Analyzing Environmental Racism in Richmond, CA:
A case study of the *United Heckathorn* toxic site

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Abstract

This work attempts to analyze how the issue of environmental racism has unfolded in Richmond's historical context; particularly focusing on how the toxic site, *United Heckathorn* has affected the surrounding community before and after it's listing on the EPA's National Priority List. Interviews and census data analysis were used to explain the context in which environmental racism has developed. Interviewing Richmond residents within the proximity of *United Heckathorn* and relevant environmental justice organizers provided information such as: *United Heckathorn* awareness, health accounts, and most importantly indirect/direct challenges that perpetuate environmental racism. Census data analysis showed the gradual increase in African American, Asian, and Latino population, while simultaneously the decreasing white population from 1970-1990. Although most interview participants were completely unaware of *United Heckathorn's* existence, they provided rich accounts of general "toxic experiences" throughout the city of Richmond. Over time, Richmond residents have "normalized" their environmentally degrading living conditions and consequently contributed to the unawareness of alternative situations. Their unawareness of *United Heckathorn* is also attributed to their poor access to environmental information resulting from weak communication between environmental organizations and communities of color. I concluded that more time and effort should be placed on increasing communication between the two and provided possible solutions that could possibly bring about an effective environmental change.

Introduction

Although racism has been popularly deemed a phenomena of the past, it continues to be evident in various social and physical structures in our present society. While some significant progress was created in the 1960's civil rights movement, people of color must continue to fight for equal treatment in all socio-economic areas (Bullard 2001). These inequalities have consequently spilled over onto environmental conditions and policies, which have placed communities of color at a disadvantage (Bullard 1993). As a result of this racism, whites of all class levels have had an "edge" in gaining access to a healthy physical environment.

Countless studies such as the ground breaking United Church of Christ study have found that race is the primary correlating variable to toxic sites, while income level is secondary (UCC 1987). At the heart of the problem is the United States' racial division where extreme racial inequalities are able to persist and take shape (Kozol 1991). It is through these important findings that environmental racism is defined as a racial bias in the location of hazardous waste facilities and the disproportionate exposure among minority groups to health-threatening environmental conditions (Bullard 1990; Bullard & Wright 1992).

Although Bullard's ER definition uses terms such as "bias" and "disproportionate", which inherently imply a comparative study to determine environmental racism, I was particularly interested how environmental racism has developed and the way it looks at the *local* level, today. Past environmental racism studies on areas such as Los Angeles, Baton Rouge, Florida, and North Carolina have generally found strong correlations between minority communities and highly hazardous toxic sites (Adeola 1994; Bullard 2001; Pastor 2001; Stretesky & Hogan 1998). It is too frequent that environmental justice scholars get caught up in the process of finding a causal effect that attempts to prove the existence of environmental racism (Turner & Wu 2002).

I decided to assume that environmental racism has existed in the city of Richmond, CA based on the findings of past Richmond environmental literature in order to investigate how environmental racism has, and continues to affect the revolving communities. Bullard's analysis of the Richmond grass-roots environmental justice organization, West County Toxics Coalition (WCTC) struggle against the Chevron Richmond Refinery during the 1990's shows how organizations of color have risen to fight against environmental racism in their communities. The fact that Bullard, a leading environmental justice scholar has studied

environmental racism issues in Richmond, is sufficient enough to safely assume that environmental racism exists throughout the city.

Bullard's case study focused on three different objectives: the organizational tactics and dispute methods WCTC used against Chevron to improve living conditions, the conditions and context of negotiations, and assess the level of outside support WCTC had (Bullard 1993). WCTC worked to get both state and federal government agencies to support their effort to reduce Chevron emissions. WCTC succeeded in creating a meeting with Chevron to negotiate emissions levels and were able to produce a timetable layout outlying their goals, which were inclusive of community voices. Of course, talking about emission reduction is different from actual emissions reduction. At the end of Bullard's analysis, he concludes that mainstream environmental justice groups must actively involve communities of color in their agenda. A number of toxic sites and facilities continue to exist throughout Richmond, therefore more concentrated effort should be placed to improve living conditions for all specific sites.

