

Hidden Waste, Toxic Bodies

Narratives of Industrial Pollution in the USS Lead Superfund Site, East Chicago,
Indiana



Abandoned picnic benches outside Carrie Gosch Elementary School, winter 2018 (Photograph by Chad Davis. Personal collection. 2018.)

A Thesis

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Introduction

On a cold late winter morning in March, Akeeshea, a 42-year-old Black single mother of three, starts laughing: “I’m a lead baby, that’s what they call us, the lead babies.” “It’s not funny,” she says, but sometimes laughter is all that keeps her from crying.¹ Akeeshea is one of over 1,100 residents in East Chicago, Indiana recently displaced by the toxic legacy of industrial pollution. She was evicted from the West Calumet Housing Complex due to health concerns over lead and arsenic levels inside and outside her home. She now lives down the street, fearful of what lead and other toxins might be found in her new residence.

Akeeshea’s former home in the West Calumet Housing Complex was built atop a former USS Lead smelter and refinery. In April of 2009, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officially established the USS Lead Superfund Site, 36 years after the West Calumet Housing Complex was built. The Superfund program was established by Congress in 1980 under The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA). It provides emergency environmental funding for clean up and emergency testing in areas of severe toxic contamination.² Because toxic contamination is so pervasive throughout the United States, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color, the program has been limited in its ability to address all but the most contaminated of areas.³

The problem in East Chicago extends beyond the complex into a large part of the mostly

¹ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, March 16, 2019.

² “What is Superfund?” United States Environmental Protection Agency, accessed January 12, 2019, <https://www.epa.gov/superfund/what-superfund>.

³ There are more than 1,300 Superfund sites in the United States, and these are only the most severely contaminated parts of the country. Budget cuts and funding gaps have prevented most clean up efforts from being implemented. (David Johnson, “Do You Live Near Toxic Waste? See 1,317 of the Most Polluted Spots in the U.S.,” *Health, TIME*, Mar. 22, 2017, <http://time.com/4695109/superfund-sites-toxic-waste-locations/>.)

black and low income Calumet community, which is located in the southwestern part of the city. The site was divided into three zones in order of priority. Zone 1 contains the entire West Calumet Housing Complex, where lead levels reached upwards of 90,000 parts per million (ppm), or 9% of total volume, in resident's yards and homes. Zone 2 is made up of the low-income mostly Black Calumet neighborhood, and zone 3 is known as East Calumet, a middle-class racially diverse neighborhood.

My research follows the story of Akeeshea and other East Chicago residents to examine how legacies of toxicity shape their everyday lived experiences. East Chicago is an industrial mega-hub, with some of the largest factories and industrial centers in the world. Furthermore, its political and corporate history are defined by racialized decision-making and (il)legal corruption. My interviews with residents prompted many questions: Why are East Chicago residents forced to sacrifice their health for jobs? Why has the media been so absent in covering the gravity of this issue? Why have environmental justice activists struggled to gain concessions from the government and industry? How does racism and classism affect these issues? There are a multitude of questions presented by the situation in East Chicago. My principal research question asks how toxicity has impacted the physical, social, cultural, and political lives of low-income communities of color in East Chicago, Indiana. Through research and field work, I established my overarching claim, that racism and corporate and political corruption are symptoms of the inequities of racial capitalism, which compound legacies of toxic industrial pollution in low-income communities of color and limit the strategic capabilities of environmental justice groups.

The case study of East Chicago serves as a crucial example in understanding how acts of corruption are not merely abnormal acts within otherwise equal economic and political systems, but are rather symptoms of unequal systems that render the toxic bodies of marginalized people

invisible, and serve to recreate spaces of injustice. By analyzing existing research, I show the gap in theory regarding the relationship between racial capitalism and corruption in cases of environmental injustice. Through field work, I reveal how the lived experiences of people like Akeeshea are informed by the rendered invisibility of their polluted livelihoods. Through documentary filmmaking, I creatively visualize and present new opportunities for creative analysis and observation. Finally, by putting history, theory, and personal experiences into conversation with one another, I show how analyzing acts of corruption as symptoms of racial capitalism begs an understanding of the interdisciplinary cultural and political nature of environmental injustice, and the inequities in processes that serve to create justice. Racial capitalism and its relationship to corruption engage in the multi-faceted legacies of industrial toxicity in communities of color, and provide new opportunities for justice in the midst of violence.

