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# Environmental Justice Discomfort and Disconnect in IBM's Tainted Birthplace: A Micropolitical Ecology Perspective

*Peter C. Little*

## Introduction

The “toxic time bomb” of the so-called “green” high-tech industry is no longer a secret. Today, “[h]igh-tech pollution is a fact of life wherever the industry has operated for any length of time, from Malaysia to Massachusetts” (Siegel and Markoff 1985, 163), and so is resistance to high-tech toxic disaster. Since at least the late 1970s, electronics workers, academics, and environmental justice and labor rights activists have “challenged the chip” industry (Smith, Sonnenfeld, and Pellow 2006; see also Pellow and Sun-Hee Park 2003). Their struggle exposed not only the toxic externalities of microelectronic modernization, but also the emergence of red-green counter movements marked by both subtle and overt ecopolitical and ecosocialist aims.

This article explores how high-tech toxics activism unfolded and continues to unfold in the Rust Belt community of Endicott, New York, the birthplace of International Business Machines Corporation (IBM). I aim to speak to recent efforts by political ecologists “to mine First World case materials for rich new insights” (Schroeder, Martin, and Albert 2006) and to generate discussion of the micropolitical ecology<sup>1</sup> of environmental justice. With a nod to the insights of emerging First World political ecology research and theory (McCarthy 2002, 2005), another goal is to mesh First World political ecology and environmental justice studies. Their synthesis matters because “both are explicitly normative, focused on the intersections of multiple forms of marginality and vulnerability, and critical of the undue narrowness of many mainstream environmental discourses and agendas” (McCarthy 2005, 955). I draw on ethnographic research<sup>2</sup> to illustrate activists’ feelings of discomfort and disconnect with environmental justice politics and activism.

<sup>1</sup>I define micropolitical ecology as a critical approach to ecopolitical and environmental social movement theory that honors the complexities of activism identity, alliance, and the intersubjective reality of righteous pluralist politics.

<sup>2</sup>While my anthropological research in Endicott began much earlier (Little 2003), the ethnographic data presented here were collected in 2008–2009 as part of a dissertation project funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation’s Decision, Risk, and Management Sciences Program (Little 2010). I conducted in-depth interviews with local activists (n=12) to learn about their lived experience and involvement in the IBM-Endicott contamination controversy. To protect the identity of my informants, I use pseudonyms for all the activists I discuss here.

In this way, the narratives presented here illustrate interruptions and slippage in collective identity processing brought on by a combination of activists' struggles over meaning (Eyerman and Jamison 1991) and, in some cases, racial politics. While the environmental justice movement has had a very brief historical run, the number of studies examining grassroots conceptions of environmental justice is certainly on the upswing (Capek 1993; Bullard 1994; Szasz 1994; Cable and Shriver 1995; Novotny 1995; Di Chiro 1995; Harvey 1996; Lake 1996; Pulido 1996; Epstein 1997; Sandwiess 1998; Schlosberg 1999, 2004; McGurty 2000; Pellow 2000; Taylor 2000; Kurtz 2002; Checker 2005; Spears 2004, 2006). Still in the making, contemporary theories of environmental justice are incomplete, and movements themselves are often mediated by "repertoires of action" (Hess 2007), leaving researchers engaged in a negotiation with a complex terrain of "dense webs of already existing representations" (Marcus 1999, 23). In Endicott, for example, investigative journalists from outside the community helped popularize the issue (Grossman 2006; Gramza 2009), and on several occasions my informants explained to me that these journalists do a good job of telling the story of their struggle. But, as is always the case, certain micropolitics lack attention or go under the radar. I intend here to bring such politics or hidden discourses, especially racial politics, to the surface, not just because my ethnographic research revealed this contentious discourse, but also because such micropolitical description is commonly overlooked even within righteous ecopolitical and ecosocialist studies.

I rely on ethnographic description to critically assess contemporary alliance politics amid an ever-changing "environment of justice" (Harvey 1996). Echoing Sen's insight that "we can have a strong sense of injustice on many different grounds, and yet not agree on one particular ground as being *the* dominant reason for the diagnosis of injustice" (2009, 2, his emphasis), this article aims to invoke discussion of the contested grounding of intra-activist relations and local diagnoses of and discomfort with environmental justice as a stimulus for action.

