journalists in New

Zealand. These experiences—along with previous training in action research (AR) and community-based participatory research—made me feel I was relatively prepared to think critically in my dissertation fieldwork about my positionality, about power relations between researcher and subject, and about ways I could disseminate my findings appropriately and respectfully. And yet I was largely wrong: activists reminded me that my simply going into homes, especially given the nature of the research work that had been conducted before me, could be unwelcome and invasive, if not a form of the violence previously described. I was forced to ask whether it was more important for me to prove that I could talk past my whiteness and affluence and find common ground, or whether I take the most trauma-sensitive approach. In the end, I found I needed to shed my attachment to certain methods and recognize I was deferring to what felt comfortable, not what was actually the most appropriate for the setting and for the population.

In my research experience, I also realized I needed to truly consider whether I was making my choices of methods based on my interest in getting the "tough" stories. As a colleague of mine mused, sometimes our research seems more "real" when we are close to the suffering—we might take it as a signal that we are doing something right[26]. Also, my training[27] in qualitative methods had underscored the limits of "hit-and-run ethnographies" (see Geertz 1973). When faced with the message from people in Atlanta that I should not interview certain groups and I should not live near or in the affected community, I wondered how I would get close to the stories I thought were most important. This revealed two biases. The first was the belief that I was equipped and suited to gather *anyone's* story. I came to see these presumptions as problematic, noting for example that my educational capital, race, and class position had led me to believe that I had a right to do certain work. The second research bias was that the most authentic and compelling stories about the impact of the UWFP would come from those most directly affected by the everyday plight of environmental injustice. This presumption was in part based on my education on the EJ movement having been shaped by stories about the most oppressed fighting back. In conceptualizing the history of the environmental justice movement, my mind always went to the compelling scenes of direct action like those of low-income, nonwhite citizens laying their bodies down in front of trucks ready to dump toxic waste on their communities. These galvanizing types of stories were the ones I wanted to hear, gather, and share. Over time I saw this desire was coming more from my own interest in being witness to and documentarian of "the thick of the pain," in the words of one interviewee, than from the understanding that I was in fact needed in particular spaces, or asked to do specific work.

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[26] This observation comes from personal correspondence with anthropologist Dana Powell.

[27] This first training was as an undergraduate student in cultural anthropology, which influenced my orientation on ethnography.

After landing in Atlanta, I realized that the aforementioned training and the previous experiences still left me desirous of frameworks for thinking through particular frictions. I also recognized that much of the literature in EJ studies was guiding me towards procedures that checked a lot of the CBPR/AR boxes but still could venture into the potential for re-traumatization. Therefore, my epiphany in the field was that reformulated conceptualization of EJ—namely that environmental injustice yields compound traumas that should inform practice—was key to my being able to navigate challenges and incorporate community feedback.

My experience ultimately was akin that of other white researchers like sociologist Joshua Sbicca, who describes his going into a space of nonwhite activists at a People's Grocery and being told that his questions were important, but that he should be able to articulate how his work was going to serve more than himself (2015). Sbicca's advice for food justice scholars contemplating fieldwork ethics is to engage with the idea of "sweat equity" (labor solidarity); the case I present on EJ-as-trauma is similarly in the hopes of providing more tools for future researchers.

And so, this case study points to the underlying need for more scholarly discussion of insights and innovations in EJ methods. EJ studies pulls from a number of disciplines/fields, including public policy studies, epidemiology, law, sociology, anthropology and geography. In part because of the range of disciplinary trainings from which researchers draw, EJ studies needs more critical review of diverse methods researchers employ. Specifically, more analysis of the merits and potential limitations of approaches to qualitative methods is necessary.

3. Moving forward with trauma-sensitive approaches

Increased discussions of trauma-sensitive approaches would be a productive addition to qualitative methods for EJ researchers. Considering trauma at every stage of the research project would be fruitful for those looking to resolve the tensions I explored in the introduction to this paper. As explained, EJ studies benefits from the continued inclusion of qualitative case studies. However, complaints from communities and damaging historical practices from research institutions should be integrated into future approaches. Researchers doing interviews and other related types of fieldwork should consider what those before them have done and ask what community members' previous experiences with research institutions have been and how future research could better serve communities. In considering data collection methods, a trauma-sensitive approach would consider pitfalls of particular choices in terms of negative impact for local populations. Maybe insensitive projects have occurred before, maybe those directly affected by environmental violences are weary of being asked to explain lived experiences, and/or maybe the researcher themselves is representative of populations that do harm. This