This project is meant to be read in a particular order. The introduction and first three chapters of this project are meant to be read first, followed by a viewing of the documentary, titled *Mother Lead*, and then a reading of the fourth chapter and conclusion. It is designed this way because the beginning of the paper serves to situate the narrative in the historical, theoretical, and personal realities faced by East Chicago residents. The film then serves to visualize the first half of the paper, and present new ideas and conclusions. The final part of the paper serves to put the film and paper into conversation with each other, drawing conclusions and presenting opportunities for further research, possible solutions, and addressing where gaps still lie.

This research is based in personal narratives. It seeks to connect the theoretical to the personal, to visualize how toxic exposure is impacting the lives of East Chicago residents, and to

apply new lenses through which academics, activists, and others can understand environmental injustice. This research is inherently collaborative, and through this project, I illuminate and amplify the voices of residents, sharing their stories to foster the possibility of change.

The Mother of the Block

History and Theory Behind Racial Capitalism, Corruption, and Calumet's Hidden Poison

When Akeeshea was growing up, the Calumet community was the bedrock of her identity. Her grandmother was the mother of the block, offering fresh produce to neighbors, babysitting kids whose parents were still in school, and hosting barbeques in her backyard. When the levels of toxic pollution in her community were fully realized in 2009, her foundation was shaken.⁴ The neighborhood she found comfort in as a child and young adult was now sited as a super-polluted sector of the city, divided up into zones, and entirely reorganized based on levels of toxic exposure. The spaces where she taught her kids how to ride bikes and shared laughs with neighbors, were now defined by a consciousness of knowing she, her kids, her family, and her neighbors were being polluted at extreme levels.

This chapter serves to explore this shaken foundation through a historical and theoretical lens. The theories of racial capitalism, the polluter-industrial complex, environmental racism and environmental justice inform how corporate and political corruption have compounded the effects of environmental racism and racialized toxicity, and limited the strategic abilities of environmental justice groups. By first putting these theories into conversation with the city's history, I reveal the historical trends which created the situation in the USS Lead Superfund Site. The case study of East Chicago reveals how cities like it, with large populations of disenfranchised low-income people of color, face disproportionate levels of corruption on both a political and corporate scale, resulting in toxic exposure and premature death at beyond alarming

⁴ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, March 16, 2019.

levels. This work is largely influenced by Andrew Hurley's similar analysis of Gary, Indiana.⁵ My work builds upon his conclusions to reveal the deep and multi-scalar complexities of environmental justice issues, and suggests how these problems expand beyond legal and political issues as he suggests, and are more broadly related to issues of culture and politics.

Defining Racial Capitalism, Corruption, Violence, Environmental Racism, and Environmental Justice

For the purposes of this research, it is necessary to first define what I mean when I discuss terms like racial capitalism and corruption, violence, environmental racism, and environmental justice. These definitions draw from research and studies like the United Church of Christ's groundbreaking study in 1987 on environmental racism in the United States.

The residents of East Chicago, particularly those living in the Superfund site, have been exposed to what Robert Nixon calls slow violence. Violence is often thought of in immediate, action-based terms, but the environmental violence and injustice manufactured by corporate industry and the East Chicago political machine have subjected city residents to a fog-like violence, one that creeps over the town, slowly infecting residents with asthma, lead poisoning, and a multitude of other health ailments as it passes by.⁶ These residents have been rendered unfree by their daily subjugation to violence at the hands of corrupt corporations and the political system.⁷ Through the literal use of violence to control bodies and other forms of ecogovernmentality, the corporate-state alliance is able to exercise control over populations, policing and relegating them into zones of submission.⁸ Because these daily acts of violence

⁵ Andrew Hurley, "The Social Biases of Environmental Change in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980," *Environmental Review: ER* 12, no. 4 (1988): 1-19, doi:10.2307/3984075.

⁶ Rob Nixon, "Introduction," in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁷ Malini Ranganathan, "The Environment as Freedom: A Decolonial Reimagining," *items: Insights from the Social Sciences*, June 13, 2017, <https://items.ssrc.org/the-environment-as-freedom-a-decolonial-reimagining/>.

