

# MOBILIZED 4 MOVEMENT

## The ENRICH Project

### *Blurring the Borders between Community and the Ivory Tower*

Ingrid R. G. Waldron

In the spring of 2012, I agreed to direct a project on environmental racism in Nova Scotia after meeting with Dave Ron, a social and environmental activist who had been involved for some time in the Save Lincolnville Campaign, a community-led initiative for the removal of the landfill near the African Nova Scotian community of Lincolnville.<sup>1</sup> As I listened to Dave discuss the impact that a research project on environmental racism could have on the lives of Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities across the province, I became increasingly aware of how little I knew about the topic. As a professor whose scholarship had focused mainly on the health and mental health impacts of race-, gender-, and class-based inequalities over the past ten years, I had never focused my attention on environmental racism.

While I was initially hesitant to lead a project on a topic about which I knew little, I became intrigued by the prospect of addressing such a politically charged issue. I was thirsty for a new challenge that had the potential to effect real change in racially marginalized communities. Most importantly, I understood that the significance of the project lay in its uniqueness: few, if any, studies exist that examine environmental racism in *both* the Indigenous and Black communities in Canada. Given the dearth of research on environmental racism in Nova Scotia, particularly from the perspectives of these two communities, the project serves as a kind of case study for telling a particular kind of story situated in the Nova Scotian context and, in many cases, in the larger Canadian context.

That project, which was later titled the Environmental Noxiousness, Racial Inequities and Community Health (ENRICH) Project, is a community-based academic study of the socioeconomic and health effects of environmental racism in African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities. From its inception, the mission of the ENRICH Project has been to employ an interdisciplinary, multi-methodological approach that bridges the academy and community to support ongoing and new efforts by Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian peoples

to address the social, economic, political, and health effects of disproportionate pollution in their communities.

There are a total of 16,245 Mi'kmaw people residing in Nova Scotia.<sup>2</sup> An increasing proportion of the Mi'kmaw population resides in Halifax (5,666).<sup>3</sup> The Mi'kmaw or Lnu are the founding people of Nova Scotia, having existed in Nova Scotia for thousands of years.<sup>4</sup> The Mi'kmaw nation known as Mi'kma'ki stretches from the Canadian Maritimes to the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec.<sup>5</sup> It comprises thirteen Bands/First Nations, each of which is governed by a chief and council. The largest of the thirteen Bands in Nova Scotia are Eskasoni (4,314) and Sipekne'katik (2,554).<sup>6</sup>

There are 21,915 African Nova Scotians residing in Nova Scotia.<sup>7</sup> They represent the largest racially visible community in the province, constituting 2.4 percent of the total population.<sup>8</sup> Black people have been residing in Nova Scotia for almost three hundred years. They are descendants of African slaves and freedmen, Black Loyalists from the United States, the Nova Scotian colonists of Sierra Leone, the Maroons from Jamaica, and the refugees of the War of 1812. Between 1783 and 1785, over three thousand Black people left New York and other ports for Nova Scotia as part of the Loyalist migration at the close of the American Revolution.<sup>9</sup>

The ENRICH Project provides a framework for thinking through several important questions about how historical processes and ongoing colonialism shape socio-spatial processes that disproportionately harm Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities, including environmental racism. For example, how can we engage in a more intersectional and inclusive conversation about the social justice dimensions of place, space, environment, and health? How are hierarchies and intersections of race, culture, gender, income, class, and other social identities spatialized in rural and urban settings? How do we unpack the larger socio-spatial processes that create disproportionate exposure and vulnerability to the harmful social, economic, and health impacts of polluting industries and other environmental hazards in Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities? What are the possible public health advocacy responses to existing or proposed industrial projects near these communities?

These questions have guided the ENRICH Project in redefining parameters of critique around the environmental justice lens in Nova Scotia and throughout Canada, opening a discursive space for a more critical dialogue on how environmental racism manifests within the context of white supremacy, settler colonialism, state-sanctioned racial and gendered violence, neoliberalism, and racial capitalism. The project has also been crucial in elucidating the ways in which environmental health inequities in Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities are worsened by preexisting and longstanding social and economic inequalities that are products of Canada's colonial legacy.

