

**“We’ve Been Studied to Death, We Ain’t Gotten Anything”:
(Re)claiming Environmental Knowledge Production Through the Praxis of Writing
Collectives**

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Introduction

The women of the Newtown Florist Club (NFC) in Gainesville, Georgia, have been studied. . . a lot. They have been studied by Georgia state governmental organizations that concluded that increased rates of throat and mouth cancer within their community were due to “lifestyle choices” (smoking and drinking), not because of industrial encroachment on their neighborhood (McKinley and Williams 1990; Roskie et al. 2008, 10). They have been studied by Federal agencies, which have concluded that there was no threat to human health from surrounding industries (ATSDR 2001/2002), even as community residents watched their neighbors and loved ones die of the same diseases (Spears 1998). They’ve been studied by university professors and students, who have, among other things, sought to develop links between environmental contamination and disease in the community (Spears 1998, 30–33) and preserve the oral history of the community (Spelman 2012; Spears 2008), while at the same time trying to understand connections between environmental impact and perception within the community (Johnson, Heynen, and Shepherd 2009). Through all this research, a big question remains as to who gets to decide what gets studied and who gets to decide what counts as results and knowledge about Newtown. The residents of Newtown often do not have the opportunity to decide what is going to be studied and how the studies are carried out. Nor have they had the chance to discuss the results or the ways the information is organized and presented, if at all. As a result, the “scientific” research oftentimes fails to accurately represent their understanding of their own everyday lived experience and their community (see also Novotny 1994; Checker 2012). Given these *status quo* dynamics common within so many cities, this paper discusses prefigurative processes that have been enacted to contribute to more inclusive ways of co-producing understanding and strategies for struggling against environmental justice, racism, patriarchy, and uneven urban environments .

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The women of the NFC are tired of being studied without seeing the benefits to their community. They are tired of having “experts” come into their community for a short period of time and tell *them* what *they* are experiencing and, more often, what they are *not* experiencing. They are tired of having outsiders speak for them, while they continue to feel that their voices are not being heard. They are tired of outsiders’ stories of their community being legitimized, while the stories they tell of their own lives are ignored. They want to be able to take control of the stories that are being told about them, they want to participate in research, not just have research be done “on” them. Most importantly, they want people to listen and hear their stories and their lived experiences and help them do something about it to improve their quality of life.

What is actually going on environmentally in the community is unclear. Upon closer attention by our larger team, we determined that previously conducted studies were partial and flawed. Take for instance a 1993 Landfill Study conducted by the Georgia Dept. Natural Resources that investigated landfill threat to health and environment. The study identified elevated lead in groundwater 3 times the federal standard, but failed to investigate for mercury, and PCBs. In 1997, a Lupus Study showed the community had elevated cases of lupus that were 9 times higher than the US population rate, while simultaneously underestimating Newtown’s lupus prevalence as there were 12 additional cases not included, as they fell outside the study timeframe and not all homes were surveyed, and not all cases identified. These are the kinds of investigations upon which “inconclusive findings” are time and time again reported back to the community. And yet, folks continue to fall sick and die.

This paper explores the opportunities and challenges faced through the creation of a writing collective, The Newtown Florist Writing Collective (“the collective”), which was formed in 2009. The collective brings together the leadership of the NFC with professors and students from the University of Georgia, and professionals (lawyers, economic development specialists, environmental engineers, toxicologists, and others) from the University of Georgia (“the University team”). While we do not want to undermine the balance of this effort by having it become theoretically obtuse, we do want to situate our collective efforts within a tradition of Gramscian political ecology, but one focused clearly on antiracist politics (see Gramsci 1971; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; hooks 1984; Mann 2009). In so doing, we seek to bring the sentiments of Gramscian thought in subtle albeit instructive ways to contribute to important efforts focused around to antiracist and feminist praxis as related to urban environmental politics (see Hall 1980; Ekers et al. 2013). Given the sorts of intellectual/political effort we have mobilized to create our group, and within this effort all the

difficulties of negotiating a group identity that serves a particular kind of egalitarian ecological politics, we think it is important to clearly embrace and harness the sort of ethico-political commitments that an antiracist Gramscian approach most clearly signals. Mann (2009, 333) helps to articulate what is at stake within this sort of approach by suggesting that “First, it [Gramscian political ecology] can never be merely scholarly. Second, it can never be disembodied from the currents of social change it investigates and of which it must necessarily be a part. Of course, much of political ecology inevitably suffers from the ivory tower syndrome that plagues most scholarly work today, but it is surely the case that political ecologists work harder than most to escape the academy’s thrall.”