⁸ Éric Darier, "Foucault and the Environment: An Introduction," in *Discourses on the Environment*, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999).

become normalized over time, the corporate-state described in Michel Foucault's lecture series *Security, Territory, Population* is able to normalize policing and further control individual people.⁹

The United Church of Christ's study defined environmental justice as the right of all individuals to be protected from environmental degradation. The study also discussed environmental justice in tandem with environmental racism, which is a term used to refer to how people of color are adversely affected by pollution when compared to white people.¹⁰ Ruth Wilson Gilmore goes even further to define racism as, "the state-sanctioned and extralegal exposure of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."¹¹ In the case of environmental racism, premature death results from toxic exposure, whereas in cases of police brutality, for example, premature death results from excessive force by police officers.

Racial capitalism is one of the core theories within Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Racial capitalism looks at how capitalism serves to reproduce and recreate the systems of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism by deriving social and economic value of people based on their race.^{12,13} In doing so, people of color are rendered invisible, exposed to slow violence and premature death, and remarginalized. Racial capitalism is sustained through various processes, one of these being corruption. Most existing corruption theory defines corruption as acts that are outside of and against otherwise just systems like

⁹ Michel Foucault, "11 January 1978," in *Security, Territory, Population*, ed. Michel Senellart, tr. Graham Burchell, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

¹⁰ Robert D. Bullard et al., "Environmental Justice in the Twenty-First Century," in *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty 1987-2007*, Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 2007, http://www.ucc.org/environmental-ministries_toxic-waste-20.

¹¹ Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze, "Police Power and Particulate Matters: Environmental Justice and the Spatialities of In/securities in U.S. Cities," *English Language Notes* 54, no. 2 (September 22, 2016): 13–23.

¹² Cedric J. Robinson, "Racial Capitalism: The Nonobjective Character of Capitalist Development," in *Black Marxism and the Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹³ Nancy Leong, "Racial Capitalism," *Harvard Law Review*: 126, no. 8 (June 2013): 2151-2226, <https://harvardlawreview.org/2013/06/racial-capitalism/>.

capitalism and liberal democracy. Here, I suggest that corruption is not an act outside of these systems, but is rather inherent within the unequal and violent system of racial capitalism.

Corruption is the way in which corporations and political institutions make decisions that enact or perpetuate violence against individuals and communities. Corruption functions as a tool through which political and corporate entities render people of color worthless, particularly through environmental violence. This is accomplished through neglect, division, remediation failures, intentional dumping of toxic waste, and the like.

Historical Trends, Alarming Presents

While it exists as the quintessential post-industrial, low-income, abandoned city, East Chicago, Indiana inhabits one of the largest industrial matrixes in the world. The BP Oil Refinery in Whiting, Indiana, situated partially in East Chicago, is the 7th largest oil refinery in the country, and the largest in the Midwest.¹⁴ The largest steel mill (Gary Works) and the largest integrated steel complex (ArcelorMittal Indiana Harbor) in the United States are located just miles apart, the former in Gary and the latter in East Chicago. Indiana also serves as the nation's largest steel producer.¹⁵ When you take into account that the United States is the fourth largest steel producer in the world, and that Indiana is merely the 38th largest state with only 45 miles of coastline, this information is quite astounding.¹⁶ Add to the equation the countless chemical plants, lead smelters, and various other industrial complexes that clutter the cityscapes of places like East Chicago, and the realities of pollution begin to come into view.

¹⁴ *Refinery Capacity Report*, Washington, DC: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2018, <https://www.eia.gov/petroleum/refinerycapacity/>.

¹⁵ Joseph S. Pete, "Indiana leads nation in steel production," *NWI Times* (Munster, IN), May 31, 2017, https://www.nwitimes.com/business/steel/indiana-leads-nation-in-steel-production/article_def40810-528e-5a98-acc2-ebab79de08a2.html.

¹⁶ Coastlines, especially on lakes, are vital to steel production. Massive quantities of water are necessary for cooling, descaling, dust scrubbing and other processes involved in steelmaking. (*Water Management in the Steel Industry*, Brussels: World Steel Association, 2015, <https://www.worldsteel.org/en/dam/jcr:29bdb150-b3cf-41c6-9845-1daedd1ee344/Position+paper%253A+Water+management+in+the+steel+industry.pdf>.)

