Episode 4: Dance Against the Incinerator

Trace Material: Stories from the Plastics Age

[Music - Rainbow Road]

Ava Robinson:

As the 20th century came to a close, plastic was everywhere. Grocery stores were filled with aisle after aisle of food wrapped in plastic. Toy stores were stocked almost entirely with plastic toys. Americans embraced their new plasticized lives. But what happened when they threw that broken toy or yogurt container away?

Burgess Brown:

Plastic started to pile up. And as a result, garbage became a bigger problem than ever. From Parsons Healthy Materials Lab at The New School, this is Trace Material: Stories from the Plastics Age.

[Music - Rainbow Road]

"Welcome to Ironbound Insights, I'm Vic De Luca, your host. This evening we're in Old Campino's Restaurant where the Essex county committee to stop the garbage incinerator is having a fundraising dance. We're gonna see some people speaking about the issue and please stay with us cause we're gonna be live right here talking about the dangers of the garbage incinerator which is planned for the Ironbound section of Newark. Stay with us."

Ava:

Okay, Vic isn't joining us as a new host. That recording is from a 1984 local news program called Ironbound Insights where Vic was reporting from the Dinner Dance Against the Garbage Incinerator.

Burgess:

It might not be the catchiest of names, but it gets to the point. In this video Vic hops around from table to table at the Dinner Dance and chats with locals about their thoughts on the incinerator that was being planned for their neighborhood, the Ironbound, in Newark, New Jersey.

Vic: I'm now with Arthur Roser who's a businessman here in the Ironbound and throughout Newark. Arthur, do you think this incinerator will harm the Ironbound?

Arthur: This is what frightens me the most is the fact that we already have, according to the state, the highest levels of lead. Even the state advocate has come out and stated that if this incinerator goes up, we'll have 5 times as much. If we're already are in a danger point, what will happen to us in terms of our health?

Vic: Okay now I'm with Frank Movella, who's a ten-year old who lives down in the Ironbound. Frank, what do you think about this garbage incinerator?

Frank: See, I wanna live the rest of my life here and I don't like this because mostly I've been getting bronchitis almost every year and this could make it worse for me. I'm saying this because everyone could get sick from this.

Ava:
By the time the garbage incinerator plans for the Ironbound were released in the early 1980s, the community there was already active and knowledgeable about toxics in their environment. They had to be.

Burgess:
The Ironbound section of Newark is a unique place. Residential and industrial have always been side-by-side, pressed up against each other and bordered by railroad tracks and highways.

Ava:
To talk about what happened to America's waste boom in the 1980s, we're going to focus the story on the communities that bore the burden of that waste. Communities like the Ironbound in Newark.

Burgess:
To help us tell the story, we spoke to Ironbound Community Corporation activists—who actually hosted that dinner dance Vic went to—about their community's fight to reduce toxic waste in the Ironbound and the long battle they waged against the incinerator.

Ava:
And we also spoke to a community organizer working in Newark today about the legacy of that incinerator. Because, well, spoiler alert, it got built. But trust us, the story is still very much worth telling.

[Guitar music]

"The planners down in Trenton got a problem to solve, million tons of poison that they gotta get rid of, so they take out their maps and they write their numbers down and they say "hey let's ship it to the Ironbound."

Arnold Cohen:
The Ironbound section of Newark gets its name from the fact that it's surrounded by railroad tracks. It's always been an immigrant working-class neighborhood. In the past it was German and Irish. Currently, your big immigrant groups are your Portuguese, Brazilians, Hispanics. And it's maintained its flavor over the years as that. It was never a rich neighborhood so you don't have any of the old mansions that you have in some urban areas. But what you have people have taken very good care of and have a lot of

pride in. So the battle against toxic waste is a battle for survival here in the neighborhood. You have this stark contrast between the love and the care that people have put into their homes and in their families versus what some industry has done and is attempting to continue to do to this neighborhood. And what people see is really turning it into a dump. And that is the dynamic and that is the battle we're fighting in the middle of.

Burgess:
That's Arnold Cohen, an organizer with the Ironbound Community Corporation, being interviewed in 1991. At that point, he'd been working as an activist in the Ironbound for over a decade. But the ICC wasn't founded with toxic waste in mind. That issue came to them.