Among the various toxic sites found in Richmond, I chose to conduct my analysis on the toxic site *United Heckathorn*. *United Heckathorn* is one of four toxic sites in Richmond that is currently on the EPA's National Priority List[1], therefore I felt this was a suitable area for environmental racism research. Located on the Richmond Harbor, this site milled and packaged a number of hazardous pesticides such as DDT (95% of production) from 1947-1966. It was only until 1990 that the site was incorporated as a superfund site after inspections showed high levels of chlorinated pesticides and metals in the soil and bay. Although the EPA has taken a number of measures to reduce the amount of DDT pollution, dangerous levels still exist in the bay and consequently affect aquatic life (US EPA 2003). This still poses a threat to humans due to the high frequency of fishing that many Richmond residents (mostly Latinos, African-American and Asians) partake in their daily lives (ATSDR 1992). Despite twenty years of awareness and remediation attempts, many residents may *still* be at risk of health issues as a result of environmental racism.

A past study conducted by the Asian Pacific Environmental Network has documented the disproportional contaminated fish consumption by the Laotian Richmond community. Through surveys and interviews they found the main reason why people fish to be "for food" and not solely as a recreational activity. More respondents were likely to catch their fish rather than

[1] http://www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/npl/npl.htm (see California, then Contra Costa County)

buying it from any other source, thus increasing the probability of future health problems. Although they heard of the health advisory, many did not recall what it said and would completely ignore it. Many of these residents are recent Laotian immigrants that heavily depend on fish as a primary source of food due to both their poor economic status and cultural eating practices. As a result of this study, the state government mandated all fishing advisories to be written in Laotian in order to increase their awareness and decrease the amount of fish consumption. Even though this study solely focused on the effects on the Laotian community, APEN acknowledges that other minority communities are also at great risk of fish poisoning and environmental racism.

The development of environmental racism in Richmond was largely rooted from the historical impacts of World War II during the 1940's. World War II dramatically increased Richmond's population and radically changed its racial composition through the industrialization of the city. The need for weapons and naval ships provided vast amounts of employment opportunities for people of all age, sex, and color. Richmond alone, produced one fifth of all naval ships in the United States and employed 90,634 people—7.3 percent of all manufacturing employees in California at that time (Johnson 1993). Richmond became a world famous boomtown as it swelled from a prewar population of 23,642 in 1940 to 93,738 in 1943—a 396% increase over a three-year time span (Johnson 1993)! The African American population alone, increased from 270 in 1940 to 10,438 in 1943 (Lemke-Santangelo 1996).

Richmond, June 1942

Richmond, June 1943

My research will investigate how communities of color have been affected by *United Heckathorn* and analyze their overall perception of general Richmond environmental issues. It is necessary to first understand these developments in order to know how to bring about an

effective change that will better living conditions. This research documents the challenges Richmond residents experience, which ultimately contributes to their unawareness of toxic sites in their community.

Methods

This study utilizes interviews, census data, and historical documents to explore the effects of environmental racism on *United Heckathorn* residents and to see how environmental racism has developed over time throughout the city of Richmond. The city of Richmond has undergone significant events that have shaped and molded the current context where environmental degradation is able to exist throughout communities of color.

Interviews

Participants were recruited through Richmond environmental justice and educational organizations, random fishing population sampling, and the snowball recruitment method. Participants targeted for this study were current residents within a one mile radius of *United Heckathorn*, but also EPA officials, who direct and facilitate the remediation of the toxic site. These interviews provided insight to information such as: perceptions on environmental issues, the effectiveness of media information, and most importantly the indirect/direct challenges that contribute to the disproportionate location of hazardous sites to minority communities.

I conducted a total of eight interviews and a number of informal interviews throughout my study. I divided my interview subjects into two categories: (1) *United Heckathorn* experts, (2) *United Heckathorn* residents. The *United Heckathorn* experts interviewed were, Lynn Suer, the current EPA *United Heckathorn* site manager and Carmen White, the former EPA *United Heckathorn* site manager. Residents interviewed were Alicia Jackson, Felipe Galaviz, Elia Loayza, Maria Garcia, Rosalind Welch, and Juan Galvan.

Figure 1. Enhanced view of Richmond from the Bay Area's perspective. The "x" represents the residential location of my participants.