The Newtown Florist Club

According to Ms. Faye Bush, a central figure in the organizing efforts within the community, “The Newtown Florist club was established in 1950. The houses here were built in 1938. The tornado came through in 1936 and kind of wiped this whole community out. They built this community after the tornado, they built it on top of the landfill; we didn’t know that until later on after we had a lot of people dying of lupus and cancers and all those kind of things.” Ms. Bush continues by saying, “So we had the state just come in and test the soil. They came in and tested the soil and they said they didn’t find anything in there that would cause cancers or lupus or whatever, but we had our UGA researchers at that time come up with their students, and they did some soil testing and they did find some chemicals in the soil. And they did a survey after that so they’re saying that when they came in and had to do the survey, they did [it] on the people dying, they said it was our lifestyle smoking and drinking.”

We want to mobilize more contemporary efforts to re-read an antiracist Gramscian approach in line with Stuart Hall and suggest that Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis was situated within a historically-contingent understanding of the historical politics that Ms. Faye sets up for us and helps us to understand. We think it is useful to embrace his thinking to engage in our own racialized praxis both up until now and in moving forward. As such, it is important to see how over the seventy year history of this community, industries encroached on the neighborhood, until by the 1970s they had abutted the neighborhood to the south and west. Today the encroachment has resulted in fourteen industries situated within a one-mile radius of Newtown, and the neighborhood directly borders the active Norfolk Southern/CSX railroad. Furthermore, a scrap metal recycling center sits adjacent to residential properties (Roskie et al. 2008). Like in so many other cities across

the US, in Gainesville industries are disproportionately concentrated on the Southside of the city, which is predominately African-American and Latino.

The NFC was formed in 1950 after neighborhood collections for funeral flowers came up short and one of the founding members' husbands suggested that the women in the community form a flower club. The club began collecting money to provide flowers at funerals, but they also helped people in the community who were sick or caring for sick family members. The women were flower bearers, attending funerals carrying a rose and dressed in black in the winter and white in the summer. They brought flowers into the church in a procession behind the casket to offer a sense of solidarity and support to the family that lost their loved one.

Over time the NFC provided a broad and far-reaching support network in the racially segregated Gainesville. The club provided space for the women of Newtown to come together, to support each other, and to socialize. In addition to helping those in need, the club turned their attention to the community's children. The women formed youth groups to offer afterschool and summer activities for the neighborhood children and began working towards improving their community and collective social reproduction. Here we invoke Ekers and Loftus, who suggest that for Gramsci: "Social Group' is clearly used in the *Notebooks* [1971] not simply as a substitute for class, but rather to identify the different groupings of people that come together politically. Indeed, Gramsci was aware of the processes of racialization, in which southerners were produced as distinct subjects in juxtaposition with northern Italians" (see also Kipfer 2013; Short 2013; Featherstone 2013). The ways that collective subjectivities are formed is often through struggle and support networks seeking political solidarity. The case of the NFC shows this through clearly racialized and gendered circumstances.

Through their activities, the women of the NFC became leaders and activists on behalf of their community, in solidarity with their community, much in the way Naples (1998) discusses "activist mothering." They worked together to create positive changes and to present a unified voice to the city of Gainesville. Through the 1960s and 1970s they became more and more politically active. They lobbied the all-white city government for recreational facilities for African-American children, organized civil rights marches against the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist factions, fought for sidewalks, paved streets, and to eliminate poor housing and outhouses, and hosted political meetings in their living rooms and around their kitchen tables.