orientation would further build on reflexive, relational efforts that CBPR models advocate and remind researchers that ethical practice depends on local politics, dynamics of diverse populations, and histories. For example, sometimes staying in a community as a temporary neighbor to gather information on daily struggles might be appropriate; ethnographic approaches might be ideal. At times, this type of presence is even requested, as it was for me when I did other research studies. In other circumstances, such as the ones I experienced in my fieldwork, living as a short-term resident could remind locals that the affluent can come and go as they please[28].

I have drawn on research on PTSD and the limits of talk therapy to reinforce that researchers might assume that explaining an experience is cathartic, while in fact it might lead to anguish. It is easy to find scholarly narratives on the power of storytelling—e.g. as countering patriarchal oppression (McNamara 2009); this case study invites questions about how stories are gathered and whether this process is in fact innately liberating for subjects. If researchers consider data from psychology studies on trauma treatment, those in academia might recognize that "talking out" the traumas are sometimes more for the benefit of researchers. Given this claim that narrating one's trauma could actually be damaging, especially for those who understand clearly the violence they have been through, then it seems clear that the stories are more for outsiders' understanding of impacts of environmental injustice's many violences. Thus, researchers need to face the difficult introspective question of whether particular research motivations are selfish, even if well-intentioned. Of course, more should be known about the lingering impacts of structural oppression, and the ways that EJ activism today is including more on mental health. But this work should be done with special care and, as much as possible, in collaboration with trusted community member liaisons or "gatekeepers[29]." It is reasonable to assume that part of the reason more activists are saying they want to be "gatekeepers" for research projects is in part because of the potential harm they see for those who have been through tremendous trauma.

A more trauma-sensitive approach is arguably a challenging route for many researchers. In my personal experience, the qualitative data collection process for the UWFP study was far more frustrating than any previous research endeavor. The remote nature of the work made the establishing trust take far longer than expected, and I believe I had far more doors closed on me than would have been the case were I more often on site. I had to let go of a bit of my ego in the reframing process. I was looking forward to "breakthrough" moments that, in my experience, single-site ethnography had allowed for, moments in which the subject and researcher found common ground. I had experienced such moments

[28] Hence the merit of having researchers be those who live in community and/or have familial or other personal connections to the affected site. As discussed, none of these qualifiers describe me when it comes to Proctor Creek or even water injustice more broadly.

[29] Discussion of the politics of gatekeepers is outside the purview of this paper, but part of the territory for which I'm advocating more scholarly investigations.

in places like Dar es Salaam and in the Mekong Delta, where I had seen individuals shed their skepticism of me and we found some sense of camaraderie. And yet I was told in Atlanta that forcing this type of moment would be intrusive, especially given that I had nothing to actually fix on-site regarding water blights. These reflections connect to the idea that ethical practice is not just community-oriented and reflexive, but also contextual.

While EJ activists I consulted cautioned certain approaches to research, all of these interviewees told me there was plenty of work for academics to do to serve community groups. The EJ movement may be in "2.0" stages and/or second—even third—waves, and EJ scholarship is similarly going through evolutions (see Carter 2014, Pellow 2016, 2018). New directions in EJ scholarship are necessary to match the complex, and some contradictory new dimensions of EJ struggles, e.g. tensions between EJ organizations (see Harrison 2015). My experience in the field suggests that community groups still need, and are asking for, academics to document phenomena and share information on findings with communities. The qualitative case study is still relevant in both the critical literature and in applied action for communities marginalized by environmental injustice. However, improved methodologies and more tools for ethical orientations are needed for these studies to do less harm. Conceptualizing environmental injustice as collective violence that creates trauma can help researchers begin to build such skill-sets.

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Conclusion

1. Enduring lessons from Warren County, North Carolina

I introduced this dissertation with a story from the most recent political turn within the EPA: Mustafa Santiago Ali's departure from the agency in 2017. I conclude with a vignette from the EPA's part incarnations. Taken together, these stories show the ways that activists working against, within, and outside the Environmental Protection Agency have contemplated the role of the state, and its relation to activists, in regards to forwarding environmental justice.

