



# Making the Invisible Visible: Telling Stories to Animate Environmental Injustices

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## Abstract

The women of the Newtown Florist Club (NFC), a social and environmental justice organization located in Gainesville, Georgia, use storytelling both in their day-to-day lives and through their political activism to contest the environmental and social injustices they experience. In this paper, I draw on Black geographies and Black feminist storytelling to demonstrate how critical environmental justice scholars can use stories to interrogate systemic environmental injustices. I integrate this theoretical framework with the stories told by NFC members to contend that stories have both theoretical *and* methodological saliency. Stories facilitate an integration of the structural with lived experiences by highlighting (1) the contradictions activist navigate, (2) the ways activists draw support and motivation from connections to people and place, and (3) the ways activists use the past to connect the personal and political to imagine and prefigure new futures. In conclusion, I reflect on listening to activists' stories as one way for researchers to operationalize critical environmental justice.

## Keywords

Critical environmental justice, Black geographies, storytelling, environmental racism

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## Introduction

Since their founding in 1950, the women of the Newtown Florist Club (NFC) have been telling stories. For NFC, a social and environmental justice organization in the predominately Black Newtown neighborhood of Gainesville, Georgia in the Southeastern United States, storytelling is central to their work. Stories are a form of survival and resistance used to combat oppressive structures that work to silence and ignore the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Tagore 2009;



Sium and Ristskes 2013). Moreover, stories make visible the consequences and embodied experiences of BIPOC communities living in a white supremacist, racial capitalist, settler colonial, patriarchal society (Mahtani 2017; Collins 2000; Banks-Wallace 2002). Through their stories, NFC members bring attention to their struggles and connect these struggles to other BIPOC communities, but they also make clear their struggles do not solely define them or their world (McKittrick 2011; Reece 2019a). NFC members tell their stories explicitly through academic partnerships (Spears 1998; Prez 2002; Kohl 2015), via intergenerational oral histories (Spelman 2017), and during walking and multimedia toxic tours (<https://youtu.be/PzPT7Jr0IWg>).<sup>1</sup> NFC members also tell stories implicitly through informal interactions and community events such as Black History Month programs, girls education programs, annual awards events, their annual Martin Luther King Day celebration, everyday conversations, the photos they display in their office, and their activism.

In this paper I argue that for critical environmental justice researchers, listening to stories told by activists is simultaneously a methodological and theoretical endeavor. From a methodological perspective, stories highlight the complexities and contradictions of the lived experiences of environmental (in)justices. From a theoretical perspective by animating injustices, stories are part and parcel of activists' fights for the survival of people and place. Stories animate these processes in three interconnected ways. First, stories are an avenue through which activists bring to light the contradictions they navigate as they simultaneously fight for their community but against the spaces their community occupies. Second, stories are a political tool that activists use to draw support for their work and to motivate others to get and stay involved in their struggles. Third, stories allow activists to connect the past with the present as a way to bring the personal into conversation with the political.

To ground my argument that stories are theoretically and methodically salient, I draw on Black geographies and Black feminist storytelling to examine the stories told by two members of NFC, Ms. Faye Bush, who was executive director of NFC from 1991 – 2015, and Ms. Rose Johnson, the current executive director of NFC. By integrating NFC's stories with the theoretical frameworks of Black geographies and Black feminist storytelling, I demonstrate how critical environmental justice scholars can use stories to connect structural oppressions to the experiences of those living in environmental justice communities. To conclude, I reflect on how activists use political storytelling as a tool to contest systemic oppressions in their communities and what scholars can gain by listening to stories.