I begin this article by defining environmental racism and its health effects

in Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities. This is followed by a discussion of the interdisciplinary, collaborative community-based approach the ENRICH Project has been using over the past six years to address the socioeconomic and health effects of environmental racism. The article concludes with a discussion of some of the achievements and challenges the ENRICH Project has experienced in collaborating with Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities in Nova Scotia.

## **Defining Environmental Racism**

Environmental racism can be defined as the disproportionate location of waste sites and other environmentally hazardous activities in racialized communities. It occurs when environmental policies and actions (intentionally or unintentionally) disproportionately disadvantage racialized individuals or communities.<sup>10</sup> As Robert Bullard notes, environmental racism also refers to the lack of power Indigenous and racialized communities have to oppose the location of waste sites and other environmental hazards in their communities, as well as to their exclusion from mainstream environmental groups and regulatory bodies.<sup>11</sup> Environmental health inequities refer to the disproportionate rates of illness and disease in communities that are located near waste sites and other environmental hazards. These illnesses and diseases include cancer, upper respiratory disease, and allergies, among others.<sup>12</sup>

One of the many limitations of the environmental justice lens in Nova Scotia is the tendency to subsume race within class in discussions about where industries get placed in the province. The ENRICH Project centers race as a fundamental analytical entry point for understanding the spatial patterning of industry in Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities, while also acknowledging that a sustained focus on race must be accompanied by an engagement with the ways in which environmental racism manifests within the context of the intersecting dynamics of class, gender, disability, and other social identities.

The ENRICH Project is also highlighting the ways in which environmental racism operates as a form of state-sanctioned racial violence that harms Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities—communities that are already dealing with preexisting vulnerabilities, such as underemployment and unemployment, income insecurity and poverty, food insecurity, and poor-quality housing. It is also illustrating how environmental health inequities in these communities are outcomes of these social and economic factors as well as of longstanding toxic exposures and other environmental health risks. Given the dearth of studies and literature on environmental racism and environmental justice issues in Nova Scotia and Canada, the ENRICH Project is also documenting the long history of struggle and grassroots resistance and

mobilizing in Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities to address environmental racism.

## **The ENRICH Approach**

The rationale for conducting the ENRICH Project was based on several factors. For example, the project is driven by the strong needs expressed by community members for research that addresses the impacts of polluting industries and other environmental hazards on socioeconomic well-being and health in their communities. Community members have also been concerned about the lack of transparency and accessibility of Nova Scotia Environment's community consultation process.<sup>13</sup> Nova Scotia Environment is a government agency that promotes a healthy community. The project has been successful in engaging a multidisciplinary team that includes professors and researchers in sociology, political science, environmental science, environmental studies, chemistry, epidemiology, nursing, and medicine, as well as students, volunteers, members of the Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities, environmental organizations and activists, other NGOs, and health professionals.

The ENRICH Project is activist-scholar inspired in its quest to bridge and blur the boundaries between academic scholarship, theory, and analysis and grassroots activism and other community-based activities. The project's diverse activities include conducting community-based participatory research; conducting mapping using geographic information systems analysis (GIS); writing peer-reviewed journal articles and research reports; presenting at academic conferences and seminars; training students and volunteers; developing multidisciplinary partnerships; engaging and mobilizing Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities and advocating on their behalf; conducting water testing projects; developing and implementing social action campaigns; organizing, hosting, and facilitating community workshops and public engagement events; consulting with government and legal experts; helping to develop policy; granting interviews to media; and sharing information on social media.

The ENRICH Project exemplifies the creative, innovative, timely, and culturally relevant ways in which research can be conducted, bringing together critical academic inquiry, the core principles and values of community-based research, and a creative mix of new technologies, media, and art. Most importantly, however, it seeks to support marginalized struggles for social and environmental justice in Nova Scotia by amplifying the voices of community members who have sought to galvanize opposition to environmental racism over the last several decades. Calling attention to the transformative human agency of Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities, ENRICH illuminates their rich and varied legacy of building solidarity, organizing, mobilizing, and activism.