About a year into my dissertation research, I ran into a family acquaintance in Atlanta, and I told him what I was working on in the city. He asked if I knew he had been involved in the Warren County, North Carolina incident in 1982. I had not, and I was delightfully surprised by my luck in running into a witness from that time. This event is widely considered one of the seminal political moments in the nascent movement and some even call the Warren County struggle the "birthplace of EJ" (see Alkon and Agyeman 2011, Bullard 1990, Chavis 1993, Cole and Foster 2001). At first, I expected George would say he was among the protestors, since I knew him as a public servant who had been involved in civil rights mobilizations in the Southeast in the 1960s. However, George said he actually was working for the EPA at that time.

George and I ended up talking for hours about his recollections from working in the 1970s and 1980s in community organizing and environmental planning. I had read about Warren County countless times in articles and books. The episode even shows up on the EPA's website in its visual timeline of the EJ movement and I use the story of early EJ protests in my undergraduate college classes on environmental justice. Yet George's telling made me realize I and others might have missed interesting nuances of the political moment. These details link to broader analyses from my dissertation.

At the time of the Warren County incident, George was a community-relations specialist in the EPA's Region 4 office of public affairs. In 1978, he and others in the regional EPA learned that employees from the Ward Transformer Company had been secretly dumping toxic fluids in rural areas neighboring the manufacturing site. This illegal disposal was in the effort to avoid costs of complying with EPA waste recycling standards. Details of the illicit activity showed the contempt the company's owners had for environmental regulation and public health: the discharged polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) were known to cause cancers and birth defects. Company employees had driven around at night and released PCBs suspended in oil on to public roads (*New York Times* 1982). George explained that the owner of Ward Transformer and his accomplices were fined and sent to prison for breaking environmental law, but the problem remained of what to do with so

much contaminated earth. Among many concerns, wind could blow PCB-laden soil into residents' backyard. The toxins needed to be contained. The eventual decision by the EPA was to gather the polluted soil and create a landfill. It was the siting of this landfill, not the clean-up of toxins and enforcement of lawbreakers, that became the subject of the noteworthy community-led protests. Warren County was at the time majority African-American and low-income. Residents complained that the placement of a toxic waste dump would only further disincentivize economic prosperity in the areas, as property values would go down. Community groups argued that the proposed landfill was yet another burden imposed by the state and a sign of ongoing underdevelopment of the area (see Frank 1966, Marable 1983).

George expressed sympathy for those who decried the landfill. He agreed the siting was problematic, especially for an area dependent on agricultural production. He felt unable to be part of securing alternatives, and so he told me he tried to work as a community liaison, communicating the possibilities for court action and for ensuring containment of the hazards. Snippets of the transcribed interview provide insights into the particular conflicts George's felt.

TP: The episode has been referred to as a watershed moment in the emergent of the environmental justice movement and as a key example of environmental racism. Did you feel at time that the landfill was racist?

George: I think environmental racism was certainly behind the illegal dumping. The owners—the man and his sons and his employees—they were White and they didn't live in the places where they drove around. They went under...the cover of night and sprayed this super poisonous material on all the roads. Of course, they must have known this stuff would seep into the ground or not stay in place. It was oil and so their argument when they were caught was it was heavy and would stay put, but—they would never do that in their own backyard and obviously they knew it was illegal for a reason. The landfill was a problem, but it was the best solution at the time given all the other options.

You have to understand, this all started unfolding about eight years into the EPA's [creation by Nixon]. Many of us were coming from community organizing and were still trying to figure out how to get different levels of government to work together. It was a good thing that regulations were beginning to keep companies and corporations in line—remember we didn't use to have any regulations on this kind of thing at all, it was like the Wild West. We held people accountable and enforced code. That was good. I think it became a problem when the landfill was mismanaged by the state of North Carolina. We need controlled waste sites. That's part of the issue. We need multiple agencies in government to work together and make sure everything is up to code and that the codes are strong.

...I and others pushed for there to be more studies on how many landfills were in African-American communities...we actually partnered with activists to publish these results. We wanted more of this conversation, we needed communities to come together and help us push the federal government to do better and we all as citizens needed to hold representatives accountable to their constituents.

Later in our conversation I asked George what he had made of the protests.