Ava:
Back in 1969, parents in the Ironbound banded together to get funding for a daycare in the area. The Ironbound Children's Center was the flagship program of the organization during its early years.

Burgess:
Then, in the mid-70s, Arnold…

[Arnold: my name is Arnold Cohen]

Burgess:
… teamed up with two organizing friends.

[Nancy: I'm Nancy Zak. Bob: And me! I'm Bob Cartwright.]

Burgess:

…to expand the services of the ICC to meet a growing list of needs in the community.

Ava:

They were able to open up a storefront in the Ironbound where community members could drop by and share their struggles. After reflecting on the issues the community brought to them, the ICC set about trying to help solve some problems.

Arnold:

You know, so the initial things that we're involved in were health related. We were able to have a mobile van going around, giving examinations to children that were on Medicaid, just to make sure that they got check-ups. And one of the first issues that we dealt with was around airplane noise. When one of the older people in the neighborhood came into our office in tears, because this supersonic jet was flying over his home. And it was just like the last straw of horrible airplane noise affecting his life and his health. So it's, you know, some of our initial entrees before the... before the toxic stuff.

Ava:
But very quickly, the “toxic stuff” started to take center stage. The Ironbound had had factories for decades and decades. The neighborhood had always been pressed up against the creation and making of products. But, in the 1970s, the other side of American consumerism started to come to Newark as well.

Bob:

Ironbound has been an industrial area with residents for about 140 years. It's an, it's an unusual neighborhood. We actually talked with a sociologist once he had a category that he thought that we were stereotypical of which is a neighborhood where industry is completely integrated with residents. Where there's no separation. And that's how Ironbound developed. And with small industrial enterprises on the same city blocks as apartments and two and three family houses.

Arnold:

Back in the mid seventies, we learned about plans for multiple incinerators. The city had a list of what they called their ‘dirty dozen,’ which was a list of toxic waste sites in the city that needed to be cleaned up. Ten of them were in Ironbound. We also learned about plans for at that point three incinerators, a toxic waste incinerator. So all that led to the formation of the Ironbound Committee Against Toxic Waste because we realized we needed to fight back.

Burgess:
All of these incinerators were suddenly being planned because incineration seemed like the future of garbage disposal. Landfills were, well, filled. The spread of plastics created a culture of disposability around a material that will never decompose. All that new waste meant America needed a new plan.

Bob:

Incineration, which had been dumped back in the sixties because of pollution got renamed as "resource recovery." Now, once you turn it as "resource recovery," and if you're sitting in Livingston, New Jersey, not in Ironbound, and you hear the word resource recovery. We're going to recycle things, we're going to take the rest of what you produce. We're going to turn it into energy so that we don't have to import foreign oil. Wouldn't that be great? Well, it's great. Unless you've got pollution with it. And it's great if you are living in Livingston, just thinking about it, as opposed to living in Ironbound and breathing.

Ava:
So according to these companies, the new incinerators weren’t only making garbage go away forever—they were also creating energy from a resource that was constantly renewing: our mountains of trash. And while incinerators do create energy, the folks at the ICC said that they also created harmful toxics and polluted the local area. This solution may not have been as simple as people wanted to believe.

Bob:

We were aware of the fact that the toxic chemicals that would come out of the incinerator would be primarily from the plastics that were put in. We were aware of that from the beginning.

Ava:
Burning large amounts of trash will always release particulate matter and smoke. But burning organics like food waste and burning plastic are different. The growing plastic production made incineration more dangerous.

Burgess:
The Ironbound community was especially weary of incineration because of their history with one particular toxic chemical: dioxin. According to the EPA, dioxin is a carcinogen, can cause reproductive and developmental problems, and can interfere with the immune system and with hormones.

Ava:

Folks in the Ironbound were all too familiar with dioxin by the time the incinerator plans came along. In the 1950s and 60s a chemical plant in the neighborhood produced the infamous herbicide used during the Vietnam War called Agent Orange. During production, dioxin was released into the air, water, and soil all over the Ironbound and left parts of it contaminated to this day.