### *Community Meetings and Workshops*

The ENRICH Project held a series of regional community meetings in 2013 and a final convergence workshop in 2014 titled “In Whose Backyard?—Exploring Toxic Legacies in Mi’kmaq and African Nova Scotian Communities.”<sup>14</sup> The objectives of these events were to bring together Mi’kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities, listen to their concerns about the impacts of polluting industries in their areas, and obtain their suggestions and guidance about how research can be used to support ongoing and new advocacy efforts to remove and/or clean up these industries.<sup>15</sup> Community members discussed the importance of creating opportunities for environmental groups to play a larger advocacy role; ensuring government accountability for the siting and monitoring of polluting industries and other environmental hazards, including ensuring that government policies address environmental injustices through compensation, removal, or remediation; and applying an environmental justice framework to municipal, provincial, and federal policies.<sup>16</sup>

Meeting and workshop participants also shared their ideas about developing a sustainable community-based research model for engaging communities, building capacity, and fostering collaboration among residents and other stakeholders. These ideas included the following: utilizing a participatory action research model that evolves out of the community, is community led, and is defined wholly or partly by the community; ensuring that the research design and approach reflect historical and contemporary experiences of community members by centering ongoing impacts of colonialism in which today’s inequalities of income, employment, labor, housing, and access to justice are rooted; highlighting how these structural inequalities have led to broader patterns of environmental injustices in the province; creating opportunities for communities to learn from one another about best practices for addressing environmental injustice; highlighting the success stories of community members, including examples of community resilience; and ensuring that research goals are realized in ways that affect policy change in communities affected by environmental injustices.<sup>17</sup>

Also discussed was the importance of using media and educational resources resulting from the project to raise awareness about environmental racism in Mi’kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities and engage and mobilize these communities and the public at large.<sup>18</sup>

### *Community-Based Participatory Research*

The ENRICH Project is a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project that involves researchers and communities working in partnership in ways

that enable power to be shared among all participants and that facilitate action for change. An integral aspect of building relationships between community members and academics is conducting research that is community based and that involves community members at every stage of the research process, including research design, data collection and analysis, and knowledge dissemination and mobilization.<sup>19</sup>

Over the past several years, I have come to understand the real and significant impacts CBPR can have on the lives and well-being of some of the most vulnerable members of the population, if the research is conducted with integrity, authenticity, empathy, and sensitivity and with the needs and priorities of community members in mind. As many researchers working with racialized and Indigenous communities come to realize, gaining the trust and confidence of community members is often hard-fought, hard-won and, at times, easily lost and never to be found again. Tales of being burned, mistreated, exploited and, ultimately, abandoned by researchers abound as community members are asked to recall their experiences participating in research studies that promised to transform their communities for the better.

### *Water Testing*

In 2016, the ENRICH Project moved into uncharted territory with the launch of a water testing project in the African Nova Scotian community in Lincolnville. This project had three objectives: to determine if there was contaminated water flowing in the direction of the community from the landfill site; to build the community's capacity to test their own water; and to provide community members with basic knowledge about contaminants and groundwater sampling.<sup>20</sup> The water testing project in Lincolnville formed the basis of Rural Water Watch, a nongovernmental organization I formed with Nova Scotia Community College science instructors Wilber Menendez Sanchez and James Kerr, geologist Fred Bonner, and Louise Delisle, an environmental activist from the African Nova Scotian community of Shelburne.

The mission of Rural Water Watch is to equip rural Nova Scotian communities with the knowledge, skills, literacy, and resources to address their concerns about drinking water quality. Its objectives are to build the capacity of homeowners in rural Nova Scotian communities to manage their drinking water resources by becoming knowledgeable about analytical testing, undertaking water sampling, and learning how to identify potential contaminants that could affect water quality; to help homeowners in rural Nova Scotian communities build a community-based drinking-water-monitoring network; to raise funds for water sampling and water-quality testing and improvement; and to train students to address drinking water quality.<sup>21</sup>

### *Legal Consultations*

During the summer of 2016 when the Lincolnville Water Monitoring Project commenced, I initiated a collaboration between the Lincolnville Land Reserve Voice Council (an environmental justice group formed by community members in Lincolnville) and Ecojustice, a Canadian law charity that fights for a healthy community. Since that time they have been working together to identify legal strategies for addressing the landfill in Lincolnville.

