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Environmental justice in the therapeutic inner city

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ABSTRACT

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) has long been characterized as Canada's skid row within public narratives that raise concerns about communicable diseases, open drug use, survival sex work, and homelessness. This stigmatizing gaze has bolstered a deficit-oriented philosophy that emphasizes measures to mitigate these threats, ostensibly by erasing the moral and environmental depravity from the landscape. However, such measures threaten to further marginalize DTES residents by perpetuating public sentiments of fear and disgust toward the inner city. In this paper, we challenge this orientation by reporting the results of a research process in which DTES residents chronicled their impressions of the neighbourhood. Our findings reveal a paradoxical therapeutic response to environmental injustice in the inner city, one that enables society's most marginalized people to find support, solidarity, and acceptance in their everyday struggles to survive, even thrive, amidst the structural and physical violence of the urban margins.

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1. Introduction

With the world's urban population now surpassing 50%, there is a growing focus on the built environment as a determinant of urban health inequality and concomitantly as a setting for public health intervention. The WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (2008) has recently cast light on this problem, pointing out that 32% of the world's population (6% in developed countries) now dwell in what the UN-HABITAT defines as "slums"¹ as evidence of the severe polarizing consequences of the urbanizing world. Canadian cities are not exempt from calls for a higher level of scrutiny toward glaring disparities in urban environmental quality (UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), 2007). For example, the neighbourhood known as the Downtown Eastside (DTES) in Vancouver, Canada, has since the mid-20th century been nearly universally maligned as an appalling social and aesthetic blight on an otherwise much-envied global metropolis, a glaring discrepancy in a city that is consistently

rated as one of the most livable in the world (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009).

Resolving the stubborn growth of health disparities in Canadian cities continues to evade urban planners and public health practitioners as air pollution (Buzzelli and Jerrett, 2004), toxic hotspots (Lambert et al., 2006), food deserts (Larsen and Gilliland, 2008), traffic hazards (Schuurman et al., 2009), low-income housing conditions (Chaudhuri, 1998), and myriad other environmental conditions continue to worsen over time, even when the overall trend is toward improved quality of life for better-off urban dwellers. Some commentators have suggested that such problems are no longer simply a result of misinformed urban planning and environmental management policies, but have become symptomatic of an impending social breakdown exacerbated by a systemic loss of faith in our governing institutions (Wacquant, 2008; Bourdieu, 2003). In Vancouver, a long tradition of civic unrest aimed at various state and private sector interest groups ranging from real estate developers, police, 2010 Winter Olympics organizers, and other authorities – often taking place on the streets of the inner city – provides abundant evidence of the widening gulf that exists between mainstream political priorities and the concerns of the DTES community and its sympathizers.

At the same time, environmental justice proponents have increasingly targeted those social and institutional forces that have been found to discriminate against inner city populations, as this literature has evolved toward more systemic analysis and action against the structural determinants of inequity as opposed to a mere distributional conflict (Geronimus, 2000; Pellow, 2000;

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¹ Defined as "a wide range of low-income settlements and/or poor human living conditions," these areas generally share four characteristics: buildings of poor quality; overcrowding (in, for instance, the number of persons per room); inadequate provision of infrastructure and services; and relatively low price. In many, there is a fifth characteristic – insecurity – because of some aspects of illegality (especially for squatters) or no legal protection for the inhabitants (who rent)." (cited in WHO Commission, 2008).

Lake, 1996). Yet while several geographers have contributed to the advancement of environmental justice theory more broadly (Cutter, 1995; Pulido, 1996), to date, this literature has remained at the periphery of the evolving sub-discipline of health geography. The few environmental justice contributions from geography thus far have focused predominantly on medicalized/epidemiologic approaches that align more closely to a more positivist epistemology (e.g. GIS mapping and modeling of airborne contaminants and concomitant univariate disease patterns), thereby upholding a perspective of environmental injustice based largely on the distribution of environmental hazards (Maantay, 2005; Jerrett et al., 2001). More critical and culturally contextualized interrogations of the complex dynamics between place and the social determinants of health that is characteristic of the “post-medical geography of health” (Kearns, 1993) have been considered to a lesser extent. This gap is particularly curious given the complementary aims of environmental justice and the new public health in achieving health equity for vulnerable populations (Masuda et al., *in press*).