Burgess:

Residents were still battling to clean up the dioxin from Agent Orange when the incinerator plans came along. If you listened to our last episode, you'll remember that Dr. Sarah Evans from Mount Sinai told us that dioxin is released when PVC is burned. So, when The ICC got wind of several incinerators planned for the Newark area, and over twenty planned for the state of New Jersey, they knew they needed to mobilize.

Bob:

We were cognizant from the beginning that certain battles that we engaged in were winnable, and others were not.

Ava:
These companies had different proposals that varied widely. They were also in different stages. One was called At-Sea Incineration. That's at-S-E-A. Essentially, the idea was to burn the garbage on enormous barges out on the water, so any pollution would be further from land, and people.

Bob:

At Sea that was a winnable one, because it was not created by local politicians and business interests. It was much more of a national thing. The corporations behind At Sea Incineration included, you know, all kinds of major polluters and whatnot, but they were scattered around the country. So that seemed to be winnable.

Burgess:
It was winnable in large part because the ICC could lean on local politicians for support. These weren't local companies and Bob told us that neither the community nor the politicians trusted them to actually do what they claimed they were going to do.

Ava:
At-Sea didn’t gain enough local traction. The company eventually failed.

Bob:

One of the happiest and proudest days of my life was the day that I read in the newspaper, a very short article that declared that At Sea Incineration had declared bankruptcy.

Burgess:
Another company trying to get an incinerator built in New Jersey was SCA.

Bob:

SCA's incinerator. That was to be built 500 feet away from people's houses. That appeared to be a winnable one. And those two, we won on. We also won on a bunch of little issues like the Thomas Street warehouse, we got that one cleaned up and some other things in Ironbound.

Ava:
Bob, Nancy, Arnold and their colleagues at the ICC were constantly working on what probably felt like a million different battles, both large and small. Their fight against what they generally referred to as “the garbage incinerator” (meaning the only one that is actually standing and burning) was a big one.

Arnold:

So this was a proposal with Port Authority of New York, New Jersey, County of Essex, and a company called American Ref-Fuel. Peter Shapiro, who's a County Executive at that point, Democrat, quote-unquote progressive was saying, you know, "This is our solution to our toxic waste. This is the way to go. We're going to change it into energy and isn't this wonderful." And so we really had to change that whole narrative around and just say no, and had to convince quote-unquote, you know, national environmental groups that this was a real danger.

Burgess:
So the team at ICC set about making that clear. They took their case to the court of public opinion and an early hearing took place at a local Catholic church.

Nancy:

The reason people got involved was because we made it very clear how toxic waste impacted a person's health. We drew a very good connection. And we were constantly flyering about the health impacts. Well, the story I always tell about the incinerator is when the incinerator people wanted to come to the largest Portuguese church in Ironbound, Our Lady of Fatima, and they approached the parish council, but there was somebody on the parish council who was a member of the Ironbound Committee Against Toxic Waste. He said to the priest don't agree to it unless they make it a public meeting. And so they made this public meeting, and this crowd turned out that overflowed into the streets in Ironbound. There were people outside. We were there, but we weren't running the meeting, but we had tables all around the edge with things in Portuguese, Spanish, and English about the health effects of the incinerator.

Ava:
The community in the Ironbound was already being affected by toxics. People like little Frank from that video of the dinner dance knew that their neighborhood couldn't take any more pollution. And they were ready to let the world know.

Nancy:

These guys come in and they're at the podium and they're showing a slideshow about incinerators in Europe and they show these bikini-clad women laying on lounge chairs, right by the garbage incinerator in Norway or someplace. And they're saying, see? It's so safe, everybody loves it, you know. And in the middle of the talk, the Girl Scout troop that was there that night, the girls got up and started going around the podium with their little homemade signs about "stop the burn." And all of a sudden somebody ran up from the front of the, of the audience and grabbed the bottom of the screen. And the screen was one of those retractable screens that went [*imitates noise*] and the whole place erupted in applause and everybody was cheering and screaming and that was the end of the meeting. And we were handing out our flyers and talking to people.

Burgess:
Local churches were a great place for the ICC to speak to the community about toxics… they also tried out some pretty creative community building strategies.