Each interview session was conducted at the place most convenient for my participants, widely ranging from public spaces such as coffee shops to private like their home. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and was digitally recorded at their discretion. *United Heckathorn* experts were asked questions dealing with toxic site remediation, human health risks, past community support, and EPA funding. *United Heckathorn* residents and fishers were asked questions about past environmental "toxic experiences", *United Heckathorn* familiarity, and indirect/direct challenges affecting their ability to relocate. Fishers were also asked about their fishing frequency and longevity, fish consumption, and past detrimental health experiences.

Census Data

I focused on Census data from 1970 to 1990 in order to document the changing racial and ethnic compositional patterns after Un*ited Heckathorn* went bankrupt in 1966 until it was placed on the National Priorities list in 1990. Although racial identification is very complex and compartmentalized, I grouped races in 5 general categories in order to find the general racial demographic changes over time. As depicted in table 1, the ethnic groups used for this study were Non-Hispanic white, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and Other races. Although

I attained similar information through interviews, census data provided the numerical backbone of changing demographics. This data provides supporting evidence that can show why the city of Richmond, is susceptible to environmental racism.

Results

After conducting 8 interviews their responses revealed a greater knowledge of environmental concerns associated with the overall toxicity of Richmond. One of the most striking and unanticipated shared sentiments among residents is their ability to *normalize* environmental hazards in their neighborhood. Even though none were specifically aware of *United Heckathorn's* existence, their responses can be attributed to the great environmental information gap between residents and environmental organizations. Interesting results were also found when asked about the possibility of relocating to a different area. Census data analysis also shows how communities of color have gradually increased between 1970 and 1990 to consequently provide the development of environmental racism in Richmond to unfold. I decided to group my results in to three different categories: (1) Toxic experiences, (2) Relocation, and (3) Census Data analysis.

Toxic experiences:

Of the three Richmond residents I interviewed, two have lived in the city of Richmond their entire life and have consequently witnessed various instances in which environmental toxic hazards can be literally seen outside of their home window. Living in severely hazardous conditions such as these has consequently led to the *normalization* of environmental toxic concerns and has essentially become a part of their routine daily life.

Mario: Why don't people in Richmond try to organize and make their voice heard about environmental problems?

Respondent: I have lived in Richmond all my life and I have seen dirtier things that are probably more bad for your health than just a couple of contaminated fish or fumes.

Mario: What do you mean by dirty?

Respondent: Oh man, I remember when I was a child, I could literally see yellow rain drip down from white walls! It was ridiculous…shit, I thought rain was supposed to be clear like water…or at least non-yellow!

Other respondents had similar "toxic experiences" when asked about their knowledge of environmental pollution in Richmond.

Mario: You mentioned seeing odd things before, could you elaborate?

Respondent: This was a couple years back and all, but I remember waking up one early morning and the pavement was completely white. I was thinking to myself, did it snow out here or what?

Mario *Snow*? It snow's out here in Richmond?

Respondent: No! And that's the problem. Just a couple of minutes later though, I saw people in space-like suits cleaning up this stuff off the pavement, and cars…I thought I was losing my mind! The crazier part about it though, is that 2 hours later when people were getting up to go to work, it was *all gone*!

Relocation

When presented with the possibility of relocation, all respondents felt it was economically and socially impossible.

Mario: So if you know about these health risks, why not move out of Richmond?

Respondent: Are you kidding me? My husband and I make a pretty good salary together and we're still not able to move to a "better" neighborhood like El Cerrito…and El Cerrito is right next to Richmond! Just cause you're in a "better" neighborhood doesn't mean that you'll escape those toxic chemicals. It's all messed up here.

Although financial constraints were among the biggest concerns, which prevented residents from relocating, they mentioned the importance of social networks they have developed over their entire life in Richmond.

Respondent: I want my child to feel safe walking around through our neighborhoods knowing that I can depend on my neighbors to look over her. I know every single person on my block and I know if I were to mover elsewhere, it would be almost impossible to be as comfortable as I feel in my neighborhood.