### *Government Consultations*

Following the series of meetings and the final convergence workshop the ENRICH Project held in 2013 and 2014, I consulted with various government departments and agencies, as well as private-sector agencies, in 2014 to determine if and how they could address community members' concerns about polluting industries in their areas.<sup>22</sup> I received a call from New Democratic Party (NDP) Member of the Legislative Assembly Lenore Zann at the end of that year asking to meet with me to discuss how her party could address these concerns. What resulted from that meeting was the creation of the first private member's bill to address environmental racism in Canada, which I discuss later.<sup>23</sup>

In October 2016, the ENRICH Project became an official member of the African Nova Scotian Decade for People of African Descent Coalition (ANS-DPAD) following a meeting on October 19 with the United Nations Working Group of Experts for People of African Descent. In addition to this session in Halifax, the UN Working Group met with coalitions comprising Black Canadian organizations in Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal that year. The objective of ANSDPAD is to examine, reconstruct, and mutually strengthen the relationship between the African Nova Scotian community and government. On September 25, 2017, the UN Working Group submitted its final report on the human rights situation of people of African descent in Canada to the council based on its consultations with Black Canadian organizations and government. Among the Working Group's many concerns was the pattern of environmental racism in African Nova Scotian communities.<sup>24</sup>

### *Policy Development*

On April 29, 2015, Zann introduced the Environmental Racism Prevention Act (hereafter referred to as Bill 111) to the Nova Scotia Legislature—a bill we had been collaborating on since earlier that year.<sup>25</sup> Bill 111 was the first private member's bill on environmental racism ever to be introduced at a house of assembly in Canada. The purpose of the bill was to establish a panel to examine the issue



of environmental racism in Nova Scotia and provide recommendations to address it.

On April 21, 2017, the ENRICH Project was part of a working group that launched the first provincial Environmental Bill of Rights at a press conference event in Halifax.<sup>26</sup> This bill seeks to ensure a healthy and ecologically balanced environment for all Nova Scotians, protect Nova Scotians from environmental hazards, address environmental racism, and confirm the government's public trust duty to protect the environment.

### *Campaigns*

In the fall of 2015, I was disappointed to learn that Bill 111 was not one of the bills the Nova Scotia NDP was planning to put forward for debate at second reading during the fall sitting of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly. The ENRICH Project subsequently launched a campaign whose purpose was to garner wider public and political support for the bill. The campaign involved the creation of a Bill 111 advocacy page on the ENRICH Project website, where a campaign letter template, a video on the implications of white privilege for environmental racism, a filmed spoken-word piece on environmental racism, and an online petition were posted. Two student volunteers kept up the pressure by sending daily tweets to government officials across the province. Several also initiated on-campus activities that included coordinated petition signings and class talks to mobilize students. A few weeks later, we were all thrilled to learn that the team's efforts had paid off when I received word from Zann that her party had selected Bill 111 to be put forward to second reading.

On November 25, 2015, all three parties debated the bill on the floor of the House, a historic event, since no such bill had ever been debated—or even introduced—at a house of assembly in Canada. Unfortunately, the bill was not put forward to the Law Amendments Committee, which gives clause-by-clause consideration and hears representations from any interested persons or organizations about the contents of referred public bills after they have received second reading in the House. This was a crushing blow to me, as well as to the team members and volunteers who had put so much effort into letter-writing campaigns, social media campaigns, student mobilizing on campus, and other activities. Although numerous people cautioned me about not expecting too much, since private members' bills rarely, if ever, pass into law, I had held out hope that our bill would be different. However, I am pleased to say that since that day, the bill has been resurrected three times by the NDP, which reintroduced it as Bill 6 on October 14, 2016, and as Bill 32 on October 6, 2017. On September 13, 2018, the bill was reintroduced as Bill 31 under a new name: An Act to Redress Environmental Racism. Although there is no telling what will come of Bill 111, I remain encour-



aged by the ongoing efforts made by the NDP to see the bill pass into law, as well as the attention it has given to environmental racism in the province and country.