By the 1970s, Newtown residents regularly noticed visible, audible, and odorous evidence of the industries that had encroached on their community impacting their everyday life. Grain dust

from the nearby Purina Mills Factory dusted the neighborhood. Children who played outside, and at the neighborhood park, which Purina Mills towers over, would come inside covered in fine yellow-brown dust. Waste from the plant, mainly fermenting feed dust and decaying grain, was dumped into open sewers that ran through the neighborhood, creating a dreadful smell. Newtown residents contend that the concentrations of industries adjacent to their neighborhood disrupt their quality of life and have caused disparate health impacts in their community (Johnson, Heynen, and Shepherd 2009).

The articulation of long-term ecological politics within Newtown's history echoes the sentiments of Ekers and Loftus, who suggest that in a Gramscian sense the ways we create our identity through struggle against racialized environments, both shapes our collective identity and hopefully works to shape our environment toward more egalitarian ends; that these are part and parcel of the same moment. Ekers and Loftus (2013, 27) suggest more specifically that "praxis is what makes the natural world and reflects back on the humanity of which it is itself a part." They add that "Nature, as with space, is not simply static and immutable: it is ever-changing depending on interactions with other moments that might be historicized and situated within specific geographical contexts and practices." (27-28).

As the production of the Newtown environment became more and more toxic, the women of the NFC maintained their original mission of bringing flowers to funerals and helping to care for the sick. It was through this work that they began to notice high occurrences of respiratory ailments in their community. People were dying of the same types of cancer and lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease, at alarming rates. In the 1990s, with the rise of the national environmental justice movement, the women began wondering if the environment, namely the neighboring industries, were causing the illnesses in their community.

The NFC joined national environmental justice (EJ) efforts to bring attention to the inequitable exposures to toxins and industrial pollutions communities of color and poor communities experienced; they were some of the first involved in the struggle as the very notion of "environmental justice" was being articulated. They were leaders in this national movement. At the local level, the NFC continually lobbied city and state officials, about the health problems in their community, and other problems associated with the industries in their backyards. In many cases, their complaints were repeatedly ignored. In others, research was carried out "on" the community, and state and federal researchers concluded the problems claimed by the community did not exist, even if as a group we are certain that methodological problems exist within with these studies.

The sentiments of Hall (1996) help us make sense of the difficult dynamics surrounding our collective identity within Newtown, as we work to make visible these urban environmental politics in ways Gramsci had not yet been able to speak to. To this end, Hall (1996, 1) talks about “thinking at the limit” as “thinking in the interval, a sort of double thinking” to articulate one form of intellectual and political agility that can be mobilized for the sake of intervening in urban environmental ecological and identity politics. We feel that going deeper to embody, infuse, and disrupt the lines along antiracist Gramscian thought, experience, and politics, through Hall’s definition of identity, is revolutionary. This logic allows us to contribute to ethico-political praxis within the context of Newtown’s racialized community and to struggle collectively against what has too often been simply referred to as environmental (in)justices. In so doing, we are working to prefigure new modes of inquiry, articulation, and demand-making that must move forward, given the lack of justice served in hundreds of communities across the US and the world. But in so doing, we recognize that must harness these “old ways” from which to spring from to create new ways of democratically producing knowledge about place-based politics.

Who Gets to Choose How: Collaborative Writing?

There is now an impressive archive of data from the numerous studies that have been conducted on Newtown, sometimes at the request of the NFC, as club and community members tried to draw connections between the illness and disease in their community and the surrounding industries. While it is difficult to make “smoking gun” connections between environmental pollutants and health problems, a recent review of the studies conducted by an environmental consulting firm based in Atlanta found that many of the studies were methodologically flawed, and that the conclusions have serious limitations (see Roskie et al. 2008).

Although Newtown has been studied over and over again, the community members, especially the women of the NFC, do not feel as if anyone is listening to *their* (the community’s) experiences, and if they are listening, they are not hearing what is being said. There are too many discrepancies between what researchers found and what folks experience in their everyday lives. It is with this in mind that the leadership of the NFC began to search for alternatives to traditional relationships with those with the experiential knowledge to conduct research.