The city is almost entirely made up by people of color. It is 54% Hispanic, and 38% Black. Furthermore, over one-third of the population lives below the poverty line, and a large majority of the city is classified as low-income.¹⁷ The city has been defined by a history of massive population growth and decline, political and corporate corruption, job opportunity and job loss, and the effects of industrial pollution.

The steel industry is as integral to the history and culture of East Chicago as Hollywood is to Los Angeles. Graver Tank Works, a steel-centered company, established itself as East Chicago's first major industry in 1888. East Chicago was mostly swampland when it officially became a city in 1893, and at the turn of the century, industrialization skyrocketed.¹⁸ LaSalle, Republic, and Inland Steel Co. began massive operations in various areas.¹⁹ Construction of the Indiana Harbor, the current location of ArcelorMittal's integrated steel complex, began around this time. East Chicago became known as the "Twin Cities," with the Harbor functioning as one "city" separated from the western portion of East Chicago, where the Calumet neighborhood is found, by railroad tracks.²⁰ This constructed geographic phenomenon created a cultural division in the city, with those from the Harbor embodying a certain pride, and vice versa. The division was more than cultural, however, with residents living in the Harbor being made up mostly of lower class immigrants and workers of color, and those living in the western portion of the city

¹⁷ "East Chicago, IN," Data USA, accessed January 27, 2019, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/east-chicago-in/#category_income.

¹⁸ Sarah Reese, "TIMELINE: A look at East Chicago's early days, development," *NWI Times* (Munster, IN), Dec. 11, 2016, https://www.nwitimes.com/news/special-section/ec-lead/timeline-a-look-at-east-chicago-s-early-days-development/article_1481b657-c92d-55f6-8dea-2e940ad4e96c.html.

¹⁹ Elvia Malagon, "East Chicago: From swampland to industrial hub," *NWI Times* (Munster, IN), Mar. 12, 2016, https://www.nwitimes.com/news/history/then-and-now/east-chicago-from-swampland-to-industrial-hub/article_1ee46381-4a72-5073-8235-dbc48af48688.html.

²⁰ "A Brief History of the City of East Chicago," City of East Chicago, accessed January 12, 2019, <http://www.eastchicago.com/page80/page101/index.html>.

being wealthier, whiter, and US citizens.²¹ Residents of color were forced to live closer to the factories in the Harbor through urban zoning laws, and thus exposed to more pollution. As neighborhoods changed throughout the latter half of the 20th century, residents of color were displaced from the Harbor to neighborhoods like Calumet in urban renewal projects that destroyed housing in the Harbor and led to the construction of low-income housing in the western part of the city. The West Calumet Housing Complex serves as one of the most prominent examples.

All aspects of city planning were corporatized from the beginning. The East Chicago Company began its process of what Julie Sze calls “destructive urban planning” in 1903, zoning particularly aspects of the city as valuable or invaluable, and zoning particular spaces as white/wealthy and others as non-white/poor.²² This process was destructive, because spaces were destroyed and remade based on their economic value, which stemmed from racist and classist ideas of value. In the beginning white meant Protestant and citizen, but grew to include Catholic immigrants from southern and eastern Europe when southern Black folks and Hispanic immigrants began to increasingly populate East Chicago in search of post-war jobs.²³ The East Chicago Company was responsible for selling much of the land that would be industrialized, including the 64 acres where International Smelting and Refining Company, a subsidiary of Anaconda Lead, built its lead smelter in 1912, and where the West Calumet Housing Complex would be constructed 60 years later.²⁴

With the rampant increase in industrialization, job opportunities attracted immigrants and

²¹ Tamsen Anderson, “‘Beautiful New Homes’: The Development of Middle-Class Housing in the Industrial Suburb of East Chicago, Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 109, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 185–223, <https://doi.org/10.5378/indimagahist.109.3.0185>.

²² Julie Sze, “Environmental Justice, Urban Planning, and Community Memory in New York City,” in *Echoes from the Poisoned Well: Global Memories of Environmental Injustice*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

²³ Anderson, “‘Beautiful New Homes.’”