The micropolitical ecology of the environmental justice alliance analyzed here invokes questions that could apply to red-green politics elsewhere. When non-environmental justice activists meet environmental justice activists and are challenged to employ "environmental justice" to re-think and re-articulate their struggle with industrial contamination, what do these activists say? How do they interpret this intra-activist relationship and navigate their confusion with the term *environmental justice*? How is environmental justice negotiated on the ground and amid complex intra-activist relations? These are the guiding questions and foci of the ethnographic analysis presented here. Ultimately, these questions aim to contribute to the so-called "micropolitical ecology" (Neumann and Schroeder 1995; Jewitt 2008; Horowitz 2008) of environmental justice (see Checker's article, this issue) by examining interpretations of environmental justice *within* alliance situations, intersubjective zones of unsettled advocacy and intentionality that entangle people, meaning, and the logics of environmental justice "for all."

## A Brief History of IBM and Neoliberalism in Endicott

Endicott, New York, like other deindustrializing Rust Belt communities in the U.S., has experienced moments of boom and bust, capital accumulation, and “neoliberal creative destruction” (Harvey 2007). The International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), under the leadership of Thomas J. Watson, Sr., made Endicott an epicenter of early electronic modernization by building IBM’s “Plant Number One” in Endicott in 1924, after the merger of nearly fifteen companies, the most critical of which were the International Time Recording Company and the Computing-Tabulating-Recording Company. What is today the largest multinational computer and IT consulting corporation, IBM started out in the business of punch-card machines and other time recording technologies for business operations. By the mid 1930s, Endicott was known as “Main Street IBM” (Aswad and Meredith 2005), helping sustain IBM’s role as a critical American corporation in the creation of 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism (Olegario 1997).

Today, IBM manufactures and sells computer hardware and software and provides infrastructure services, hosting services, and consulting services in areas ranging from mainframe computers<sup>3</sup> to nanotechnology and cutting-edge epidemiologic and climate change software. Boosting these products and services is IBM’s most recent tagline, “Let’s Build a Smarter Planet,” yet another fine example of the political ecology of corporate environmental responsibility.

During the Reagan-Thatcher years, Endicott, like many other industry towns in the U.S. Rust Belt region, became a sacrifice zone of neoliberal political economic power, of restructuring built on a promise to restore the region’s high-tech industry, to sustain the regions’ history of technological innovation and to continue the mission to computerize everything for the benefit of everything. This message was made strikingly clear when Ronald Reagan, one the major architects of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005; Graeber 2010), delivered a speech to a crowd of Endicott workers and residents on September 12, 1984 during a Reagan-Bush rally at the local high school football field:

[T]he computer revolution that so many of you helped to start promises to change life on Earth more profoundly than the Industrial Revolution of a century ago . . . Already, computers have made possible dazzling medical breakthroughs that will enable us all to live longer, healthier, and fuller lives. Computers are helping to make our basic industries, like steel and autos, more efficient and better able to compete in the world market. And computers manufactured at IBM . . . guide our space shuttles on their historic missions. You are the people who are making America a rocket of hope, shooting to the stars . . . Today, firms

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<sup>3</sup>Today, mainframe computers host servers used primarily by large organizations, such as universities and government agencies, for critical applications. These include bulk data processing for the census, industry and consumer statistics, and financial transactions, among other applications.

in this valley make not only computers but flight simulators, aircraft parts, and a host of other sophisticated products. (Reagan 1984)

Amid these neoliberal promises of juggernaut growth and innovation, the IBM-Endicott facility, which at one time employed around 13,000, continued to downsize during the 1980s and 1990s, with the plant officially being sold in 2002 to a small IBM spin-off firm, Endicott Interconnect Technologies (EIT). The plant closure was coupled with an equally concerning consequence of IBM production: toxic contamination. Once involved in “making America a rocket of hope,” many residents of Endicott are now making a living in a “contaminated community” (Edelstein 2004).