### **Critical Environmental Justice, Black Feminist Storytelling, and Black Geographies**

Critical environmental justice scholars encourage a systemic approach to environmental justice, one that does not just focus on where environmental goods and bads are, but on the structural processes through which these inequities are distributed (Pellow 2018; Pulido 2000; 2017). Moreover, critical environmental justice calls for a focus on intersectional, multi-scalar environmental injustices, with an emphasis on the state and systemic forms of oppression (Pellow 2018; Pulido 2015; 2017). It not only questions what counts as an environmental injustice, but also how people imagine, remember, and contest these injustices emphasizing “a socio-spatial imagining of oppressions that are nonlinear and non-vertical” (Ducre 2018, 23). To do this, critical environmental justice scholars encourage research that contextualizes environmental conditions within the histories, legacies, and contemporary manifestations of the settler colonial state (Ducre 2018; Pulido 2015; 2017; 2018; Goodling 2021). Yet, while an emphasis on structural processes is critical to understanding the persistence of environmental injustices, it cannot come at the expense of the experiences and voices of those living injustices. Collins (2000)

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<sup>1</sup> Toxic tours are a form of storytelling that uses the community's physical geography to tell their story on an emotional and material level (Houston 2013; Pezzullo 2007).

contends that to understand these histories and legacies of ongoing systems of oppression, we must recognize the privileging and silencing of knowledge formations.

Cameron (2012) acknowledges that while some geographers contend stories have reached their scholarly usefulness, others still see stories as acts of politics and political motivation to transform social, political, and economic worlds. In this paper, I focus on storytelling that utilizes the past, present, and future to situate personal experiences and to help the teller and the listener make sense of the world around them (Banks-Wallace 2002; Houston 2013). I draw on Black geographies and Black feminist understandings of storytelling to demonstrate how stories can be used by critical environmental justice scholars to connect structural processes of oppression to the experiences of those living environmental injustices.

Storytelling has been used by Black women, in particular, since the time of slavery as a form of resistance and remains an important tool to connect individuals' experiences to systematic oppression (Tagore, 2009). Stories' allowance of the concurrent analysis of individual experiences and systemic power structures highlights their political importance. Through storytelling, Black women ensure their experiences cannot be erased nor ignored. In this way, by (re)claiming their narratives, Black women (re)claim and (re)define place.

The telling and listening to stories can be a political act, especially when the tellers are constructed as outside knowledge producing realms (Smith 2015; Brickell and Garrett 2015; Collins 2000). In this way, storytelling is a practice in and of itself, as well as a political performance (Prokkola 2014). It is used to make sense of the world, and to communicate experiences to others (Browdy 2018; Crawford 2019). In this paper, I focus on everyday storytelling that is integrated into the social fabric of communities that people use to make sense of who they are as well as where they belong (Crawford 2019; Joshi et al. 2015; Prokkola 2014).

Stories are deeply spatialized processes. This spatialization can be seen within the stories themselves, but also in how stories are seen, heard, regulated and (de)legitimized (Joshi et al. 2015). Black geographies scholars remind us that Black people and Black experiences have been rendered ungeographic by the white gaze "not only because sociospatial denial, objectification, and capitalist value systems render them invisible, but also because the places and spaces of blackness are adversely shaped by the basic rules of traditional geographies" (McKittrick 2006: 8-9). Black geographies contest these processes by challenging one-dimensional meanings of race, place, and Black bodies (Bledsoe et al. 2017; Eaves 2017; McCutcheon 2015; McKittrick and Woods 2007). Stories are one way Black people can turn themselves from the "racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers" (Morrison 1992: 90). Black communities can use stories to operate outside the realm of the white gaze and in doing so, challenge white supremacist systems. Through storytelling, they can create and maintain their histories and imagine what their futures hold.

By drawing on the legacies of Black geographies and Black feminism, I contend that stories, especially stories told by those who society has rendered voiceless, are a critical way to animate the experiences, contradictions, and complications of living environmental injustices. In what follows, I tell how NFC's stories were shared with me, reflecting on my positionality as both listener and analyzer of these stories.