²⁴ Reese, “TIMELINE: A look at East Chicago’s early days, development.”

migrant populations from other parts of the United States. Over 50,000 people lived in the city by the 1920s, twice the size of the population today.²⁵

Black Americans began arriving to East Chicago in 1914. Almost immediately, white residents instituted strikes at steel mills and other industries because Black, Hispanic, and other minority populations now worked in “their” jobs. The presence of the KKK and other racist organizations forced Black workers and other minority groups to live close to their jobs and in certain neighborhoods.²⁶ Most neighborhoods were off-limits to folks of color, who were excluded by housing prices, all-white social clubs, and the presence of groups like the KKK. As a result of what George Lipsitz calls the white spatial imaginary, space became racialized, and value, opportunity, and community improvement projects were assigned according to racial and class distinctions.²⁷ These neighborhoods were often in better locations, further from factory pollution and industrial noise.²⁸

The Federal Housing Act of 1934 further discriminated against minority groups, disqualifying them from obtaining mortgages on the sole basis of race or ethnicity.²⁹ Additionally, the reauthorization of the act in 1949 stipulated the creation of new public housing units, without regulating where and on what these homes would be built.³⁰ In 1955, urban renewal programs in East Chicago under the nonprofit Purdue-Calumet Development Foundation displaced thousands of residents living in the Indiana Harbor. These programs sought to

²⁵ Sarah Reese, “A century of heavy industry transformed East Chicago’s Calumet neighborhood,” *NWI Times* (Munster, IN), Dec. 12, 2016, https://www.nwitimes.com/news/special-section/ec-lead/a-century-of-heavy-industry-transformed-east-chicago-s-calumet/article_2e8a104e-2ae9-5f42-9142-a74829c6ea85.html.

²⁶ Reese, “TIMELINE: A look at East Chicago’s early days, development.”

²⁷ George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 10–23, <https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.26.1.10>.

²⁸ Anderson, ““Beautiful New Homes.””

²⁹ “1934-1968: FHA Mortgage Insurance Requirements Utilize Redlining,” The Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston, accessed January 12, 2019, <http://www.bostonfairhousing.org/timeline/1934-1968-FHA-Redlining.html>.

³⁰ Reese, “TIMELINE: A look at East Chicago’s early days, development.”

redevelop deteriorated spaces, but ended up exacerbating segregation and concentrating poverty. Historical analysis makes a direct link between urban renewal programs and racism, and Chicago and the surrounding area became one of the most blatant examples of this trend.³¹ Chicago had such a racist housing problem that Martin Luther King Jr. made it his major goal after the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts were passed. This “destructive urban planning” turned the residential communities of many Black, Hispanic and low-income people into industrial and commercial parks, and displaced these populations, forcing them to find housing elsewhere. Furthermore, these spaces became further racialized as the city targeted specific communities of color in its destruction of housing, community spaces, parks, schools, and the like. Today, many older East Chicagoans reflect on this reality, imagining the homes they grew up in that are now spaces of corporate industry.

As people grew more skeptical of so-called urban renewal, the federal government refused to approve other redevelopment plans unless adequate housing was constructed for those displaced. As a result, public housing complexes such as West Calumet Housing Complex were constructed.³² In 1960, East Chicago’s new zoning code highlighted the area where the West Calumet complex was eventually constructed as heavily industrial, yet ten years later, it was approved for residential construction. Control of the land where the West Calumet Housing Complex was built changed hands multiple times before it ended up in the control of the Blaw-Knox Company. Companies like USS Lead were previous owners. In 1970, Blaw-Knox sold part of the land to the East Chicago Housing Authority (ECHA). After purchase, vacant lead facilities

³¹ Christopher Silver, “The Racial Origins of Zoning in American Cities,” in *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997).
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/60043486/>.

³² Reese, “A century of heavy industry transformed East Chicago’s Calumet neighborhood.”

were demolished, and USS Lead remained in operation until 1985.³³

Vast amounts of political corruption were prevalent in the acquiring of the property from Blaw-Knox. East Chicago Housing Authority Executive Director at the time, Benjamin Lesniak Jr., received at least \$100,000 in bribes from the complex's builders, Lawrence Bursten and Solomon Seidel, the East Chicago Development Corporation, and other sources to place the new housing complex on the land previously owned by Blaw-Knox. Bribes were also used to orchestrate the destruction of the lead facilities on the land, which eventually led to further contamination. Officials as high up as the mayor, John B. Nicosia, then City Controller and eventual mayor Robert Pastrick, and City Attorney Jay Given were implicated in these bribes. Public housing was a necessary component of the mayor's strategy to continue receiving millions of dollars from federal urban renewal programs, and these bribes were a large part of the process in allocating which sites would contain the new housing developments. Mayor Nicosia, Pastrick, and Given were never indicted on corruption charges, and Lesniak received a plea agreement in exchange for testifying against the complex's builders, Bursten and Seidel. As a result of Lesniak's testimony, Bursten and Seidel received two years in prison.³⁴