George: Oh, I actually knew many of the protestors and wanted them to show up—I knew they would should up. They were friends. I knew...they were likely going to get arrested by police. And so, I called up a few people and told them that they'd be arrested and told them the jail where they'd likely be taken, so friends could pick them up. We made a plan for the bail...we figured out how we would pick everyone up from the jail and have money for bail. The protest was very important and the push back necessary to make particular issues visible. And I worked to make sure people could prepare, we worked together. Everyone had their role.

Since leaving the EPA in the 1980s, George continued to be involved in efforts to mitigate environmental burdens, primarily in public works and nonprofit sectors. He worked for advocacy groups focused on transportation equity, served as a consultant for Atlanta's sanitation management, and advised public libraries in climate change "drawdown" strategies. George's stories from experiences inside and outside government re-emphasized two salient themes from my research findings: first, the demand for more enforcement by the EPA and second, the importance of EPA community liaisons.

He and others I interviewed over two years of research on the UWFP resoundingly agreed that the EPA—along with state and city entities—needed improved enforcement. George and other respondents provided me with numerous examples of how private companies and development projects had been allowed to skirt regulations. This finding on the enduring importance of enforcement connects with claims on other EJ researchers (Konisky 2005, Harrison 2017, 2019); in other words, this finding is not especially new. However, underscoring this ongoing request is still worthwhile for two reasons. First, community voices are clear: more enforcement would be more helpful than increased matching grants and opportunities to work with the EPA in big "visioning" projects. Case studies within this dissertation have argued that the UWFP was crafted under the presumption that increased community participation and collaboration between EJ organizations would break through barriers. But many of the ongoing issues communities face seem fixable by a combination of improved oversight and better monitoring of hazards. The promise of participation has been oversold, as I have argued throughout this dissertation. In fact, the UWFP can be viewed as a distraction from the basic purpose of the

EPA. The agency still falls short on the monitoring and compliance enforcement work for which it was founded in the 1970s.

I interpret data on the UWFP as evidence that this EPA project worked to appease communities while displacing the focus on the state's poor public services. Water injustice in the United States is frequently a story of crumbling infrastructure, shrinking state/city environmental management budgets, as well as insufficient monitoring, as those covering the Flint water crisis will attest (Clark 2018, Smith and Friedman 2018) Given all this, UWFP's inability to deliver on the assurance of opening up government resources for community groups is especially distressing. People suffering from environmental injustices almost always need the state to invest in improved public services.

The second argument that George's tale reiterates is the merit of linkages between community groups and government agency workers. George's description of calling up protestors facing arrest struck me as remarkable. He knew he could not prevent the landfill; he understood the government rationale and that this could not be changed overnight. But he was not complacent about the unjust nature of the siting, and he saw the vital role citizen-led protest had in pushing for accountability and better practice. So, he worked during his time at the EPA to have community voices affect change. There are others like George in the EPA today, though many are thwarted by politics within the agency (see Harrison 2017, 2019). Those fighting for environmental justice in their communities need EPA staff who believe in their cause, who will be on the "frontlines" together, and who can do the important work of communicating key information across divides. For years I have heard community groups ask for better access to crucial expertise and assistance from experts in particular ways. No EJ activist with whom I have spoken has ever diminished the organizing power of their community peers, but many have recognized the need for strategic alliances with experts. The collaborations of the UWFP did not turn out to be fruitful unions, but every interviewee that denounced the partnership said they still wanted to figure out how to access certain resources. This finding connects to arguments against the "bootstraps" approach and towards the need for conceptualizing resourcefulness, or processes by which communities can foster links to spaces with different resources than their own and mend uneven resource distribution (MacKinnon and Derickson: 2012). More individuals who can work as liaisons across different spaces of EJ—from the legal system to the regulatory spaces to civil society organizing—are needed in order to boost resourcefulness in affected communities. Such individuals are also crucial for trust-building between EJ organizations of different capacities, e.g. the grasstops and grassroots.

Ongoing lessons from places like Warren County also complicate a few of the conclusions found in critical EJ scholarship, namely that working with/within the state is in in essence

counterproductive. These particular arguments in critical EJ studies advocate anti-statist approaches (see Pellow and Brulle 2005, Pellow 2016, Pellow 2018, Pulido et al 2016). I draw on two specific versions of these positions in order to unpack the limitations of particular conceptual binaries, and to push for a different type of reckoning with the disappointments with state engagement.