Census Data Population analysis

Table 1: Ethnic and Racial Profile

	1970		1990		
Race	*# Population*	*% Population*	*# Population*	*% Population*	*% change (1970-1990)*
Non-Hispanic white	39372	49.8	26817	30.7	-19.1
Black	18256	23.1	37700	43.1	20.0
Hispanic	7996	10.1	12104	13.8	3.70
Asian	2106	2.7	10029	11.5	8.80
Native American	360	.455	521	.596	.141
Other	576	.729	254*	.291	-.438
Total	**79061**	**100**	**87425**	**100**	10.6

*Non-Hispanic "other". Initial "other" category was 6586.

Two of the biggest racial demographic changes from 1970 to 1990 in Richmond can be attributed to the Non-Hispanic white and black populations. Even though the city of Richmond *only* increased by 10.6 percent from 1970 to 1990, Non-Hispanic whites drastically decreased by 19.1 percent while blacks increased by 20.0 percent. In 1990, Blacks became the majority (43.1%) and the white population dropped to a distant second (30.7%). This occurrence is exemplary of the "white flight" phenomenon, which partially results from the continuous post WWII African American population influx that affluent whites deemed as threatening (Johnson 1993). As white residents lose their social networks and their ideological sense of home and belonging, many decide to relocate to different areas they are able to identify with (Moore 2000). Although Blacks increased at the greatest rate, the Asian population also grew (to lesser degree) by 8.80 percent while Hispanics only increased by a slim 3.7 percent.

The 1990 "other" category had a very interesting stat as *only* 254 of the initial 6332 "other" were non-Hispanic. Consequently, 6078 or 96 percent of "other" were classified of Hispanic origin. This can either be representative of the very diverse Hispanic racial group, or attributed to the gradual increase of Hispanic immigration restrictions. This anti-immigrant sentiment disproportionately affects those of Hispanic origin, therefore, many undocumented residents would rather mark the "other" category in fear of deportation or imprisonment. An insignificant population change was seen among the Native American category as it increased by only .238 percent.

Discussion

Although, only one Richmond resident was familiar with the *United Heckathorn* toxic site, their overall interview responses are representative of the underlying issues that contribute to the issue of environmental racism throughout the city of Richmond. Residents have *normalized* their unhealthy living conditions largely due to their overall knowledge with toxic experiences and reciprocal impacts of World War II.

This tremendous change created a number of social and economic problems for Richmond that continue to be evident today. Housing shortages, residential segregation, and overcrowded schools were among the many socio-economic problems that arose from World War II. Although families were able to attain good wages from the shipyards, they were not able to secure housing and were consequently forced to live on the streets. Those who *did* find housing

were forced to live in racially segregated communities due to Jim Crow segregation practices that were commonly exercised during that time period. As a result, the African American population density of north Richmond increased from 8.1 percent in 1940 to 56.1 percent in 1950 (Johnson 1993). African American communities consequently had to endure poor living conditions and live in some of the worst environmentally degrading areas in the United States. This residential pattern continues to hold true today even after segregation practices have ostensibly been eliminated.

Thus, when environmental justice groups seek to gain Richmond resident support in regards to specific toxic area issues (such as *United Heckathorn*), many residents such as Rosalind Welch respond, "so what else is new? We're not disturbed by this because we've grown up with it...we're used to it..." Ostensibly, Rosalind's response may be interpreted as an apathetic stance on environmental issues, however one cannot make this assumption without incorporating confounding factors such as socio economic status and toxic issue awareness.

Job employment and other economic issues were among the first concerns that all my interview respondents shared in common. Many were working two jobs and had more than one child to feed before any environmental concern crossed their mind. In their mind, "making money is our first priority…only after we have this can we think about environmental issues…" Workers of color are especially vulnerable to environmental threats because of the greater threat of unemployment, resulting from their concentration in low-paying, unskilled non-unionized occupations (Bullard, 1993). These communities are more concerned about the immediate economic problems they must endure rather than future environmental problems. It is asinine to expect communities to get involved in environmental change when they could have difficulty bringing food to their table, pay their bills to provide a roof for their families. In other cases, however, residents are not experiencing these *severe* economic issues and do not get involved in environmental change due to lack of environmental informative resources. Consequently, many do not believe getting involved in grass roots environmental justice campaigns will be able to change the deeply imbedded issues that the city of Richmond harbored throughout its development.