### From IBM Birthplace to Contested Toxic Space

In addition to being IBM’s birthplace, Endicott is home to a large plume of trichloroethylene (or TCE) and one of the nation’s largest “vapor intrusion” sites. TCE is a chlorinated solvent that was used heavily in the 1960s and 1970s for metal degreasing; it was also commonly used in chip production (Mazurek 1999; Smith, Sonnenfeld, and Pellow 2006). Because of its volatility, TCE can move from groundwater to soil and even vaporize, causing concern about TCE vapors and their impacts on indoor air quality. TCE has been identified in at least 852 of the 1,416 sites proposed for inclusion on the U.S. EPA National Priorities List (Scott and Cogliano 2000), which contain “the most serious sites identified for possible long-term cleanup.”<sup>4</sup>

Starting in the late 1970s, the IBM-Endicott plant had numerous spills of various chlorinated volatile organic compounds, including TCE, into the surrounding environment. While the exact history of “reported” spills remains unclear, what is known is that a TCE plume spanning over 300 acres poses a risk to more than 500 households in the community. Homes above the contaminated groundwater source are at risk for vapor intrusion, a process where volatile compounds migrate into the groundwater source for nearby buildings, including homes, schools, and businesses. The TCE contamination has also raised local concerns about health risks. However, public health agencies, including the New York State Department of Health and the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, have only generated inconclusive reports linking health problems to TCE exposure, which is common with environmental health studies (Little 2009).

Local citizen action surfaced in 2003, shortly after IBM sold its Endicott plant. Two groups, Citizens Acting to Restore Endicott’s Environment (CARE) and the Residents Action Group of Endicott (RAGE), formed and began to prod the state

<sup>4</sup>See <http://www.epa.gov/superfund/cleanup/index.htm>.

and IBM to further investigate the toxic plume IBM was leaving Endicott residents to live with. RAGE acts as a clearinghouse for information on the IBM spill and reports to the community and other stakeholders on health issues, property values, and legal matters. From its inception, RAGE initiated health data collection, environmental research, community education and outreach, and political awareness. While CARE remained a “stakeholder” in the debate, it slowly began to dissipate, as RAGE members began to forge strong political ties<sup>5</sup> with New York political officials, including Hilary Clinton and Eliot Spitzer. RAGE’s members include local teachers, professors, religious leaders and other professionals, making it a diverse group. RAGE has become a strong community advocate, keeping government agencies and political officials committed to the “community’s” cause.

By 2006, RAGE’s founders started to draw back. By then, a class-action lawsuit with nearly 1,000 listed plaintiffs represented by seven attorneys had been filed, and RAGE was relatively happy with the progress it had made. RAGE’s founders were even awarded a prestigious U.S. EPA award for community organizing. The EPA found these activists to be an “eclectic, informed and representative group.” In celebration of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day on April 21, 2005, the EPA gave them an award for the category of outstanding “non-profit, environmental, and community groups.” To better reflect the scope of the local advocacy effort and widen the focus of their advocacy, members of RAGE decided to reform in 2006 and become the Western Broome Environmental Stakeholders Coalition (WBESC). The WBESC was also formed to better organize and consolidate members of RAGE, CARE, and the Alliance@IBM, an IBM employee organization dedicated to protecting and preserving IBM workers’ rights. Despite the earlier recognition of their efforts, members of the WBESC and the Endicott community continue to struggle with uncertainty and doubt, especially regarding the health impacts of living in IBM’s TCE plume.

Environmental justice movements, like all social movements, are messy and volatile in that their “dynamics are overlapping and unruly. They defy boundaries, models, and temporal isolates” (Checker 2005, 34). It is often difficult to pin down what is *in* and what is *out* when discussing struggles for justice that stress problems or *rights* that are very broad in nature (e.g., human rights, rights to a healthy environment, rights to health, etc.). This flexibility has opened up the vision and possibilities of certain social movements, like the contemporary environmental justice movement, which is currently expanding its vision of justice and who in fact qualifies for these struggles for justice:

The solution to environmental injustice lies in the realm of equal protection of all individuals, groups, and communities. No community, rich or poor, urban or suburban, black or white, should be made into a sacrifice zone or dumping ground... The environmental justice movement challenges toxic colonialism,

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<sup>5</sup>This was done with the help of a RAGE member who eventually became a state assemblywoman.

environmental racism, the international toxics trade, economic blackmail, corporate welfare, and human rights violations at home and abroad. Groups are demanding a clean, safe, just, healthy, and sustainable environment for all. They see this not only as the right thing to do but also as the moral and just path to ensuring *our* survival (Bullard 2005, 42, my emphasis).