Bob:

We used to do spaghetti dinners. We called them "peace spaghetti dinners," where we had these poster contests and essay writing contests and Nancy and Arnold did most of that work with the schools. And then we would have an annual dinner you know, because big organizations have annual dinners, you know, as fundraisers and whatnot. And they charge, you know, $500 a ticket or whatever. I think we charged 50 cents or a dollar for the spaghetti dinner. And then we would, you know, give out the awards to the kids. And that was something that got kids involved with our work. It got parents involved, grandparents. They would all come to the dinner because their kid was getting an award.

Ava:
But it wasn't only people who lived in the Ironbound that the ICC reached out to and communicated with about toxic waste and the possible dangers of the incinerator.

Arnold:

So the other piece around the garbage incinerator is we also organized people in the suburbs. We had people going door to door in Maplewood, South Orange, suburban communities, trying to let their neighbors know that this is something we would not want in our community. We should come out in opposition to it being in Ironbound.

Burgess:
So the ICC gathered all sorts of coalitions from all over New Jersey who came together to fight against the garbage incinerator that was planned for the Ironbound.

Ava:
These coalitions had worked together against other incinerators like the SCA and At-Sea and won. So what happened this time?

Bob:
The garbage incinerator was being pushed by a very large coalition of people based around the Democratic party and based upon liberals in the Democratic party. Their goal at that time was to build one garbage incinerator in every county in New Jersey, 21 were to be built.

Bob:

My understanding is that we stopped 20 of them. The only one that got built at that time was in Newark. As a part of the organizing in Newark, we also set up a statewide coalition at that time around garbage incineration. And that's how we were able to defeat the rest of the garbage incinerators around the state. The one in Newark was in the planning stages earlier, it had the financial and political backing, and it was clear that that was not going to be something that we won on. You know, if we were to win on that particular issue, it would be like a miracle. I tend not to believe in miracles though.

Burgess:
Now, the ICC wasn't affiliated with the Democratic Party. They still aren't. But they often found them to be allies in the work they were doing.

Bob:

We also were very, very careful to not get associated with either of the two political parties. Lots of times community activists will ally with either Democrats, sometimes the Republicans. The point of view that we took though, is that these issues were not partisan issues in that sense. And so we welcomed the participation of Democrats, Republicans, and anybody.

Ava:
But this time local progressive Democrats backed the incinerator. Everyone was looking for a magic solution for waste and for them the incinerator was the closest they could find. The ICC proved time and again that there was real power in locality. But that was also true with the incinerator that ended up getting built. Local politicians, people with job titles like "County Commissioner" and "City Councilmember," were the ones who paved the way for it.

Bob:

They thought that incineration was a solution because incineration had been going on for decades and decades. It got a bad reputation in the sixties when the first environmentalists started organizing around air pollution. And so what they did is that they relabeled it, right? So now it's no longer a garbage incinerator, which everybody knows to hate. Now it's a resource recovery facility; provides energy to the community. All of those things that you don't want, we'll take care of! You know, it was convincing to suburbanites of course, because it wasn't going to be located anywhere near them. So, you know, liberal Democrats that lived in suburban Essex County were supportive of the proposal. And so what we argued is if you like it so much, why don't we put it in Livingston?

Burgess:
But, they didn’t put it in Livingston, a predominantly white suburb. They put it in the Ironbound. The diverse working class neighborhood that was already struggling with toxics. And that wasn’t a coincidence.

Bob:

You know, even back in the eighties you, you would see very, very big differences, based on economic status in terms of how people looked at the environment. In suburban areas it's more of an idea, whereas in Ironbound, it's a material reality.

Ava:
And in the decades since the incinerator was built, there have been new generations of activists who have had to grapple with that reality.

Melissa:

So my name is Melissa Miles and I'm the executive director at the New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance in New Jersey. The New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance or the Alliance for short is a statewide organization dedicated to supporting communities that are on the frontline of environmental pollution.

Burgess:
Communities like the Ironbound. Melissa got her start in community organizing with the ICC. She’s known Nancy, Bob and Arnold for years. Now, she works specifically on environmental justice issues with the Alliance.

Melissa:

Next year will be our 20th year of existence. We were started by, you know, local activists from different parts of New Jersey who decided that it was time to come together and, and put a stop to, the trend of the siting of polluting facilities in communities of color and low income communities.