Building on a long-standing relationship with a public interest environmental law firm in Atlanta, NFC began partnering with faculty at the University of Georgia. The broader initiative, drawing on the experience of University faculty and students, addresses land use and environmental

issues in Newtown to work across disciplinary ways of thinking about solutions to the problems identified within the community. The “University team” now consists of faculty members and students (from University of Georgia), a lawyer who used to be associated with the UGA, two US Forest Service researchers, an environmental lawyer, a chemical engineer, and a toxicologist/risk assessment specialist. The team has worked with the community to develop approaches to the environmental racism and injustices their community faces, including but not limited to drafting new legislation to propose to the city and building an urban garden to help continue to organize around, and in, the environment. One way the NFC wanted to proceed was through the creation of this writing collective, which was their idea.

Collaborative writing takes a variety of forms and is used to address many divergent political and social agendas. It thus constitutes an intentional practice that differs from many kinds of papers or books that are co-authored in that the pieces that are collaboratively written, in the vein of what we are trying to accomplish, question the boundaries between individuals and question the various forms that the “academic self” takes. This differs from co-authorship which “refers to a joint author or collaborator; coauthoring is the process by which more than one author takes on the takes of creating a written work” (Anderson and Lord 2008, 202). By distinguishing collaborative writing from traditionally co-authored works, we acknowledge the complexity by which we come to this endeavor and engage it as part of the writing process itself (see Ian Cook et al. 2008-2010).

Collaborative writing within the academy, or those projects that intentionally try to break the boundaries constructed between universities and surrounding community, face the difficulty of exploring notions of collaboration in a context which increasingly emphasizes publishing and the individual. Ede and Lunsford (2001, 354) contend that “the notion of author (like that of the founding or sovereign subject on which it depends) is a peculiarly modern construct, one that can be traced back through multiple and overdetermined pathways to the development of modern capitalism and of intellectual property, to Western rationalism, and to patriarchy.” These notions of the author as individual and as authority are embedded within academic structures; “the ideologies of the academy take the autonomy of the individual—and of the author—for granted” (Ede and Anderson 2001, 357).

bell hooks, the name under which Gloria Watkins chooses to publish, is another important example of an individual voice in collective writing. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks (1989, 9) explains that she uses the name bell hooks to

construct a writer-identity that would challenge and subdue all impulses leading me away from speech into silence. I was a young girl buying bubble gum at the corner store when I first really heard the full name bell hooks. I had just ‘talked back’ to a grown person. Even now I can recall the surprised look, the mocking tones that informed me I must be kin to bell hooks—a sharp-tongued woman, a woman who spoke her mind, a woman who was not afraid to talk back. I claimed this legacy of defiance, of will, of courage, affirming my link to female ancestors who were bold and daring in their speech. Unlike my bold and daring mother and grandmother, who were not supportive of talking back, even though they were assertive and powerful in their speech, bell hooks, as I discovered, claimed, and invented her, was my ally, my support.

By paying homage to her past and all those that have influenced her writing, hooks questions the boundaries of where and how knowledge is produced. She is also freeing herself from what she refers to as the “domineering forces of history, of familial life that had charted a map of silence, of right speech” (hooks 1989, 8). The use of a persona allows her (and others) to write more boldly, acknowledges the multiple influences on her writing, and questions notions of scholar as individual.

The Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar represent another example of how collective voices are heard. The English version of their book, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven Lives in India*, emerged from *Sangtin Yatra*, a book that the nine authors published in Hindi. The books seek “to tell a story as a chorus in which nine travelers from varied sociopolitical locations self-reflexively merge their voices to seek answers to a set of shared concerns” (Nagar 2006, xxi). The project explicitly engages a collaborative methodology as well as a collaborative form of writing. In *Playing with Fire*, which Nagar translated from Hindi to English, she acknowledges her role as translator and framer which both separates her from the authors, but at the same time, with her being an original member of the collective, reflects her engagement with the others. The book uses a “blended but fractured we,” which enables the authors to recognize both those things that bring them together and those things that separate their lived experiences (Nagar 2006, XXXIV). We rely on this same fractured “we.”