As a former resident of Endicott and an environmental anthropologist and advocate for the community, I welcome this environmental justice “for all” approach and find it a useful framework for making sense of Endicott’s struggle with “toxic uncertainty” (Auyero and Swistun 2009) and the vibrant uncertainties of advocacy alliance. While Bullard points to important contemporary movement transformations, certain activists struggle with the very idea of couching their struggle in terms of environmental justice. Some environmental and toxics activists, as will be shown below, wonder where environmental justice *fits* or where it meaningfully connects with local advocacy. These are provoking questions that confound the general understanding of environmental justice as “a local, grassroots, or ‘bottom-up’ community reaction to external threats to the health of the community, which have been shown to disproportionately affect people of color and low-income neighborhoods” (Agyeman 2005, 1–2).

Industrial toxic contamination, in both the Third and First World, can be both disabling and enabling (Edelstein 2004). The IBM-Endicott contamination has resulted in many *disabling* consequences (e.g., illnesses with uncertain and complex causes, stigmatization, unemployment, hopelessness, and stress) that may never be mitigated or remediated, despite the ongoing efforts of IBM and the NYDEC. Amid this toxics rupture, people have taken action—some vocally, many more in private—resulting in a citizen response that has *enabled* both a “sense of community” and a “politics of enunciation” (Allen 2003, 21)<sup>6</sup> showcasing at least some sense of collective intentionality and morality. What I came to realize when I returned to Endicott in 2008 was a certain micropolitical tension between local activists and outsider environmental justice activists, a tension between people, and I include myself here, who tend to “make it their duty to speak for the people” (Bourdieu 1990, 186).<sup>7</sup>

### National Environmental Justice for All Tour

In May 2004, environmental justice organizers from Los Angeles, Louisville, New York, New Orleans, and Texas gathered in Louisville, Kentucky together with other advocacy groups from across the country to support the grassroots work of Louisville activists who had been struggling for many years to force a cleanup of

<sup>6</sup>Allen (2003) draws on Alcoff (1992) to formulate her “politics of enunciation.”

<sup>7</sup>Here, it should be noted, Bourdieu is actually referring to the social scientist, that social actor who “has no mandate, no mission, except those which he claims by virtue of the logic of his research” (1990, 186, *sic*).

industrial pollution in a section of West Louisville known as “Rubbertown.” Twelve plants along a half-mile stretch polluted an adjacent African-American neighborhood on a daily basis, resulting in activists from around the U.S. descending on Louisville to show their solidarity and help explore available solutions. This collaboration, led by local organizers, eventually paid off. In June 2004, the Louisville Metro Council passed a budget to fully fund a Toxic Air Pollution Reduction Plan. In June 2005, the Council passed the Strategic Air Toxic Reduction (STAR) program, a regulatory program designed “to reduce harmful contaminants in the air we breathe, to better protect citizens’ health and enhance quality of life.”<sup>8</sup> Organizers soon realized that Louisville’s struggle was common in communities across the country and that EJ activists were networking and joining together to strengthen the environmental justice movement. Faced with this realization, EJ organizers at the 2004 Louisville meeting brainstormed a National Environmental Justice for All (NEJA) tour to highlight EJ struggles and “meaningfully link community groups together.” According to these organizers, the goal of the NEJA tour was to raise “the profile of EJ fenceline struggles at the same time as building solidarity and influencing major chemical policy reform debates with the experiences of grassroots fenceline communities.” Additionally, NEJA tour members wanted the tour to create momentum for reforms of governmental, corporate, and institutional policies and practices that led to environmental racism, toxic exposure risk, and environmental damage.

While organizers aimed to ensure that the tour would inform policy initiatives at the state and national levels, and also augment the political base for environmental justice work and impact leadership in the 2006 Congressional elections, the tour also aimed to “[b]ring together multiracial and multiregional grassroots community activists, environmental, health, and social justice advocates, medical professionals, policymakers, celebrities, and journalists aboard biodiesel buses, fostering solidarity among these diverse groups.”<sup>9</sup> Environmental justice *for all* was the goal. What is important, I think, is how such universal environmental justice ideas and practices are themselves appropriated and re-embedded in and by local activists and their practices, thus exacerbating the social fragmentation and messiness of environmental justice action and the environmental justice movement’s attempt to proliferate and collectively organize. What follows is an ethnographic sketch of local activists’ interpretations of the NEJA tour and their negotiations with environmental justice.