### *Public-Engagement Events*

Over the last several years, the ENRICH Project has held several types of public-engagement events to raise awareness about environmental racism in Nova Scotia. Most recently, the ENRICH Project held a two-day event in October 2017 titled *Over the Line: A Conversation on Race, Place, and the Environment*. This public and academic symposium brought together US, Nova Scotian, and Canadian experts to engage in a solution-based, cross-cultural conversation about some of the most salient issues of our times and their impacts on our most vulnerable communities. Speakers discussed the relationships among race, place, and the environment by discussing scholarly and community-based work on environmental racism, environmental justice, climate justice, renewable energy, energy policy, the built environment, urban planning, and environmental health inequities. The symposium kicked off with a lecture by the “father of environmental justice” Robert Bullard and continued the following day with a keynote from George Lipsitz and presentations and panels from activists and scholars.

Discussions focused on engaging with a more critical understanding of how colonialism, racism, whiteness, class, and other social identities are imbued in the places and spaces where we live, work, and play; unpacking the larger socio-spatial processes that create disproportionate exposure and vulnerability to the harmful social, economic, and health impacts of inequality in Indigenous and Black communities; articulating the links among police violence, spatial violence, environmental violence, and struggles for environmental justice; and highlighting the possible public health advocacy responses to existing or proposed industrial projects and other environmentally hazardous activities near Indigenous and Black communities.

### *Arts Education on Environmental Justice*

In 2014, the ENRICH Project launched *Time to Clear the Air: Art on Environmental Racism by Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian Youth*, a program to support youth-based art that explores the impact of environmental racism on the health of Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities. *Time to Clear the Air* engaged Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian youth in creating and showcasing diverse forms of art to communicate examples or instances of environmental racism in their communities, mobilize other youth on these issues, and initiate a dialogue about these issues in the wider public. By exposing youth to diverse forms of art, the project inspired them to use their voices to

discuss an important social justice issue that disproportionately affects their communities.

### *Documentary Film*

*In Whose Backyard?* is a thirty-minute documentary film on environmental racism in Nova Scotia that was released in 2014 and produced for the ENRICH Project by Pink Dog Productions. The film captures the voices of Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian community members who share their stories and struggles against environmental racism in their communities. Using interviews with community members and footage from the meetings and workshop the ENRICH Project held in 2013–2014, the film sheds light on the concerns that community members have long held about the links between pollution and chronic diseases.

### **Final Words**

The long history of social and environmental justice struggles in Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities across the province have been premised on building collective power, communicating demands for self-determination and sovereign independence, and engaging in anticolonial, anticapitalist, and counterhegemonic acts of resistance, including nonviolent civil disobedience (blockades, marches, sit-ins), to challenge historical and contemporary forms of state-sanctioned violence. Struggles for social and environmental justice will only succeed, however, if they are accompanied by critical analyses that unpack the larger socio-spatial processes of inequality that lead to possession and dispossession, analyses grounded in theories that shed light on how environmental racism manifests within the context of colonialism, racial capitalism, patriarchy, and other substantive and structural issues.

As the ENRICH Project moves forward to engage affected communities, the public, and environmental and other organizations in these and other conversations, I would like to reflect on the many challenges, milestones, and successes the project has experienced. While the project has been successful in engaging a diverse team comprised of Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian community leaders, volunteers, environmental professionals, faculty, students and other individuals, considerably more work needs to be done building and sustaining collaborative relationships and partnerships with other Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities that are on the frontlines of grassroots mobilizing efforts to address environmental struggles in Nova Scotia but that do not often receive attention.

One of the most important lessons I have learned over the past few years is that engaging marginalized communities requires a shift in thinking about

how power, privilege, and equity are implicated in relationship building, partnerships, and research. For example, considerations about how researchers can work *with* rather than *for* or *on behalf of* communities must be premised on organic, trusting, collaborative, reciprocal, and equitable relationships with community members. This involves recognizing and respecting community members as experts in their own lives; ensuring that frontline communities are leading research, policy initiatives, and mobilizing efforts; and ensuring that these communities are involved at every stage of the research process and are full participants in the co-creation and dissemination of knowledge.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to the community members who have shared their experiences with me and with whom I have been privileged to develop relationships. These relationships have impressed upon me how crucial it is to conduct research that is grounded in and evolves out of the priorities, concerns, and needs of community members first and foremost. Moreover, I have come to a greater appreciation for the importance of creating spaces and opportunities for divergent voices to resonate.

## NOTES

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