Nagar (2014) has extended some of her thoughts and concerns about the explicit use of her collaboration not just as a writing collaboration but as research collaboration. In her new book, *Muddying the Waters*, Nagar highlights the importance of working toward “radical vulnerability” within collectivities. About this idea she says (Nagar 2014, 12-13), “If mistakes and complications with violence necessarily accompany our actions, memories, desires, and locations as representers,

then our methodologies must allow all the members of an alliance to become vulnerable before one another about these mistakes and complicities, while also recognizing that our ability to grasp or know these can only be partial and provisional.” In this way, by questioning the notions of knowledge production and taking steps to break down barriers constructed around traditional forms of knowledge production and opening ourselves up to being vulnerable, Nagar is paralleling the goals and approaches of activist scholarship regardless of whether or not she herself identifies as an activist scholar or not.

Based on this discussion, we are working to organize approaches others have pioneered as a way of collectively harnessing diverse perspectives about the ongoing environmental injustice that has brutalized the Newtown Community. In so doing, we work to blend our voices and our insights to better represent the struggles of racially oppressed communities who continue to suffer uneven social power relations even after so much research has shown such extreme disparities within US cities.

Cooperation and Collaboration between the NFC and the University Team

The Newtown Florist Club writing collective formed in 2009 through the confluence of interests and a set of nascent relationships. As the multi-interest team from the University began to develop relationships with the women of the NFC, it was important for all involved that research done in the community did not follow the common pattern that the community had seen before: researcher comes into Newtown; does research *on* the NFC; leaves; NFC left with neither a tangible product or maybe if they are lucky a copy of yet another study done *on* them (much of which they might not actually agree with). Instead of this process of “research as usual,” over a several year period of relationship and trust building, scholars from “The University” explored options of how they could work with the women of the NFC and “co-produce” an understanding of their struggles with environmental politics instead of doing research *on* the NFC. In consultation with the executive director of the NFC, Ms. Faye Bush, several university researchers made a commitment to not publish anything on the NFC under their individual names, instead agreeing with the idea of forming a writing collective so that the work they were doing together could be published in a way that addressed questions of authorship and recognized the complex relationship the NFC has had with previous researchers.

Initially, all members of the University team and the leadership of the NFC were going to participate in the collective. The leadership of NFC determined that they would like to write a book

that told the history of the NFC, but that also provided organizing tips based on their experiences that could be used by other organizations and communities facing the same hardships. As the process began to unfold, it quickly became clear that, due to logistical concerns and different levels of commitment from the members, including everyone equally in the collaborative process at the beginning stages was going to derail the project before it was able to form. As a result, with consultation of the entire collective, we formed a steering committee.

The steering committee consisted of two representatives from the University team and two representatives from the NFC. The steering committee was charged with laying ground rules for the writing collective and producing an outline and proposal for the format of the book. The broader collective still includes all the members of the University team and any member of NFC who wants to participate. In many ways, this collaborative writing process represents another form of collective voice, similar to the collaborative writing of Nagar and the Santin Writers. While we choose to use one voice, it is often the expertise and experience of one person or a small group of people who is represented in the physical writing, but it is through the intentional process of acknowledging that in our words we are influenced by and indebted to each other through discussions and actions that the collaborative writing process develops.

The collective is designed to combine the lived experiences of Newtown residents with academic researchers to create a forum where the voices and experiences of one cannot be distinguished from those of the others. This intentional act is designed to question notions of knowledge production, but to also equate the lived experiences of Newtown residents with the academic findings of researchers and professionals. By creating a forum where all voices are heard equally and indistinguishably from one another (unless they are necessary to distinguish), theoretically each voice on its own should carry the same amount of authority. Unfortunately, this may not be the case when embedded understandings of identity and “legitimate” forms of knowledge production blur these understandings for the audience. We hope that through the intentional use of collaborative writing as a tool, strategy, and tactic, the collective will deconstruct some of these understandings, locally within the EJ politics of Newtown, but also more broadly. To understand the potential of using a writing collective as a tool to challenge conceptions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge production, we think it is important to consider how authors have entered into writing collaborations, what their goals have been, and what form of collaborative writing the collective intends to use as its model as it proceeds with its various projects.