Ava:
Although the term “Environmental Justice” became popularized after the ICC’s fight against the incinerator, looking back, that fight could certainly be described as a fight for environmental justice.

Melissa:

The environmental justice movement or EJ movement as it's often called, is basically folks who are impacted, who come from communities that are impacted by environmental pollution. It looks different in different places, there are places where, you know, the EJ communities may be impacted by transportation infrastructure and other places where it may be pipelines and other places where it may be drilling and other places where it may be fracking and other places where it may be you know, just the siting of, of energy plants. So different communities have different issues, but there are some that seem to be common and one of them is race. If you are a person of color, you're more likely to live around pollution than white people in many states. That is a fact in New Jersey.

Burgess:
We can see the truth of that statement in where they put the one incinerator that ended up being built in the State of New Jersey: an immigrant neighborhood in a predominantly Black city. Pretty far from Livingston or other affluent white neighborhoods.

Melissa:

So in New Jersey it's the number one determinant of whether or not you live around pollution and the same is true throughout the nation. And the second determinant is income. Those are the lines that sort of connect environmental justice communities. So you even have poor white rural communities that are environmental justice communities, but the movement really grew out of black communities, brown communities, Indigenous sovereign communities and nations that were just tired of being dumped upon and began to take it upon themselves to organize and to, you know, fight for a change.

Burgess:
Melissa says this “people first” approach is what sets the EJ movement apart from environmentalism.

Melissa:

The difference between EJ and environmentalism is that EJ grew out of the desire to protect lives first, right? So people being able to see the visible evidence of pollution, of unjust pollution in their neighborhoods, whether it was dumping or siting of facilities. And then the health impacts. Environmentalism, on the other hand, grew out of spaces that were more concerned with the preservation of lands, you know, the preservation of air, of water, of animals. And historically did not care as much about the lives, particularly the lives of black and brown and Indigenous people.

Ava:
So similar to how Bob spoke about the residents of the Ironbound, EJ grew out of communities where the degradation of the environment was a material reality. For people who live far away from factories or incinerators, when they think of the environment, they might think of something abstract, like an endangered animal they’ve never seen. And that’s a very real issue, but it isn't an issue that is affecting them, or their body, on a day-to-day basis.

Burgess:
Environmental Justice work is so important in New Jersey, because it’s known as a major hub of industry. And because of that, across the river here in New York, New Jersey’s reputation might be a little worse for wear.

Melissa:

It's funny because I am a native New Yorker. I moved to New Jersey when I was a teenager, but I still went to New York every single day. So I considered myself a New Yorker. And there were all these jokes about New Jersey. Like why did New Jersey smell so bad? Why is it that when you're on the turnpike, there are all these odors and, you know, people would call New Jersey “the armpit of New York.” You know it just seemed like a world away. And you know it just never occurred to me, you kind of blame it on New Jersey. It never occurs to you that it's New York's fault that New Jersey smells this way, because we do

indeed host the chunk of the region's infrastructure. You know, we have the refineries, we have the port, it's the port of New York and New Jersey, but the ships come here, right.

Melissa:

They come to New Jersey. They come to Newark, they come to Elizabeth, they come to Bayonne. We have the airport, seaport, rail port. We have the, the energy center and the, you know, the power plants. We have the sewage treatment plant. We have the incinerator. There's a reason why New Jersey smells the way it does is, because when you know, folks in the, on the Upper West Side of New York throw their trash away, it's getting trucked and barged over here. You know, we're getting trash from other countries here in Newark. We're getting waste from other municipalities. And, you know, Newark is not the only city that has infrastructure that benefits much wealthier communities: Camden, Trenton, Rahway, Linden, Elizabeth.

Ava:
New York City is far and away America's largest and most congested city. And as Arnold said, Newark is closer to Manhattan than some parts of Brooklyn are. New York has outsourced much of its infrastructure, including waste management, to New Jersey, and Jersey residents have paid the price.

Melissa:

New Jersey has an issue where, you know, you could literally forget that smoke is not supposed to be coming out of stacks over your head because it's so common to see. You know, I really only saw things like that when I moved to New Jersey. It just seemed like, okay, there was a stack, there was some smoke coming out of it. Okay. What am I supposed to do about that? I don't know, drive faster. Like why is that building flaring over there? Drive faster.