2. Engagements ahead: (more) productive forms of counter-statism

Two articles published in 2016, one by sociologist David Pellow and the other by Laura Pulido, Ellen Kohl and Nicole-Marie Cotton, suggest that an anti-statist stance is the viable way forward for the EJ movement. Pulido et al list numerous strategies for working with the state that have not delivered structural change, from litigation in the US court system to collaboration in EPA projects. They write:

> "Instead of seeing the state as a helpmate or partner, [the EJ movement] needs to see the state as an adversary and directly challenge it. While the early EJ movement did this, over the decades it has been increasingly co-opted by the state and lost much of its oppositional content. It can regain its radical position by not only challenging the state, but refusing to participate in regulatory charades." [Pulido et al 2016: 27]

David Pellow similarly argues that,

> "The state has managed, included, excluded, homogenized, and controlled humans and nonhuman natures for the benefit of a small elite. That should be reason enough to consider the merits of an anarchist or anti-authoritarian approach to socioecological change." [2016: 233]

These statements are compelling and my findings support conclusions that some EPA programs represent cooptation and are the "regulatory charades" Pulido et al describe. It is important for EJ scholars to note elitist impetuses for ongoing de-radicalization. Also, these arguments propel EJ scholars to conceptualize environmental injustice and sluggish state action as continuations of state negligence and violence. In Chapter 3, I explained the merit of this type of EJ conceptualization. However, these statements can also promote binaries that are of less practical use to today's activists and EJ scholars. It is unhelpful to conceive the choices by community groups to work with the EPA on issues like water quality as being merely de-radicalized and acquiescent. Work on water justice issues quickly reveals the necessity of expert knowledge; even radical activists like "water warriors" with whom I spoke acknowledged this. Cathy, the organizer in Flint, Michigan, fights every day against state agencies that allowed her city to be poisoned. Yet she told me that Flint residents like her need more help from environmental engineers, public health servants and other

professionals, including within the EPA. As Cathy explained to me, she has needed experts to help her and others understand concerns like THHMs—trihalomethanes—in water. How, she asked me, was she supposed to know about these invisible toxins? Her points link to arguments that language of "resiliency" can actually be legitimization for the absence of state-based investments and clean-up; Cathy and her community are resourceful and asking for particular forms of solidarity building with those in spaces of knowledge and power (see MacKinnon and Derickson: 2012). The anti-statism espoused by Pulido et al's and Pellow's imagination seem to ignore these nuances. Also, while Pulido et al thoroughly (and aptly) detail disappointments of certain strategies of state engagement, they do not offer a pathway forward beyond the statement that the movement should "confront" the state (2016: 27). What this type of confrontation looks like is unclear.

Interesting, both articles from Pulido et al (2016) and Pellow (2016) engage with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social movement, but towards different conclusions. The contrasting ways BLM is employed by each article might point to the flaws in the anti-statism binary. Pulido et al states that the EJ movement should:

> "..take a page from Black Lives Matter. It's not about being respectable, acknowledged, and included. It's about raising hell for both polluters and the agencies that protect them" (2016: 27).

On the other hand, Pellow argues that the EJ movement *and* BLM should stop their shared reliance on state-based solutions:

> "BLM demands... [indicate] the movement's willingness to expand troubling, controlling, authoritative, and is therefore not asking how we might build safe communities *beyond* the state, but rather how we might do so with *greater* state intervention. BLM co-founder [Patrisse] Cullors' vision of social change includes a plan to 'divest from policing and divest from this prison system . . . and reinvest into poor communities, reinvest into allowing us to have access to healthy food, access to jobs, access to shelter' [Pellow 2016: 230, cf Cullors 2015]

As evident here, both anti-statist proponents engage with BLM's strategies, but with different interpretations of what is at play. Of course, varying interpretations are possible when BLM and EJ are complex social movements with many facets and scales of interventions and strategies. But these reflections by Pulido et al and Pellow also unearth the shortcomings of condensing all strategies for state-based changes as "statist" and activists who advocate for such changes as not being radical enough. Though I appreciate their significant contributions to critical EJ literature, I simply disagree with these authors on the underlying conclusion about state engagement. Or, perhaps my conception of an

anti-statism that would serve EJ proponents is different. In the effort to build on their work, I argue for a more beneficial anti-, or counter-, statism and caution other forms that could in fact usher in problematic alternatives, e.g. water privatization. I contrast these two forms of anti-statism that scholars and activists alike might adopt as being either 1. productive or 2. undermining.