In an attempt to minimize some of the challenges faced by writing collectives and to explicitly discuss issues of power, authority, and research methodology, during the first meeting of the steering committee ground rules were laid out. The first ground rule was that through the process of doing the book project, it would be the goal of all involved to maximize the voice of the NFC, while minimizing the work of the NFC members. This was done at the request of the leadership of the NFC who wanted to be part of the process and participate fully in the development of the book but who were already overwhelmed in their daily tasks of organizing. Again, here is where trust was an essential ingredient.

To assist in the accumulation of materials for the collective projects, we all agreed that all meetings could (and would) be documented using a voice recorder, and any and all information recorded could be used in a project directly related to the collective. Prior to this time, the members of the NFC had been hesitant to be recorded, and so no conversations between the NFC and University team members were recorded prior. This change indicated the intentional participation of the NFC members in the collaborative methodology as discussed by Nagar (2006). In this sense, since the members of the NFC were now part of the research process and had control over how the research was carried out, they were willing to participate in all forms of research. This relates directly to the third ground rule, which was that the members of the NFC have final say in how the project proceeds and what methodologies are used. This was not to privilege the lived experiences of the NFC over the expertise of the University team, but instead to acknowledge the different stages of research and writing: data collection, data analysis, writing, conclusion formation, and editing, and also to acknowledge that in our collaborative processes different people would be carrying out different stages of the process. Giving the NFC final say was an intentional decision to put the power of research into the hands of those that had previously always been research subjects.

The ground rules were designed to address some of the challenges of writing collectives, but this is not to say that challenges do not still exist and are not continually negotiated through the research and writing process. In the next section, we address some of the main challenges that writing collectives face, and discuss how they apply and are addressed by our collective.

Challenges of Writing Collectives

A main challenge of writing collectively is whose voice gets heard, how loud, and when. In many ways the intention of writing collectives is to eliminate the tensions that exist between multiple authors, but this is not always possible. This concern was raised by the Women and Geography

Study Group (WGSG). Reflecting on their work in 2001, they recognized that while their intent was to present a strong, unified voice, in doing so they “simplified and displaced sharp differences in gendered experiences and between subject positions” (WGSG 2001, 257). This is especially challenging in collaborations between activists, academics, and practitioners—who are all trained in different ways and possess specific forms of knowledge.

How collectives choose to negotiate these processes is as divergent as the forms of writing collectives. We focus on two techniques, one used by the WGSG and one used by the Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar, because we feel they most closely align with the techniques we choose to use. In *Feminist Geographies*, the WGSG resolved most disputes using democratic consensus, but they also included:

two types of voice, one collective (the voice of particular writing groups) and one individual (where individuals represent themselves and their own views and/or provide reflections and commentaries). In writing this book we have continually had to negotiate the tensions between individuals and their different views, and to accommodate these to produce a collective voice. Admitting two types of voices into our text is the only way in which we felt we could acknowledge these distinctions, as well as reveal their importance in the construction of feminist geographies. (WGSG 1997, 11-12)

In this way, they negotiated the differences in the group by representing both the collective voice while also allowing dissenting voices to be heard. We attempt to employ multiple techniques to allow multiple voices to be heard within our single voice. One technique we are using in our book project is break out boxes where activists are able to tell their stories from their perspective with their name attached to their words. Another technique is to have a fluid membership in the collective, with a recognition of who participated in specific projects. For example, in this paper the members of the collective are different from those in the other projects we are working on. In this way we maintain a single voice but also recognize who is participating in the creation of this voice.

Richa Nagar and the Sangtin Writers negotiated similar differences in perspective and power in direct ways in the writing of *Playing with Fire*. The authorship is represented by nine women, seven of whom are “village level NGO activists from diverse caste and religious backgrounds,” Richa Singh, a district-level NGO activist, and Richa Nagar, a teacher at the University of Minnesota

(Nagar 2006, XXII). The intentionality of building trust facilitated a relationship where perceptions of power and traditions of knowledge production would be explored and deconstructed.