### **Micropolitical Narratives Of Environmental Justice**

The ethnography of environmental justice helps describe the meanings of advocacy and environmental justice for people engaged in citizen action. My informants reflect on the EJ Tour and negotiate how and the extent to which the

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<sup>8</sup>See <http://www.louisvilleky.gov/apcd/star/>.

<sup>9</sup>See <http://www.ej4all.org>.



EJ framework fits or figures in local narratives of toxic struggle in post-IBM Endicott. These activists' narratives also illustrate certain micropolitics of local advocacy, setting in relief the converging and diverging views of WBESC activists and their sense of discomfort and disconnect when it comes to environmental justice activism. Some of this discomfort and disconnect, as the narratives reveal, is informed by deeper racial politics that at least in part disabled alliance between WBESC members and members of the NEJA tour.

To be fair, it is not as though activists in Endicott outright contest the environmental justice connection in Endicott, but in their narratives on making the connection and reflecting on the NEJA tour, it seems that they struggle with the discourse. Perhaps, it is easier to locate what activists are committed to and what they are sure of rather than what is confusing and ambiguous. The topic of environmental justice can invoke this sense of confusion and ambiguity, even for more Leftist activists in the community who are privy to *justice* struggles. This came to my attention especially in my interview with Frank, a union organizer with Alliance@IBM and active member of the WBESC. I draw special attention to his narrative here, for he spoke at great length about the NEJA tour.

Frank sees the NEJA connection mostly in terms of a problem of widespread corporate pollution. According to him, there are many other communities like Endicott dealing with "this kind of thing," but maybe not necessarily the contentious and racialized zoning decisions for toxic industries, which usually invoke environmental justice-oriented politics and forms of resistance. He welcomed the tour and their cause. He felt it helped show that the issues in Endicott go beyond Endicott, that corporate pollution affects "all people," even though he also felt the NEJA tour was, as he put it, "very strange." For Frank, the IBM spill was an environmental issue that became an environmental justice issue, though it took the NEJA tour for him to realize this. He explained to me that he "felt weird" when the NEJA tour came to town because the majority of Endicott residents are white. He admitted to me that he was confused at first and didn't understand why they were in town. At the same time, he felt the tour helped him rethink how the IBM pollution in Endicott compared to other places:

In terms of the environmental justice tour, I think that this area definitely applied because there are many other communities dealing with this kinda thing. The tour was quite a large undertaking. It was done on two coasts. One on the west coast and one on the east coast, and I think they had planned to do something in the central U.S. They had a tour on the east, which Endicott was a part of. There were many communities on the tour where racial inequalities and the zoning of factories and pollution was a factor. We didn't really recognize that here in Endicott. One reason is that the majority of Endicott residents are white. I don't know the reason for that either, but it just happened to be that the majority of the people affected by the pollution in the plume and the workers were white. They were just not African American or Hispanic numbers in the area. I am sure there are people here who are either African American, Hispanic, or Asian or whatever,

but the numbers were not very large, and they were not the people really affected by the plume. But when the tour came, they brought with them several people that came from communities that were primarily African American or Hispanic and basically non-white. So the NEJA tour people had that additional element.

Frank felt the tour gave the activist in the community “a bigger view” of the problem: “It showed us how this doesn’t just happen to people and communities like Endicott.” On the other hand, he also explained that all the members of the WBESC and RAGE are white, and the primary reason they took action was because they felt that IBM “was picking on them or that IBM was disregarding them as people.” He added that,

It was a very interesting perspective that the tour activists took. I hadn’t even thought about it being a racial perspective until the environmental justice tour. I just said “Wow. This is very strange.”

What added to the experience of strangeness, at least for Frank, was that at the public meeting held to welcome the NEJA tour, “one of the African American gentleman got up and spoke, and he was very preach-like, with kind of the Southern Baptist kind of delivery.” Frank cautioned that he didn’t know if he was Baptist or not, but that “it was just that kind of delivery.” He continued, though with some trepidation, that “I happen to know personally that there are some racial problems with some of the people I have dealt with between the WBESC and RAGE, and some of those people were very uncomfortable hearing this guy talking about injustice in other communities.”