### **Listening to Stories**

When I began working with NFC, club members were wary of another researcher coming to do research *on* them. I explicitly respected this distrust and worked to build a relationship over time. With their approval and support, I established a relationship where I was doing research with them for five years. In addition to participant observation, I conducted interviews with members of NFC. Per my Institutional Review Board approval, all NFC members were given the option to either use their real

name or to use a pseudonym. Both Ms. Faye Bush and Ms. Rose Johnson, who supply the majority of the stories in this paper, chose to use their real names to claim their work. For all other research participants, when first and last names appear, these are individuals' real names; where just first names appear, these represent pseudonyms.

Questioning power and positionality were an integral part of my research process. As a white middle-class woman, my positionality was evident through my interactions with NFC members and my role as a visitor to their community. At the same time, as we established deep relationships, and through self-reflective and collaborative reflective processes (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015), my position shifted from outsider to a more complicated relationship based on personal connections and shared experiences. Moreover, the messiness of my positionality impacted the "constitutive negotiation" of my situated knowledge (Rose 1997, 316). Through this paper, I work to strike a balance between sharing the stories entrusted to me by NFC members, while simultaneously using these same stories to make theoretical claims.

In the United States, stories are both celebrated and distrusted. A story is celebrated for "its authenticity, its passion, and its capacity to inspire not just empathy but action," but "we worry that stories are easily manipulable, that the line between art and artifice too often blurs" (Polletta 2006, 2). Tensions over stories are deeply embedded in the privileging of rationality over emotion in public spheres of decision-making. The use of narrative and lived experiences as a methodological framework facilitates an engagement with knowledge that are often delegitimized. Power legitimizes theory and delegitimizes counter narratives as folk wisdom, raw experiences, and common sense (Collins 1998, xiii).

Stories can come in many forms. For this paper, storytelling centers the speaker's lived experiences through first-person narratives. More importantly, stories are told often, even though they might not be identical. The teller of the story may add details or emphasize specific points depending on the situation or the audience. This repetition of stories embeds them within the cultural fabric of families, organizations, communities, and imagined places (Amoah 1997). While all of the stories I present in this article come from either interviews, toxic tours, or formal presentations, every story is something I heard numerous times over the five years I worked with NFC.

The ways I consume, (re)tell, and analyze these stories and how people interpret my analysis says more about me than about NFC. This is because while this research was based on a mutually beneficial relationship, it is also unequal. In the end, I had the power to make final decisions regarding all aspects of the research process (Mullings 1999; Moss 2002). This does not discount the importance of these stories, nor the importance of centering the stories as methods, instead, it draws attention to the situated nature of the stories told in this paper. I turn now to the telling of Newtown and NFC's history through the voices of Ms. Bush and Ms. Johnson.

### **Newtown's Story, Newtown's Voices**

Traversing Newtown by foot or by car, a cacophony of sounds fills the air. The industrial hum of Purina Feed (Figure 1), an animal feed processing plant, and the crashing of metal from the junkyard (Figure 2) are omnipresent. At times, a CSX train rumbling down the tracks behind NFC's office is so loud it forces anyone inside to pause all conversations until the train has passed. On warm days, industrial smells such as fermenting grain, soybeans, and chicken refuse mingle together overwhelming the senses. It is in this place that Ms. Bush tells the history of the neighborhood:

. . . the houses here were built in 1938. The tornado came through in 1936 and kind of swiped this whole community out. And they built this community after the tornado, and they built it on top of the landfill, we didn't know that until later on after we had, after we had a lot of people dying of lupus and cancers and all those kind of things. Faye Bush, Toxic Tour, August 26, 2010

Ms. Bush recounts the history of her neighborhood to help people understand that the current environmental injustices the community faces are a legacy of racism and zoning decisions made by the city that allowed industry to co-develop with the segregated Black community.