In my conception, an *undermining* form anti-statism would reject any state-based reforms outright. This position is simply not feasible for millions of residents in the United States who are affected by degraded waterways. Such a stance would require the kind of citizen-led science that is disempowering, one that demands low-income people be even more lacking in time wealth and burdened to do extra (unpaid) labor. As geographers MacKinnon and Derickson point out, this type of "self-determination" approach would align with those in favor of gutting social services and promoting privatization. After all, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has used the argument of state services being ineffective in order to de-fund public schooling and promote privatized alternatives; education scholars show such reforms hurt the poor (see Rooks 2017). Using this analogy, one can see the danger of adopting rigid anti-statist stances in environmental justice advocacy. Underserved communities could potentially face only private options for improvement strategies if their own under-resourced efforts fall short. As an additional rebuttal to the strict anti-statism, we might look to some of the current campaigns by BLM and prison abolitionists. Pellow (2016) seems to qualify aspects of fights for "greater state interventions" as problematic, yet these can be among the more revolutionary. When activists like prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) argue for an end to the prison system as we know it, they envision reinvestments in social services. The case is the same for those calling for de-militarized, de-funded police. These latter positions, stances that promote reinvestment in social welfare, are more beneficial for low-income people of color than anti-statist ones that reject state-based interventions.

So, what would a more productive anti-statism look like? For one, anti-statism that assists the EJ movement would integrate lessons from the EPA's past failures and instill these in new generations of EJ organizers. Activists would be wise to not take for granted that the EPA is on their side. Organizers would benefit from awareness that political appointments can quickly change the terrain of possibility. EPA staff are more likely to be ephemeral and unreliable, thus expecting such staff to mimic the roles of organizer will probably end in frustration for all. Yet in spite of many downsides of collaboration with the EPA, there are always possibilities for interactions that yield more positive outcomes. Jill Harrison's research on dynamics inside the agency conclude with a list of places for improvement, and each of these takes into account constraints of *both* the EPA and underserved communities (2019: 210-219). As examples, Harrison argues for more staff and also robust training in EJ and her model for improved participation and outreach complements my concerns about

participation's perils. She argues that the EPA should not simply ask more citizens be pulled on to projects. Instead Harrison advocates for more transparent decision-making processes, skills and resource sharing, improved communication between experts and community members, and investments in longer, more meaningful relationships in communities (2019: 212). Additionally, her foci for reform include better permitting, increased accountability for projects, and, in alliance with my findings, awareness of the need for enforcement. These goals align with what I consider an anti-business-as-usual stance, one that pushes not anti-state positions but for a re-envisioned EPA that centers its work on equity.

As Harrison herself notes, regulatory reforms would curtail some of the worst aspects of capitalist development, but "regulatory agencies cannot fulfill that task alone" (2019: 219). An "emancipatory future" requires a suite of new practices, changed policies, and interconnected social movement strategies (ibid). These efforts to re-visit the social contract with the state are all around us in the United States at present, from discourse on police brutality to the crises of inadequate healthcare. The interconnected campaigns are for a different state, not for existence without one. The productive anti/counter state position affords scholars and activist healthy skepticism without promoting binaries that reduce all campaigns for a better state as being doomed from the start.

3. Voices of hope, and caution, from institutionalization

The arc of US history shows that the impacts of EJ organizing have been remarkable and numerous. When President Nixon founded the EPA, environmental justice was not part of many people's lexicon, the trove of EJ-related research did not exist, and EJ-focused organizations were far fewer in number. The movement has fundamentally changed the way many think about environmental change, economic development, racial inequality, and poverty. EJ as an idea made it all the way to the executive branch of the government (in the Clinton administration), it became the subject of myriad conferences, professional certification programs, and it has engendered a broad range of programming changes in organizations, governments, and private spheres.