Frank wanted the tour to expand the vision and mindset of people in Endicott. He felt that residents needed to understand that the issues in Endicott are happening elsewhere and affecting “all people.” For him, that is precisely what the NEJA tour was “all about.” He also shared his “impression” that some comments and actions of certain RAGE and WBESC activists and residents he knows and works with have been fueled by an undercurrent of local racism and prejudice toward minorities, which he finds ironic because Endicott has historically been a community of immigrants:

It affects all people. It doesn’t just affect former IBMers and the Village of Endicott, or just people who used to work for the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company [locally known, oddly enough, as EJ], or people who lived here for 80 years plus who happened to be all white.

Many of these EJ workers he refers to were Italians, mostly Sicilians, who immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1880s and early 1900s to work at the shoe factory. Today, Italians remain an ethnic majority in Endicott.

When the NEJA tour came to town, Frank “kind of got the vibe” that some of the people and activists he was involved with were “uncomfortable.”

I am not going to call them racist because I don't know what they believe in their hearts and souls. But, some of their actions and some of the things they have said and done since the tour kind of gives me the impression that they are.

After telling me that he gets accused all the time for being a radical Leftist and communist union organizer, he added:

The tour was about participation and about making the participation nationwide, not just in one community. I mean we really tried to link up to other communities after this tour to get a dialogue going between the communities and organizations and basically disseminate that to the different communities. Both the WBESC and RAGE felt that this tour was a good thing and that we could help each other. We could get help and help each other. It was just a larger perspective. We expected something to come of it. Whether or not anything has come from it is difficult to say. I am a cynical person. I am glad it took place, but I am not so sure that it was what it should have been, with the results and the outcome of the tour.

Frank was disappointed with his fellow residents and activists, and he is agitated by people being afraid to “open their mouths,” especially former IBMers who fear they will lose their pensions. Ignorance, he explained, is another point of frustration:

There is just an enormous amount of fear. Here and in other communities. Nevertheless, it seems to be very prevalent among the community. I can't tell you how many meetings I have gone to since that tour that you just leave with the impression that people are afraid to step forward and many of the people who don't think it is a problem were either on IBM's side because they are a part of it or because they are simply on IBM's side because they don't know any better, or they are not necessarily on IBM's side, but they don't believe the pollution is a problem because they are ignorant. Sorry, but that is basically it. Those are the people who come out and speak against it and it scares the living day lights out of some of the people who want to open their mouths.

Eric, who was born in Endicott and worked at IBM for a short time and is now earning his graduate degree in media studies, found the NEJA tour completely appropriate. From his perspective, the tour set in relief the broader political economic narrative of corporate globalization:

I think that the tour was fortuitous in the sense that it informed a local grassroots movement with more overarching and national issues that might have not been there otherwise. What you see in downtown Endicott now, and due to the forces of globalization, is witnessing the backlash of the northeast metropolis. We are

certainly seeing the sequestering of people of very low needs and here, I mean, most of the people that lived in those homes in the plume were working class and experienced a dive bomb and moved out, you know, and the lower class is moving in.

The demographic shift alluded to here is something that calls attention to one issue that speaks directly to environmental justice. All my informants mentioned that the population of renters in the plume area has been on the rise since the late 1990s. Members of RAGE and the WBESC helped prod the state to address this issue and make sure that renters were being properly informed about the TCE plume they lived above and the “mitigated” home they were renting. These activists got what they pushed for. In 2008, New York State assemblywomen, Donna Lupardo, helped pass a tenant notification bill which aimed to “require property owners to provide notification of testing for contamination of indoor air to current and prospective tenants.” It is listed as an Environmental Conservation Law, but it is unclear which state agency is responsible for enforcing it. Many residents and activists like Eric believe it is just something on paper:

This tenant notification bill isn't doing anything. I question the power of the people and their ability to even have the conceptual apparatus to process the law anyway.

I completed a household survey of 82 residents (both renters and homeowners) living in the plume several months after the tenant notification bill was passed, and none of the renters surveyed ( $n = 33$ ) knew anything about this law. Tenant notification and rights to information are surely topics of environmental justice that matter in contaminated communities.