**Figure 1.** Junkyard from Athens Street



**Figure 2.** View of Purina Feed and CSX Railroad from Athens Street

When Newtown was built it was on the southern edge of the city of Gainesville surrounded by farm fields:

What I first moved here it was dirt streets, the houses was just built without the porches ... There were no factories around here, just houses and that was it. Faye Bush, April 7, 2012

In 1954, Ralston Purina Mills, which is now Land O'Lakes Purina Feed, was constructed approximately 800 feet from the southwestern edge of the neighborhood. In 1966, a Cargill Plant that refines and processes soybeans was constructed approximately 1200 feet from the southwestern edge of the neighborhood (Figure 3). In 1967, a junkyard opened adjacent to people's homes on the southwestern edge of the neighborhood.



**Figure 3.** View of Cargill from West Ridge Road

By the 1970s, the area to the south and west of Newtown was completely transformed from rural farmland into an industrial zone. Ms. Johnson tells of playing as a young child in Newtown coming home covered in fine yellow dust from Purina Mills:

Ralston Purina was right across from where we lived. . . and there was an open ditch that smelled of sewage all the time so there was no fresh air to breathe in because the grain dust came from Ralston Purina constantly and . . . to just walk out the door and smell that smell was one of the things I remember well. Rose Johnson, September 8, 2012

The material realities of their neighborhood and the toxins that move through the landscape provide both a backdrop to their story and is a main character. For Ms. Bush, who often declares she never heard of “the environment” until she attended an environmental justice meeting in 1990, the environment is a place to fear. For her, the environment is the industrial pollution that dominates her landscapes and impacts the health of her and her neighbors.

The story of environmental degradation is not the only story NFC members tell. NFC members also tell the story of the formation of NFC. In 1950 when a neighbor died and the women who were

collecting money for funeral flowers came up short, they came together and decided to form a social club with dues of ten cents a month so they would always be able to provide flowers for funerals:

It started out trying to help people, and that's what we've been about all along, trying to make it better in this community . . . My earliest memories was back when I joined the florist club, working with Ms. Ruby, and my mother, and Mrs. Castleberry, there were some womens that really believed in trying to help peoples and back then, we was helping people who was sick and shut in and didn't have grocery or whatever. Faye Bush, April 27, 2012

Through the years NFC members took care of the sick and dying and supported families who were caring for loved ones:

Well like I said, when we had to go into the houses when people got sick and bathe them and go to the grocery store and do all those kinds of things . . . And we were just like a little community group. Faye Bush, April 7, 2012

Although NFC began as a social club their mission quickly expanded. Over time, their activism grew beyond traditional forms of caregiving to incorporate first social and later environmental justice. As the focus of the club broadened, the women maintained their mission of carrying for the sick and dying in their community.

### **Telling Stories to Animate Environmental Justice**

In this section, I integrate the stories told by NFC members with broader theoretical arguments to demonstrate how stories take us from the structural to an integration of structural and lived experiences. I highlight three ways stories do this: First by bringing to light contradictions environmental justice activists navigate; second, by exploring how activists draw support and motivation from connections to place and people; and third, in the ways activists use the past to bring the personal into conversation with the political to imagine and prefigure the future. While the stories I draw on often do not fit neatly into a single category, by organizing them in this way I demonstrate how critical environmental justice scholars can use stories to complicate and animate the lived experiences of (in)justice.

#### ***Narrating Contradictions***

The stories NFC members tell animate the tensions of living in an environmental justice community. Stories highlight how contradictions drive activists' work. Moreover, these same contradictions create challenges for activists as they are often fighting against and for the same place simultaneously. Stories, which can change over time, help activists navigate these contradictions and paradoxes. Stories are an avenue through which researchers can address the methodological challenge of engaging with multiple aspects of identity, agency, and structure. Through an analysis of stories told by environmental justice activists, we can see how these factors come together to structure individuals' lives.