In this paper, we address this gap by exploring the utility of a core health geographic concept, the therapeutic landscape, in informing environmental justice theory in the context of a Canadian inner city. Therapeutic landscapes are defined as those settings where the “physical and built environments, social conditions, and human perceptions combine to produce an atmosphere which is conducive to healing” (Gesler, 1996). The concept has figured centrally in the new health geography, especially in its articulation of a more spatially nuanced, socio-ecological model of health and health inequality (Wilton and Deverteuil, 2006; Kearns and Moon, 2002). In particular, we draw on empirical evidence from a community-based participatory research partnership in Vancouver’s DTES to demonstrate the utility of the therapeutic landscape as the basis for a counter-hegemonic approach to knowledge production about the inner city in support of that community’s pursuit of justice. In the following sections, we review the environmental justice and therapeutic landscape literatures, particularly as they bear on a more critical understanding of how environmental inequality and health disparity manifest in the inner city. We then look more closely at the DTES as a neighbourhood, providing a brief historical account of how it has come to be widely represented in public discourse as a blighted territory, a way of knowing that has given rise to deficit-oriented planning and disease-focused public health ethics, with resulting impacts on community integrity and health. We then present results from our case study that utilized a photography-mediated technique for local knowledge production. The combination of photography and dialogue in this method allowed us to generate alternative ways of knowing about the health of the neighbourhood, ways that challenge conventional representations of the DTES. Finally, we conclude with some thoughts about how the problem-based approach to the DTES as perpetuated by externally imposed interventions may be obscuring and possibly undermining many of the most therapeutic features of the neighbourhood and inhibiting efforts to build a healthier and just community.

2. Environmental justice and the therapeutic landscape

2.1. Environmental justice in the inner city

In recent years, environmental justice has become both an increasingly prominent social movement as well as a theoretical lens for interrogating the widening social, environmental, and political fissures of what Loic Wacquant (2008) has famously dubbed the “dualizing metropolis” (Teelucksingh, 2002; Howze et al., 2004). As a

movement, environmental justice has become a new “master frame” (Taylor, 2000) that has forced a reconsideration of the exclusionary practices of mainstream environmental governance that, under the guise of a management philosophy of regulation, protection, and conservation, has subjugated people and displaced them from their homes, whether they be located in city neighbourhoods or traditional territories. At the same time, inattention to the limitations inherent in these policies results in more environmental risks being placed in the midst of low-income, Aboriginal, and ethnoracial minority communities while they are excluded from more affluent and often “white” communities. In exposing these discriminatory practices, environmental justice has brought environmental concerns of the people much closer to real places where people live, work, and play, in essence, by discursively and sometimes literally repopulating indigenous lands, industrialized brownfields, and deteriorating inner city neighbourhoods with *in situ* communities that occupy these places, and demanding redress and change (see Haluza-Delay, 2009).

As a theory, environmental justice has become more than just an accounting of the uneven distribution of environmental harms and benefits; it is now widely understood to be a critical and systemic response to social and political structures and processes that have treated vulnerable populations unfairly or that have resulted in their underrepresentation in various approaches to environmental governance (Pellow, 2000; Pulido, 1996). Moreover, recent Foucauldian-inspired scholarship on the environment has articulated a discursive approach to understanding how injustice unfolds in the production and perpetuation of environmental knowledge. These works have located environmental injustice at the intersection between power and those expert-mediated environmental institutions that have consistently marginalized indigenous and grassroot voices since the emergence of the contemporary ecological sciences in the 19th century (Darier, 1999). Key to the notion of justice in the modern era is the recognition that the silencing of these voices has been a result of the downward dissemination of environmental regulation and management through technologies of active citizenship, which have arguably been designed more to reign in dissent than to provide a democratic platform for equal environmental rights (Agrawal, 2005; Masuda et al., 2008; Darier, 1999).

In the inner city, environmental justice has provided an entry point for urban researchers to partner in solidarity with socio-economically marginalized and racialized populations in efforts to mobilize against those forces that have historically relegated them to the city’s hazardous, neglected, and stigmatized territorial margins (Howze et al., 2004; Minkler et al., 2008). For example, in a study of a neighbourhood-based cumulative exposure assessment piloted by the US Environmental Protection Agency in Greenpoint/Williamsburg, New York, Corburn (2002) demonstrates how a shift from expert-mediated risk assessment to a more nuanced and locally generated observational account of real exposures and experiences can lead to a more robust characterization of the risks faced by the community. Similarly, Minkler et al. (2008) provide evidence from research-community partnerships in places like Harlem and Southeastern Los Angeles to show how local knowledge can be generated to resolve long-standing environmental injustices. Taken together, studies like these provide support for a research-supported environmental justice activism that confronts conventional techno-scientific deliberative approaches to environmental decision making that are accused of co-opting the voice of the community and providing legitimacy to the inequitable development of the city. It is within these alternative, often repressed, experiences in the evolving inner city that we suggest the therapeutic landscape concept can be theoretically instructive for a more robust and activist view of environmental justice for the inner city.

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