In the writing of the book, Nagar, who had experience and skill at writing, was in a position where she had the “responsibility and honor to guide this process” (Nagar 2006, XXXIX). To do so, Nagar and the Santin writers use a “blended but fractured we” that enables the multiple voices to be woven into one single experience (Nagar 2006, XXXIV). Nagar further distinguished the importance of the enabling multiple voices and experiences to be heard within the context of the a single collective voice by distinguishing between *sangtins*, *autobiographers*, and *activists*—all of whom represent different combinations of authorship and experience, and the different perspectives of the words “I,” “we,” and “they.” We also employ similar techniques, which can be seen throughout this paper—at times we refer to we, other times specific people’s experiences are indicated by name, even though they are part of the collective, and still other times we use they, especially when talking about the activism of the NFC. These word choices were done intentionally to reflect the different contributions that were made to this process. Furthermore, this specifically recognizes and challenges notions of authorship.

Conclusions

The fact that the Newtown Community’s grassroots response to the anomalous clustering of disease has primarily been organized by a group of predominantly African-American women should come as no surprise given the robust literature written in close connection with environmental/race/gender studies (see McDowell 1999; Merchant 1992; Naples 1998; Sturgeon 1997; Martínez Alier 2000; Checker 2012). The creation of *this* group by the women of the NFC and University team members provides an opportunity to explore the theoretical and praxis-oriented work resulting from deliberate trust building, but also pragmatic discussion about ways to best work together. Even though it is all too often relegated to lesser degrees of political practice (see Mallory 2006), consideration of how theory and activism inform intellectual practice remains necessary and central to the antiracist Gramscian political ecological project to which, along with others threads of literature, we hope to be contributing (Ekers et al 2013).

In this collective endeavor, the members of the Newtown Florist Collective saw an opportunity to connect new energies from non-community members for the sake of thickening their organizing network and finding new outlets through which to bring attention to their struggles. While the members of the NFC do not especially care about Gramscian theory, nor have they had

the time to read and think deeply about it, through collective experience we all have built enough trust that the women of the club believe others within the group find this way of telling their story will indeed help engender greater solidarity with other politically active people from outside Northeast Georgia. We all see the value of finding creative new ways of telling their story for the sake of amplifying it and bringing attention and action to it. That said, their story is told with the basic representations that they are most comfortable with, but these representations are imagined within an antiracist Gramscian way of seeing the world, as opposed to bending their history to conform to any particular approach rather than their worldview fit for the sake of fitting this approach. They are organic intellectuals fighting an intense war of position within a historical-geographical context that for various reasons has not been imagined this way. The non-community members of the writing collective get the privilege of learning about political organizing and the long-term struggles experienced through a 65-year history. There are few more important experiences that scholars interested in social movement theory can have than the kind of genuine and sustained relationship of trust that has been born in this project.

In assembling this unique team, we are attempting to take stock of what a diverse group can offer framing and engaging in antiracist struggle. At the same time, this writing collective is trying to think innovatively about what kinds of methodologies, analyses, and communication strategies are necessary to understand how communities like Newtown can mobilize co-produced discourses and frame political strategies that can be understood collaboratively through different lenses and transform their everyday lives. Related to this kind of praxis, Loftus (2012) invokes Gramsci to suggest “through producing nature, humans and their environments coevolve. Consciousness of this coevolution emerges through active involvement in the process” (85). While there are still much larger struggles for this group to engage in, this deliberative coevolution of our identity politics, harking back to Hall’s discussion of “the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept that can no longer be and never could be, included in the previous regime,” propels us forward into new forms of everyday praxis. To this end, even if empirically new knowledge is not produced through this endeavor (although we think it has been and will continue to be), the prefigurative processes that are giving way to these new ways of thinking about struggles around environmental justice, race, gender, and local politics, are themselves a valuable insight for all within the group.

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