For the women of NFC, the complexities of identity, agency, and structure can best be seen in their simultaneous framing of Newtown as both toxic and sacred. While on the surface they may seem irreconcilable, these contradictions are a critical part of NFC's activism. NFC members love and fight for Newtown because of the people who to them are sacred. Newtown is their place, their beloved

community grounded by love and relationships.<sup>2</sup> To protect their place and people, they have to fight against the way space is used, specifically against the industry and sanctioned pollution which is embedded in Newtown. This does not mean that everything in Newtown is toxic nor that everything is sacred. Through stories, members of NFC negotiate these complicated tensions and frame the environment, the space in which they live, as external and toxic:

Well, what I look at, what we're exposed to, and uh, and I think it's the silent killer that how it affects your body and you not knowing what it's doing to you. Then we had so much sickness and death in our community. It makes you think about what the environment do to you. Faye Bush, April 7, 2012

Even though Ms. Bush fears the environment and the industries which pollute the environment, she does not fear Newtown as a place made up of her neighbors and community. She, along with other NFC members, differentiate the space they live from the place they live. As Ms. Johnson contends, there is a clear distinction between the people and space:

I am talking about the environs in the community because our community itself is beloved – the people . . . the relationships . . . I just wonder what it would be like to not have to look up and see a Ralston Purina or an image of the junkyard or hear the train coming down the track right behind the homes of the neighbors. Rose Johnson, September 8, 2012

Ms. Johnson uses the individual experiences of her beloved community to assert their agency while using the material landscape, in this case, Purina Feed, to contrast her beloved community with the systemic power structures that sustain the environmental injustices she and her community face daily (Bell 2010).

For environmental justice communities, their physical geographies are “bound up in, rather than simply in backdrop to, social and environmental processes” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 3). Stories told about a community by the people who live in them animates these places beyond just material realities such as the dominance of industry, unpaved streets, and visible pollution as seen in the stories above. Landscapes themselves are created through racialized processes. They are not neutral, but embody a legacy of racial violence, settler colonialism, and intersecting systems of oppression (Wright 2018; McKittrick 2006; 2011). At the same time, land does not just represent a site of struggle and oppression, it also can represent a place of liberation and autonomy (McCutcheon 2019, 207). Listening to stories can be a way to interpret these complicated, and at times contradictory, relationships to place (Prokkola 2014). Moreover, stories provide a way for the teller to navigate the multiple histories of place simultaneously. As discussed in detail below, this allows the teller and listener to navigate through the spaces and places they occupy, as can be seen in the ways NFC members differentiate between the sacred and the toxic. At the same time, stories provide a way to discursively construct the conditions to not only cope with the material realities of living environmental injustices but to create conditions under which community members can work together to thrive in these places.

### ***Constructing a Black Sense of Place***

Through stories, NFC members narrate the people and activities of Newtown in ways that reveal a complicated sense of place and place-history. During the Jim Crow era, Newtown provided a place of solace. The segregated neighborhood served as an informal meeting place where information was exchanged, problems were discussed, and solutions were brainstormed (field notes, September 28, 2013). It was a safe space for everyday talk to occur (Harris-Lacewell 2004; May 2001). This is evident in how

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of beloved community comes from Black Christian theology. Martin Luther King Junior spoke of beloved community as both a place and an aspiration. Dr. King (1957) contended that the beloved community was the goal of the Civil Rights Movement, one that was not defined by hate, but by reconciliation and redemption.



the women talk about the past, such as, when Ms. Johnson and Ms. Bush shared memories of being taken in by older club members:

when I was a child growing up . . . Ms. Ruby and Ms. Bush they just pulled me out because Ms. Ruby's house was the place where all the kids came to socialize to get together . . . so it was at that young age I mean I was going to public hearings and community meetings sitting in on whatever the issues were that the club was addressing and found it to be my place and didn't want to do anything else but that but in the midst of women with such great courage like Ms. Ruby and Ms. Bush. Rose Johnson, September 8, 2012

The memories of place and the connections between the past and the present are a way NFC members use their histories to resist voicelessness and erasure (Tagore 2009). By remembering, (re)telling, and (re)imagining the past, activists expand Black spatial possibilities (Eaves 2017; McKittrick 2006). Through her memories of being brought into a safe space where she could both play and learn, Ms. Johnson claims the space as her place, the place of the Black community. Moreover, through the repetition of these stories, she constructs a sense of place in the contemporary moment when the Black community is no longer geographically concentrated in Newtown (a fact about which I say more below).