That all noted, the institutionalization of EJ may not have had a huge impact on reducing the uneven and ongoing burdens low-income people of color face (Carter 2014: 8, Pellow and Brulle 2005). Plus, institutionalized EJ may have in fact bred new problems for the movement, by fostering a glut of EJ organizations in competition for limited funds and decentering power away from the grassroots. But dismissing institutionalization as the "deepening of the neoliberal project" (see Holifield 2004) misses some of the finer complexities of reasons EJ activists wanted more state recognition and incorporation in the first place. Some of the hopes have been realized: institutionalization has encouraged a rise

in educational initiatives and outreach. This year, many policymakers and journalists were able to connect the mortality rates of COVID-19 to patterns of environmental and health discrimination. This fact is in part because of EJ claims being mainstreamed and incorporated into spaces like the Department of Justice and Centers for Disease Control[30]. Still, the major constraints on deep transformation I and other have documented suggest that this form of institutionalization is not working overall and should be reconceived. Harrison's latest book (2019) presents threads for what this reformed EPA might look like; this conversation needs to continue between scholars, activists, and other proponents of EJ.

EJ may continue to be at a crossroads, one that reflects the complexity of moving from the descriptive phase of a social movement to an "integration" of EJ phase. As I was told by an interviewee, the EJ movement has gone through decades of a descriptive phase, one in which activists were trying to explain why a certain set of concerns should be taken seriously. Then, sometimes movements "win" in some senses of the word. The respondent told me he thought that when movements move more into the so-called mainstream, they reckon with questions of what compromise means, and what scales of action are necessary—these are questions about the integration of a movement. So, as EJ grapples with the dilemmas of integrating EJ, more critical scholarship is needed in solidarity with activists who are debating these compromises, strategic directions forward, and the shape of the freedom struggle to come.

Afterword: Reflection on directions in (critical) EJ studies and applied outcomes

More EJ scholarship today is focused on the Global South and connects various environmental movements together, like EJ and degrowth efforts (see Martínez-Alier 2012, 2014). These literatures are often exciting for EJ scholars, as the international efforts to document and map disproportionate burdens around the globe provide us researchers with more data and understanding of interconnected struggles. These projects help deepen our grasp of complexities of development and can provide platforms for connecting activists across the world. At the same time, the "global view" of environmental justice that some scholars take (see Scheidel et al 2020) can rely on a few key assumptions that might lead to analytical issues. Writing from "global EJ" scholars like Schiedel et al (2020), who are working to conceptualize many different movements across space and time, often collapses diverse efforts together. This homogenizing raises intellectual problems, as I showed in Chapter 2. Therefore, I wonder about the downsides of globalizing EJ in the style of Joan Martínez-Alier's "EJ Atlas" project and others. Plus, these literatures were less

[30] Discussion of the incorporation of EJ into other departmental agencies was outside the scope of this dissertation. However, in my preliminary research I was able to speak to some individuals who had worked in agencies like the DOJ when the Clinton executive order went into effect and get a sense of the impacts of institutionalization across agencies.

helpful for me as I processed my findings, especially when I needed theories for grasping the in-fighting between US-based EJ organizations.

As I imagine next directions for my EJ research, I am delving less into global EJ literature and more into fields like American Studies. Scholarship on the dynamics of the US civil rights movement and other Black freedom struggles has given me insights for answering my lingering questions. Doug McAdam's (1986) case study of the 1964 "freedom summer" provides analytic tools for making sense of today's EJ landscape, e.g. the grasstops/grassroots friction I have discussed. McAdam's theory of high-risk/low-risk activism could be useful for EJ scholars exploring the "cleavages" I and others describe (see Harrison 2015, also Jenkins and Eckert 1986). EJ researchers might also engage with literature on the many conundrums of federally-mandated integration for inspiration beyond the state/anti-state binary (see Walker 1996, 2018). The scholarship evaluating the history of the federal "war on poverty" in the US would similarly shed light on potential for, and limits of, state-based reforms. This is all to say that I see intellectual benefit in retaining some conceptual focus on EJ as rooted in—and as a continuation of—Black freedom struggles in the United States.

At this juncture, I am still working to fully realize my hopes regarding the applied aspects of this project. My goal is to publish findings from this dissertation not only in academic journals but also as pieces for the public. I have already done public discussions of my findings with activists in Atlanta, GA, and debriefed with some community groups, and I hope to be able to do more of this work in the year to follow. I have spoken to individual EPA staff about my results and recommendations, but I would like to have a discussion with a larger group of staff within the agency. The hope is that the results of these case studies can be useful for EJ activists' strategic reassessments and considerations of future engagements.

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