Yet, according to Lynn Suer, the EPA's *United Heckathorn* project manager however, it is extremely possible to influence political litigation through community involvement campaigns. Although she acknowledged the socioeconomic difficulties most Richmond residents must

adhere to, she sighted the success of an Alameda community in cleaning up a naval shipyard after gathering resident support to pressure the city to classify it as a superfund site. Even though many of my respondents could not foresee a similar environmental change in their community, the importance of a unified community voice to better environmental conditions was also expressed. Richmond residents cannot afford to provide the same level of involvement that strong environmental communities such as Alameda can do so. Their unfortunate inability to participate in environmental ordeals as a result of financial and social constraints is an obvious sign of environmental racism.

Aside from their financial constrictions, most respondents were unaware of the different forms of news media that informs the general public of Richmond environmental concerns.

Mario: Are you familiar with any alternative forms of news media?

Respondent: Personally, I know about the radio show KPFA. It offers an unbiased form of communication and talks about good and bad issues that affect our community. It's talked about environmental issues like that Zeneca site on the Richmond Bay. I try to pay attention to that because my daughter is taught by Making Waves (tutoring program) over there and I want to know if she's in danger.

Mario: Why don't you think all people know about this news media?

Respondent: most people just focus on what the television news has to say, and that's all…Many don't know how their information is censored and filtered to protect their "friends" financial investments

Although these are not the exact words of all my respondents, Felipe's statement is reflective of their outlook on the popular media and consequently, their lack of environmental awareness. Of all my respondents, Felipe was the only person that was able to offer an alternative form of news media, in KPFA, and assured me that none of his peers knew of such a program.

Even the EPA, which strives to better environmental conditions, has great difficulty informing Richmond residents of pertinent environmental concerns and methods to bring about change. The gradual decrease in EPA state funding is a major factor preventing the EPA from incorporating new innovative and effective forms of communication. The only economically feasible communication technique according to Lynn Suer, is flyering throughout the community. Unfortunately this yields very little, if any community involvement and support. The fact that an organization such as the EPA which, pushes for environmental change within a community cannot inform the people residing in their boundaries is a serious contributing factor of environmental racism.

Many contemplated moving out of the bay area into an inexpensive area such as Sacramento, however, all believed the social networks created were to valuable. They could not grasp the idea of starting over and living in an environment in which they could potentially be socially isolated. Many were afraid they would not find the same occupational employment, they're children would have to get accustomed to a different school environment, and they would lose all family and friend ties. In the long run, they believed relocating would bring about the same, if not more problems than staying in Richmond and managing the prevalent environmental concerns. Most residents know very well they live in a hazardous environment, however, their inability to grasp the possibility of creating change within their community and bettering their living environmental standards is a great psychological impediment that needs to be addressed.

Conclusion

Although the environmental justice movement has brought about significant change and been able to improve the quality of life throughout our country, very few EJ organizations have been able to effectively incorporate communities of color (Bullard, 1993). Recent strides have been made by EPA officials and community organizers to bridge the communication gap between EJ organizations and minority communities, however, after my research it is evident that more time and effort should be placed on new innovations of communication. I find it very ironic that environmental groups strive to better living conditions throughout poor communities, yet the communities themselves are unaware of how their toxic environment specifically affects them.

<u>Possible Solutions</u>

The priorities of communities of color must be taken into consideration by environmental justice organizations and environmental groups. Communities of color may have different perceptions of environmental concerns than environmental health organizations or agencies, due to the different challenges that surface in their daily lives. Without addressing the *economic* and *social* issues that run rampant throughout Richmond, it will be very difficult to engage them on their quest to environmental equity.

Incorporating an environmental education program into our public educational system is a great way of educating the city's youth about environmental concerns specifically pertaining to their community and the various opportunities to bring about a positive change. As these children grow, they can take their knowledge back to their community and increase their

likelihood of creating organized efforts to better their environment. Once this is established, traditional forms of communication such as flyering, advertisements, petitions, and phone calls will be more effective to rally communities against toxic facilities and mandate government officials to treat highly toxic sites.

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