Animating places of environmental justice with the stories of people counters dominant narratives of Blackness as placeless, and instead, recognizes the ways “these communities innovatively worked within, across, and outside commonsense cartographic and topographic texts” to form a Black sense of place (McKittrick 2011, 949). The white gaze often flattens Black experiences and places, constructing them into monolithic places, usually dominated by a narrative of blight. Instead, Black communities are also often vibrant communities that exist and operate beyond the white gaze (Reese 2019a; McCutcheon 2015; Eaves 2017). Using stories to draw attention to the vibrant relations among the people who occupy these places highlights the possibilities of Black geographies (Eaves 2017) and the ways that people construct these places through geographies of self-reliance (Reese 2018).

Through their stories, NFC embodies resistance against silence, erasure, and invisibility. This is done figuratively, by creating a sense of belonging by connecting the place with people, as discussed above, but also literally through the construction and use of physical space. NFC headquarters serves as the physical hub of the organization where the *work* of environmental and social justice activism takes place. Even though the landscape upon which NFC operates was created by racialized processes, NFC members also see their place, the place they have created through and in which they share their stories, as a place of liberation and autonomy (McCutcheon 2019; McKittrick 2006; 2011). The work of environmental justice activism is not just the work of preventing environmental pollution, but also of convincing people that places have value and should be protected. The women of NFC do this by constructing Newtown as the spiritual home of the Black community—the place people go when they have a problem that needs to be solved, a place community members stop by to say hello, a place for gatherings:

It's almost like the queen bee . . . [the community], they know if the NFC takes on something then they can listen, they can trust it. Andre Cheeks, August 25, 2012

This role is physically represented by the way the NFC office is decorated, a form of visual storytelling in and of itself. The halls and rooms are filled with pictures—pictures of people protesting and celebrating, pictures of people who are no longer living, and pictures of children, who are now grown and have taken over the fight their mothers began. This contrasts with the world outside where Purina Feed hovers in the background, a constant visual, auditory, and olfactory reminder of the environmental injustices NFC is fighting against (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** The Newtown Florist Club office with Purina Feed in the background.

Through their stories and relations in place, the women of NFC draw on their shared sense of belonging to create a shared sense of responsibility. Historically, they used their status in the community, and their role as othermothers, or women who assist bloodmothers in raising their children, to fight for change and in the process train the next generation of community leaders (Collins 2000, 192). Through the (re)telling of stories, NFC members contextualize their contemporary approach to activism, within the historical relationships between members of the community. For example, after schools were integrated in 1969, Black children were not allowed to participate in extracurricular activities. NFC began to provide activities for them:

[W]e had a girl's organization called the Bassette's Club that came out of the work of Newtown and so for Newtown to be responsible for even all of the recreational activities after the closing of the [Black high] school, it just fulfilled that function. Rose Johnson, September 8, 2012

By providing opportunities for children after school, the women of NFC asserted their right not just to live, but to thrive in their communities (Reese 2019b). Through their activism, they chose what they could control and used the resources they had to create a better place. This story, which is frequently retold, connects to their current environmental justice activism for two reasons. First, their contemporary work relies on the care invested in the community in the past, which has been an integral part of their work since their inception and is now carried forward by current members whom previous NFC members cared for in the past. Second, these stories contextualize how members of NFC were taught to do activism and how that activism has been reproduced through relations to place and community. Protecting their beloved community using the resources available to them is integral to their activism.

