Introduction

Environmental Justice Claims

Two of the most controversial claims of the environmental justice movement (EJM) are the assertions that hazardous facilities are concentrated in minority and low-income communities in the United States and that those communities are exposed to inordinate amounts of environmental hazards. These claims are often used to spur mobilization around environmental issues in such communities. Though I have elsewhere (2009) documented a long history of noxious and hazardous facilities being located within or close to minority and low-income communities and evidence of minority environmental activism that predates the twentieth century, it is only in the past three decades that a sustained movement focused on environmental inequalities has arisen. The rise of contemporary EJM coincides with the emergence of environmental justice (EJ) scholarship, policies, legal challenges, and so on.

During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a marked shift in minority responses to environmental inequalities that laid the groundwork for the EJM. Minority activists became more deliberate in their environmental activism—they linked environment with racial and other kinds of social inequalities and framed the issues in terms of rights to safe and healthy environments. Minorities also agitated for more research on environmental inequalities, treatment of illnesses arising from exposure to environmental hazards, policies to facilitate improvement in conditions, and legal redress of harm suffered (D.E. Taylor, 2010, 2011). In addition, minority scholars and activists began to write and speak about environmental issues in the 1970s by linking them with race and social inequality (see for instance Hare, 1970).
Why Don’t They Move?

Several events related to the siting of hazardous facilities, the dumping of hazardous wastes, and the contamination of minority communities led to the emergence of the EJM in the late 1980s to early 1990s. The movement asserted that minorities and the poor lived in the most degraded environments. Among other things, movement activists argued that minority communities hosted a disproportionate number of hazardous and noxious facilities, were destroyed for freeways or commercial development, were deprived of amenities such as parks and open space, and were saddled with poor transportation and garbage-removal services. EJ activists coined the term “environmental racism” to describe processes that resulted in minority and low-income communities facing disproportionate environmental harms and limited environmental benefits (D.E. Taylor, 2000, 2010, 2011).

In response to these claims, skeptics have asked the question, Why don’t they move? This question is asked of rural and urban communities that articulate the aforementioned types of EJ claims. Famed civil rights activist and field secretary for the state of Mississippi’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Medgar Evers reflected on this question in a 1958 essay titled “Why I Live in Mississippi.” Evers said, “It may sound funny, but I love the South. I don’t choose to live anywhere else. There’s land here, and a man can raise cattle, and I’m going to do that some day. There are lakes where a man can sink a hook and fight the bass. There is room for my children to play and grow, and become good citizens” (Evers, 2005: 111).

Gail Small, a member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe and executive director of Native Action in Lame Deer, Montana, responds this way:

I’ve always known that this is the place I was meant to be. This is my source of strength here. This land that I live on today with my four kids, it’s my mother’s family’s land. And her family, they’re buried right behind us here in the hills. . . . The land is tied to the culture, to the language, to the viewpoint. There’s a tremendous spiritual connection to our homeland. (Katahdin Foundation, 2005)

Evers and Small are referring to access to land, ownership of it, and connection to it as reasons why people do not move. They are also re-
ferring to the challenges that poor rural residents face in considering relocation to places where they will not have enough funds to purchase land or a new home or must forgo supplementing their income with subsistence activities. Urbanites in communities exposed to environmental hazards also face an array of challenges if and when they consider relocation.

This book examines the underlying assumptions behind this and similar questions and analyzes the forces that constrain, compel, or encourage the movement of minorities. It examines the expulsion of minorities from desirable land and communities, the demolition of their neighborhoods, the relocation of minorities to segregated neighborhoods, and the construction of minority neighborhoods in undesirable locations. Moreover, the book examines how industrial processes expose minorities and low-income people to dangerous environmental conditions. Throughout, the book explores why minorities live in communities with hazardous facilities in them or close by. Hence, the book focuses on three key questions: Why do minorities live adjacent to hazardous facilities or become exposed to environmental hazards? Why do they not move? And who or what keeps them from moving?

Theories, Arguments, Research, and Evidence

EJM claims and activism have stimulated a robust area of research and inquiry. This book focuses on one of the largest and most contentious areas of EJ research—the exposure to environmental hazards and industrial activities in minority and low-income communities. The book reviews the research in the field. Though several scholars have published reviews of EJ research (Goldman, 1993; Pulido, 1996; Pinderhughes, 1996; Lui, 2001; Bowen, 2002; Rinquist, 2000, 2005; Noonan, 2008; Sze and London, 2008; Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts, 2009; D.E. Taylor, 2010, 2011), the review attempted in this book explores the relationship between exposure to environmental hazards and residential mobility more comprehensively and systematically than earlier publications have. It examines the theories and arguments that have been put forward to explain these phenomena and discusses the evidence presented to support or refute the claims of researchers, EJ advocates, and EJ skeptics.
This book urges EJ researchers to pay more attention to both rural and urban EJ issues and to refine their methods to account for the complexity of EJ issues. The book demonstrates that some of the same processes that have been identified and investigated in urban settings, such as segregation and displacement, also occur in rural contexts in ways that influence outcomes. Unlike Jeffreys, who argues that “the fact remains that environmental problems, from a minority perspective, are rather trivial in comparison to the larger economic and civil liberty issues” (1994: 679), this book illustrates that environmental issues are vitally important to minorities. Many minorities recognize this importance and are deeply engaged in environmental affairs.

Overview of the Book

Chapter 1 examines several landmark EJ cases occurring in Black communities in the South that led to activism around environmental issues. These cases help the reader to understand the mechanisms by which communities of color are found in close proximity to hazardous facilities. I examine the claim of disproportionate siting, racism, and discrimination in chapter 2. Chapter 3 examines the internal colonialism thesis in cases occurring in Native American communities in the West. Here, too, the processes by which hazardous facilities and industrial operations occur in or adjacent to minority communities are explored. In chapter 4, I examine several theses and arguments that can be grouped under the category of market dynamics. These theses examine several arguments related to residential mobility. They home in on the question of who moves or stays when people are confronted with the likelihood that they may be exposed to environmental hazards.

Chapter 5 examines how the legal, regulatory, and administrative contexts influence siting, exposure to hazards, and the ability of jurisdictions to enact and enforce environmental protections. Chapter 6 discusses the roles of manipulation, enticement, and environmental blackmail in the siting process and the operation of hazardous facilities.

The rest of the book focuses on the relationship between segregation, housing choices, and residential mobility. Chapter 7 examines residential segregation and the rise of racialized zoning, while chapter 8 explores the use of restrictive covenants to foster residential segregation.
Chapter 9 explores eminent domain, urban renewal, and contemporary forms of expulsive zoning. It also discusses segregation and public housing. Chapter 10 assesses whether housing discrimination is a thing of the past or still a contemporary phenomenon. The conclusion briefly discusses future directions of EJ research.