Burgess:
For people who have never been to this part of Jersey, it might be hard to picture exactly what Melissa is talking about.

Ava:
Well I mean like, it's not that hard to picture. It's just the opening credits to The Sopranos, you know when Tony is driving on the turnpike?

Burgess:
Ugh, Ava. I don't know when Tony is driving on the turnpike…

Ava:
Have you not seen the Sopranos?

Burgess:
I really don't want to talk about this.

Ava:
Okay, well, it’s shot from the Turnpike as Tony passes smokestack after smokestack, and truck after truck, all while planes are like directly above him. And that’s pretty much what it always looks like.

Burgess:
Melissa moved to New Jersey decades after the incinerator was built, and by that time, it just blended in with the rest of the industrial landscape.

Melissa:

The incinerator is weird because like, you can see it from the river. And, you know, I was standing on the boardwalk one day and I look up and I'm like, Oh, that's the incinerator. It was this huge stack. This huge gray stack, and there are just, you know, puffs of smoke billowing out. And so it's one of those things that you just get used to seeing, you know, that's a, it's part of the landscape. And there's no angle from which you can see the entire complex. It's, it's enormous actually.

Melissa:

It's just kind of obscured, you know, and the trucks that come bringing trash in and out, they do a lot of what they do at night, you know. And you just never really realize how much is actually going on there. What it is actually is a facility that burns almost a million tons of trash a year. Trash that, as I mentioned, comes from different municipalities in New Jersey, New York, some of it even from overseas. And, you know, they do this as a quote-unquote "service." They market themselves as a waste-to-energy facility.

Ava:

Covanta, the company that runs the incinerator, says they power over one million homes, and that they are a significantly more sustainable solution than landfills are. And that’s all true, but Newark residents are the people who are paying for that energy with their health.

Melissa:

Even though it does provide a service, it's a service that ultimately is harming us and, and killing the people closest to it. A little bit at a time, you know, it's a, it's a slow death by way of lead and arsenic and mercury and particulate matter.

Burgess:

But it’s not just the chemicals that Melissa is worried about. She says there’s a sickness in the way we think about waste.

Melissa:

There are definitely health impacts. You only need to smell plastic melting to know, “I need to get out of here.” But I think the first issue is really that imagination that tells us that putting our trash into this plastic bag and sending it somewhere is a solution for it. You know, I think that's an illness. You know, the trash does not magically disappear. It goes somewhere. You see a barge, you know, and you're just like, there's something wrong here. You know, we just stuff all of our unwanted things into plastic bags and send them somewhere away from us. You know, so I think that that is the first bit of harm we do to

ourselves and others is that fallacy that we live with. You know, at least we need to first come to terms with the fact that this is wrong, right? Like this is wrong. I'm putting plastic in plastic to send it to go burn, and this is wrong.

Burgess:

A few of you may be wondering, well, if landfills aren't an option, and incinerators aren't a perfect solution, what can we do with our waste? It's a good question, and there are no easy answers.

Melissa:

What we talk about in our community is how do we come to terms with the fact that when you have more resources, you're able to consume more, you're able to throw away more. And so, this incinerator does not serve our community. It serves the region. And its existence makes it so that we don't find more viable solutions for consumption and waste. It must get waste to survive. Every subsidy that goes to the incinerator, every clean energy credit that goes to the incinerator is diversion from real solutions to consumption and waste.

Ava:

When we think about waste solutions, in many ways, we're trying to mop up water with the tap still running. Can there be a sustainable solution to plastic waste? Or is the way we're consuming plastic simply unsustainable?

Melissa:

Don't landfill it. That's bad. Don't burn it. But if you don't landfill it or burn it, it's going to end up in your river, your waterways. There's no solution, you know, that, that is good for plastic.

Burgess:

There might be a word that's on the tip of your tongue. One that you've heard your whole life. One of the three R's we all learned in elementary school? You might be thinking, we already have a solution to plastic waste: recycling.

Ava:

Join us next time as we dig into the history behind the myth of recycling.

[Credits]