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ANT240  
5/12/20

### **Naturalizing Concrete Jungles: Deconstructing Structural Violence in Trenton**

The Mercer County Parks Commission oversees an array of parks throughout its diverse county, but has faced challenges in engaging the Trenton community in local natural spaces, especially with regards to developing a personal appreciation for nature, fostering connections between residents and local parks, and transforming the perception of the county parks in Trenton to a venue for personal enjoyment, natural immersion and mental peace. It is also important to consider how “markers of difference” permeate the Park Commission’s dilemma, as a significant proportion of the Trenton community is low-income and/or identifies as a racial minority — traditionally underserved and disadvantaged groups. While access to parks at first glance may seem as a leisurely activity, it can be an important determinant of health, especially for minority communities who may not otherwise have access to extensive outdoor space. Regular outdoor experiences have been documented to improve both physical and mental health<sup>1</sup>, yet this benefit often remains limited or even inaccessible for the socially disadvantaged. In our interview with land steward Alex Rivera (a Trenton native), while reflecting on his own experience growing up in the community and later as a city worker, he thoughtfully responded after a brief pause that “one of the primary barriers specific to Trenton is that people feel unsafe in the parks,” as well as the “lack of amenities and comfort in the space” in terms of feeling a sense of belonging as residents of the community who have the right to access these natural benefits.

This tension between access to “therapeutic” experiences and greater structural impediments evoke the driving arguments of Paul Farmer’s structural violence, where “suffering is ‘structured’ by historically given (and often economically driven processes) and forces that conspire...to constrain agency” (Farmer, 40) and thus, Farmer argues “it is necessary to address such matters as public health services, educational facilities, hazards of urban life, and other social and economic parameters that

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, Christopher, “The Public Value of Urban Parks,” *Urban Institute*, 1 Feb. 2017, 3.

influence survival chances” (Farmer, 46). While Farmer’s language of “suffering” and “survival” may seem better suited to the plateaus of Haiti than the streets of New Jersey’s capital, the mental and physical stresses of economic instability, surrounding urban afflictions of crime and insufficient public resources, and disproportionate access to healthcare services (and especially mental health resources) in underprivileged communities that may facilitate endemic hypertension, heart disease, and under diagnosed mental illnesses can take their toll, manifesting in a less publically visceral, but just as painful, form of suffering than Haitian AIDS victims. Amartya Sen’s sentiment that “asymmetry of power can indeed generate a kind of quiet brutality” (Sen, xvi), further underscores this dilemma, as systems of inequity and access have rendered many disadvantaged Trentonians hesitant to engage with the parks or not fully cognizant of their multifaceted benefits. One of the articles cited in our literature review<sup>2</sup> aptly demonstrates how park access itself becomes intertwined within societal power structures, where access to urban parks for minority communities can be examined both through “spatial access” — the physical availability of the space — and “social access” — whether communities face socioeconomic barriers (e.g., crime, lower-wage job constraints, which are often the product of greater power structures) in visiting them, ultimately impeding access to an impactful “therapeutic” resource.

In our interview with Alex Rivera, he termed his newfound appreciation for nature in his young adult years as a “revelation,” as it gave him a sense of mental peace amidst the challenges of youth. Rivera emphasized his desire to extend these mental health benefits and personal enjoyment from immersion in natural spaces to others in the community, valuing parks for their ecological and environmental features rather than the most commonly used features like sports facilities. In some ways, Rivera optimistically envisions the natural spaces of Trenton to be a mental refuge for residents (especially youth), as these opportunities for “mental refuge” and *free* “therapies” for other emotional/psychological/physical challenges Trentonians may be facing are often not as attainable in their

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<sup>2</sup> Weiss et al. [Reconsidering Access: Park Facilities and Neighborhood Disamenities in New York City](#). *Journal of Urban Health* 88 (2011).

immediate social environments (which are permeated by histories of structural violence against low-income minorities in the United States). The surrounding “toxicity” of the environments — a toxicity not created by dangerous chemicals but by underlying pathologies of power, against which Rivera hopes that increased interactions with nature may help remediate — evoke images of Latoya Ruby Frazier’s discussion of environmental decay and its disproportionate effects on the health of the African American community of Braddock. Similar to how the agency of her subjects’ bodies were often constrained by “how this history ravaged their bodies and created the physical ruins” (Frazier, 140) of the local environment, the bodies of disadvantaged Trentonians have also been constrained, as the (idealistically) ubiquitous and equitable resource of local parks often can be an unavailable resource. Furthermore, both through Frazier’s work and the experience of Trentonians, it is apparent how the surrounding environment can have such significant impacts on people’s health, especially those in more vulnerable communities. The complicated “internalized life experiences, perceptions of ourselves and familial personas” that have been cultivated by “sociopolitical baggage” (Frazier, 85), illuminates some of the subtle yet significant mental challenges affecting those in underprivileged sectors of Trenton. As demonstrated in research, engagement with nature and appreciation of the biological environment can have tremendous psychological benefits, which emerge as even more pressing in light of the greater issues of structures of violence, pathologies of power and toxic environments faced by some Trenton residents. But most importantly, without participating in initiatives to attract people to these natural spaces and promote a longer term relationship with the natural environment, these physical, emotional and psychological health benefits are less readily attainable and thus, these individuals may remain constrained by localized and engrained structures of power and inequity.