Not all local activists interpreted the NEJA tour as Frank and Eric did. For example, when I asked Dianne, a former member of RAGE and the WBESC who is now a New York state assemblywoman, to talk about the NEJA tour, she was more forward about Endicott *not* being a legitimate community fitting within the environmental justice frame. Environmental justice is just not on her “radar”:

I have certainly not framed it this way locally. I don't think many local residents are thinking in these [environmental justice] terms. Certainly as a state legislator I have worked with colleagues from the Bronx and other places that are really communities of color and those impoverished areas where facilities have been specifically sited and where groups have been truly taken advantage of through their lack of education. For me, I am a sponsor of the environmental justice bill and one of the criteria that seems to be holding up with the zoning of power plants is the environmental justice issue and providing communities with the knowledge, awareness, and tools to assess the impact of these things on your community. But this was a company town which either through neglect or through mistakes has led to the contamination of the groundwater, so I guess

I don't see it in those terms, no. But, I also may have a more narrowly defined view of environmental justice in this country. The way I think about it, environmental justice is not on my radar here. It's not what's going on here.

Some WBESC members did not see the tour in this light, and feel they *do* have a confident "conceptual apparatus" and are sure Endicott and the goals of the NEJA tour don't mix. For example, Shelley, who self-identifies as an "outspoken Republican" and is the present leader of the WBESC, informed me that she was "kind of reluctant" when the NEJA tour came to town:

When I heard the environmental justice tour was coming through I was kinda reluctant. There is a lot of propaganda in this issue, a lot of propaganda. All I knew was, they asked me to speak and I did, but I also prepared a little paper, as best I could, as a handout. I felt a little better getting up there and speaking to the group, but you know I think I saw it for what it really was, and it was a propaganda type of thing, I felt. It was geared toward a more Democratic agenda, and that is what it really was. I don't think it has too much to do with environmental justice as it has to do with promoting one party's agenda. I agreed to be a part of it because if I wasn't there, then the WBESC wouldn't have been there, and there would not have been any reality to it.

She then added that de-politicizing the issues was important to her and other WBESC members, and the NEJA tour threatened this goal:

I think I even mentioned to the NEJA activists and the WBESC members that this was not a political issue and that we had to all do this together. I felt kinda strange and this may sound racist, but I don't care. They had a couple of black people who got up and spoke and said that we have black people in this community who don't have any rights and don't have any opportunity. That is false. Everybody in this community has an opportunity if they want to apply themselves. That is a basic philosophy I have, and when you hear they are coming up from the South, they are still promoting those kinds of agendas, and, um, I don't think that is healthy for this country. I think we have to still empower people, not entitlement, but self responsibility.

Some WBESC members I interviewed find Shelley's actions and attitude a little harsh. Despite his belief that Shelley's candid personality can make him uncomfortable, Mike, a retired engineer, interprets the NEJA tour in much the same way that Shelley did, though with much more modesty. He felt that the government agencies were going to listen to the WBESC, and so he decided to join. As he put it,

I didn't become a member for really any other reason. I have never become a member of a group that would advocate in a radical manner. So, when the

Environmental Justice group came, I would say that they have some good points, but I would not totally agree or think that that is the way to go about it.

Reflecting on the NEJA tour, Mike stated “with these other groups, I guess I don’t see the value as much, as much as the stakeholders [WBESC] group.”

Larry, a former IBMer and the WBESC’s Sierra Club connection, pointed out that Endicott was “a little unique for the tour,” a perspective that resonates with Frank’s position. When I asked Larry to talk about his experience with the NEJA tour, he responded:

There is not a real large minority population, but there is a fairly large poor demographic group that lives in the plume area. By and large, both people haven’t been involved. Maybe that is a limit or maybe we are lacking in that, because it seems to be the case in other parts of the country. Endicott lacks minorities. We are lacking in that. But, I mean environmental justice doesn’t only have to be dealing with minorities. Women are somewhat disenfranchised. Some people don’t have political clout or power and that is definitely the class of people that were in Endicott at the time . . . It’s a poor community.

Endicott is a deindustrialized place. It is like many other Rust Belt communities coping with the aftermath of capital flight, community disinvestment, and other processes of neoliberal creative destruction (Harvey 2007). What seems less clear to the activists I just mentioned is the place of environmental justice politics in Endicott—citizen action rooted in environmental justice motives. CARE, RAGE, and the WBESC have all helped the community “find their voice,” as Larry put it.