### ***Creating the Future by Telling the Past***

NFC members use personal stories to connect the past to the present and to connect their own experiences with structural oppressions. They use their deeply personal stories to make people feel their pain of living environmental injustices:

One of my sisters Mozetta, one of her daughters came down with Lupus when she was 16, the doctor said she won't be able to live to get out of her teens and she died before

she could get out of 16. Then she had a son who just finished high school and his intention was to go onto college and do things like that, then he had the flu virus and they carried him to the hospital, they diagnosed him with Lupus, he lived for one year, then her husband had cancer, he worked at Purina Mill . . . but he worked there for years, and he came up with lung cancer, she had a tumor in her brain, so her family you know, she died about two years ago. Faye Bush, Toxic Tour, August 2014

These stories of personal loss animate the statistics of their community, where throat, mouth, and lung cancers rates are higher than expected and lupus rates are six times the national average (Roskie et al. 2008). By connecting the personal to the statistics, they help us understand the multiple realities of environmental injury—it is not one thing, it is the compounding, multiple impacts of many things (Houston 2013). Stories allow pathways through which the unimaginable becomes imagined (McKittrick 2006).

By contextualizing their experiences and histories, the women of NFC make direct connections between the pain of the past, with their present-day conditions. Additionally, by sharing their personal, individual stories, they connect their pain with broader structural processes causing this pain. Their socio-spatial imagining of oppressions is not just grounded in the contemporary moment, but in how their histories connect to the present (Ducre 2018). These deeply personal stories can be a burden the teller has to bear since they have to relive their pain to share it with others. At the same time, storytelling can also be a cathartic process through which they teach others how to navigate racialized landscapes, connect to their past, and counteract feelings of isolation and self-blame (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Fulton 2006; Joshi et al. 2015; hooks 2008; Ross 2008).

Stories create space to process not just the pain of loss, but also the pain of living within a white supremacist society. By telling their histories, NFC members educate future generations about the pain they endured and draw connections between different forms of oppression. At the same time, they also differentiate between their multiple histories. This can be seen in the ways that Ms. Johnson talks about what it was like growing up in Gainesville, which is different from when she talks about growing up in Newtown (see above):

[T]here was so much hatred and so much you know racial violence and so much after school desegregation and we left Butler [the all Black high school] the atmosphere at Gainesville High was very intense and so between leaving school and coming back into a contaminated community you know, the Klansman riding through the neighborhood, and the police who would come and really just beat you know especially the black men it was no real mercy, just a lot going on. Rose Johnson, September 8, 2012

This violence exists in tandem with the joys of Newtown through stories. By using these two contrasting histories together, the women also shed light on the fact that they are not defined by violence. Moreover, by contrasting joy and violence, they remind the listeners that the current conditions in their neighborhood are not inevitable, they were constructed, and since they were constructed, they can be dismantled and built in different ways.

Personal stories do not just connect activist's experiences to systemic processes; personal stories also motivate people to continue to engage with place-based activism, even when they do not necessarily maintain a direct connection to the place. Through the 1980s and 1990s, Gainesville's Black community dispersed throughout the city and surrounding county. Despite this, Newtown, which is no longer segregated but still predominantly Black, is still considered the heart of Gainesville's Black community. The women of NFC use their stories to maintain a connection to Newtown for Gainesville's Black population. Their histories, which have contemporary political saliency, motivate people to be a part of NFC because they see their work with NFC as helping *their* community:

I've always belonged to any number of you know organizations but none of them provided, I don't think, of my community as this one I wanted to be part of an organization that meant something to my *immediate* community. Janie Shelton, NFC Board Member, September 8, 2012

NFC members invoke the 'spirit' of Newtown to define the Black sense of place in Gainesville (McCutcheon 2015, 395; Inwood 2015, 152-153). Newtown has changed, but it remains their beloved community. Through their stories, NFC members maintain interest and support, even from people who no longer live in the community. Newtown is not something people can leave, because it is part of who they are, as Ms. Shelton explained:

I grew up here, it's a part of me, there are things that are embedded in you that you just can't get away from and I don't want to.

For people who grew up in Newtown, Newtown is not an empty shell of buildings. It is not a place of decay. It is their place. Newtown community members use stories to remember, (re)imagine, and celebrate the place and their connection to place. Through their stories, the women of NFC not only increase participation in political and social systems but also redefine and reimagine their role in relation to these systems (Isoke 2011). This is done not just in (re)imagining their role in the political structure, but also (re)defining the meaning and role of Newtown in the city and for Gainesville's Black population.

Stories not only remember the past, but they create space for aspirational imaginations of the future. Through stories, NFC members challenge monolithic constructions of the past, and in doing so, create conditions in the present through which the future they want to see can be constructed. Sometimes they do this by telling what they want their future to look like as when Ms. Johnson tells of her vision of turning into the neighborhood and seeing a sign surrounded by flowers saying 'Welcome to Newtown.' Ms. Bush envisions well-kept houses with quiet yards where people garden. Ms. Cheeks imagines a place people want to come, a place people want to raise their families, a peaceful, quiet place. These women "hope against hope" that through their work, change can and will come (Rose Johnson, 8 September 2012). They use stories to create the conditions in the present, which will lead them to a more vibrant future. In doing so, NFC members draw connections between the past and the present, reminding themselves and those around them that the conditions they live in now are not an inevitable, random occurrence, but a direct connection between the past and the present, and therefore can be different in the future.

## Conclusion

NFC members use stories to assert themselves against the voicelessness and powerlessness of dominant systems of oppression. Through their stories, activists claim place, work towards making change in their community, and inspire others to become involved in their fight. Their aspirations come through in their stories. At the same time, it is up to the listener to decide what to do with stories. This is one of the challenges of political storytelling, it does not create change in and of itself. Instead, the hope of the teller is that stories will inspire and motivate others into action. For some, this may be seen as an ineffective form of activism, but for the women of NFC, challenging their right to be in a place and animating their lived experiences of injustice is a powerful tool. The telling of their stories in and of itself does not directly nor immediately change the material realities in their neighborhood, but NFC members believe by taking up space and (re)claiming a Black sense of place, with all its complexities, they will create a situation within which material change will occur. Ms. Bush often says "They think I can move mountains, but I can't even move a junkyard." Through the telling of their stories, the women of NFC might not have yet been able to move the junkyard, but they are (re)claiming and (re)producing a Black sense of place and (re)imagining what is possible. In this way, they are slowly moving mountains.

Critical environmental justice scholars call for a holistic look at the processes that not only impact how people experience environmental injustices, but also the processes by which environmental justice arise. The challenge of operationalizing and researching critical environmental justices is that researchers have to make choices as to what to focus on and how to put onto paper the complexities of the lived experiences we study. It is not enough to focus on the systems of oppression that create environmental injustices; it is also necessary to understand why these communities have value and are worth fighting for. NFC members use stories to animate, shape, and reproduce their beloved community and in the process, make connections between structural oppressions and the impacts of these processes on individual people and their lives. Their stories of joy, pain, loss, and celebration connect their individual experiences to broader systems of oppression. But more importantly, through their stories the members of NFC remind themselves, and anyone who listens to their story not just what they are fighting against, but who and what they are fighting for.

Attending to storytelling is one way to operationalize critical environmental justice. Listening to stories and integrating them with theory, rather than simply analyzing them with theory, creates analytical and theoretical space for the ways people experience environmental justice as well as the ways activists challenge injustices. Such practices can transform understandings of environmental justice communities, shifting away from one-dimensional understandings of places that experience structural oppression toward understandings of complicated, contradictory places filled with people who are constrained by systems of oppression but have agency and resiliency. While using stories is a useful tool, storytelling must be used carefully, because while the telling of stories can be cathartic, the burden of the pain of the stories can fall on the teller. Nevertheless, by listening to NFC's stories, the messiness, contradictions, and potential for change becomes clear.

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