### Conclusion

Where is the voice of environmental justice? What is the tone of the micropolitics of environmental justice in IBM’s deindustrialized birthplace? These are tough questions that I think inspire environmental anthropologists and political ecologists to attend to critical dynamics of intra-community and intra-activist relations. While the narratives on activists’ interpretations of the NEJA tour help to answer these questions, the point is that environmental justice *is* in fact locally negotiated and contested, even amid an expanding social movement informed by a righteous intention to make environmental justice *for all*.

Many activists I interviewed talked about the NEJA tour as an effort and event that created a wide-angle view, a broader perspective on community toxics issues that transcends racial and ethnic boundaries. The narratives described here attempted to show how these activists craft their own grassroots perspective on environmental justice and the meaning and efficacy of the NEJA tour.

These narratives exposed personalized visions of the distinction between *us* and *them*, between Endicott's toxics issues and those in focus for the NEJA organizers and participants. Some local activists see legitimate connections. But, there still was an enduring suspicion about what was actually shared. As Frank's narrative highlighted, many WBESC and RAGE activists felt a certain discomfort with NEJA activists and that while he could not say for sure, this discomfort seemed to him rooted in racial politics.

Prodding this topic as a former resident, activist, and researcher was a serious challenge. While the narratives analyzed in this article aimed to expose these race-relations issues and the social terrain of negotiation, the decision to discuss these tensions—especially in a community that has made great progress in demanding IBM and the state clean up contamination—was not an easy one. My intent has been to *not* edit the reality of the micropolitics of local advocacy and instead enunciate what was witnessed, to honor what was said about NEJA activists and their efforts to communicate the meaning of environmental justice *for all*. Invoking discussion of the micropolitical ecology of environmental justice in the toxic high-tech Rust Belt, this article has tried to expose a situation of environmental justice alliance interruption whereby a movement's efforts to attain a politics "for all" is met with, unexpectedly, contestation, discomfort, disconnect, and alliance-crippling racial politics. After all, advocates are "situated in reciprocal relation to other advocates, even if geographically distant, whose intended as well as unintended actions influence what is perceived as good and possible" (Fortun 2001, 16–17).

The NEJA tour, while not its' explicit mission, attempted to expand the boundaries of environmental justice and reinforce two overlapping politics that continue to inform contemporary environmental justice activism: the anti-toxics movement and the movement against environmental racism (Schlosberg 2007, 46). Several studies have exposed this boundary-breaking and overlapping tendency of environmental justice action (Brown 2007; Brown, et al. 2004; Adamson, Evans, and Stein 2002; Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003; Bryant 1995; Bullard 1993, 2005; Cole and Foster 2001; Epstein 1997; Faber 1998; Hofrichter 1993; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss 2001; Stein 2004), the intersection of neoliberalism and environmental justice (Holifield 2004), and the "scaler politics" of environmental justice (Kurtz 2003; Bickerstaff and Agyeman 2009; Cox 1998; Sziarto and Leitner 2010; Davies 2006; Agyeman and Evans 2004). Despite some recent efforts (Checker 2005; Allen 2003; Checker, this issue), there is a need for greater ethnographic description illustrating the complexities of intra-activist relations in general and peoples' engagements in and experiences with the micropolitics of environmental justice alliance building in particular. Of course, it is unclear to what the extent ethnography will in fact inform citizen action and reconfigure the ecopolitics of "technocapitalism" (Suarez-Villa 2009) unfolding in this post-IBM setting. For now at least, the meaning and racialization of environmental justice in this socio-political setting is under negotiation, as are the always emerging social networks linking Endicott activists to the world beyond

IBM's birthplace. As a member of this micropolitical terrain—even if most often from a distance—I think certain environmental injustices, despite some activists' claims to the contrary, have occurred and continue to unfold in this contaminated post-IBM town. Endicott will always be remembered for helping launch the Computer Age and a culture of techno-fanaticism, innovation, and planned obsolescence (Slade 2006). Fitting environmental justice and the micropolitical ecology perspective into this historical narrative is a struggle, and one that, as is argued here, calls for greater ethnographic descriptions of environmental justice activism and alliance politics.

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