It is unclear whether Lesniak, Mayor Nicosia, or Given knew of the health risks associated with constructing housing on such contaminated land, but it is almost naïve to suggest they had no idea about the risks industrial waste would pose to the residents of the West Calumet complex once it was built, especially given the national rise in attention concerning environmental destruction, harm, and injustice at that time. It is more probable they just did not care, given that these projects were viewed as a necessity to continue receiving federal funds that

³³ Reese, "TIMELINE: A look at East Chicago's early days, development."

³⁴ Sarah Reese, "Corruption tainted East Chicago public housing projects," *NWI Times* (Munster, IN), Dec. 11, 2016, https://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/lake/corruption-tainted-east-chicago-public-housing-projects/article_2f0159be-5fe0-52fb-bc9c-41b0e4f92356.html.

would allow them to displace poor people in certain parts of the city in the name of urban renewal and move them to public homes on land contaminated with lead. It is also an American norm to view these instances of corruption as isolated. But it is important to realize that corruption in East Chicago, as well as Flint and many other cities like them, is a structural issue, systemic of the injustices of racial capitalism.³⁵ Corruption is not reserved solely for the greedy politician, but for the corporation and the government agencies which neglect these communities because they have been deemed invaluable by racial capitalism, which recreates slavery through the subjugation of working people of color and political control to achieve billion-dollar profits.³⁶ The historic processes that utilized corruption as a tool of racial capitalism has led to the toxic disasters seen in cities like East Chicago.

Despite the extreme negligence displayed in choosing the location and construction of the West Calumet Housing Complex, the project moved forward and was finished in 1973. Mayor Nicosia conveniently resigned two years prior, and Mayor Pastrick, who faced a string of corruption scandals in his 32 years as mayor, saw the project through to its completion.³⁷³⁸ The decisions made by these mayors and many other officials in industry and city government put lives at risk and forced people to spend over 30 years living on lead.

Contaminated Communities, Hidden Poison, and Noxious Neglect

In 1980, Congress passed The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation

³⁵ Carol MacLennan, "Corruption in Corporate America: Enron – Before and After," in *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005), doi:10.2307/j.ctt18fs7ts.10.

³⁶ Robinson, "Racial Capitalism."

³⁷ Mayor Pastrick was implicated in a 2004 racketeering lawsuit by the state of Indiana after spending over \$24 million in constructing new sidewalks for voters who pledged to vote for him in the 1999 election, and in 2011 a federal judge ordered him and his administration to pay back \$108 million in stolen public funds. (Reese, "Corruption tainted East Chicago public housing projects.")

³⁸ Sarah Reese, "TIMELINE: History of the USS Lead Superfund site in E.C.," *NWI Times* (Munster, IN), Sept. 4, 2016, https://www.nwitimes.com/timeline-history-of-the-uss-lead-superfund-site-in-e/article_eb369585-9e14-5a88-98c0-74c0fbaba5ea.html.

and Liability Act (CERCLA), and established the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Superfund program. As I mentioned previously, the goal of the program is to provide funding for emergency clean up efforts of environmentally hazardous and toxic locations. The funding is either sourced from the responsible party, or, in the case of an unknown party, from the federal government through tax revenues.³⁹ The Superfund program, and the EPA in general, however, have largely failed in their mission to protect the most vulnerable from toxic disasters. Many of the regulations made by the EPA to target pollution created what I refer to as a "pollution vacuum," where pollution and waste in wealthy white areas was captured, solidified, and dumped into low-income neighborhoods of color.⁴⁰ Others like Robert D. Bullard have referred to these acts as imperial dumping, where corporations function as imperial entities subjecting marginalized peoples to toxic poisonings.⁴¹ These low-income communities of color were relegated to the role of "sacrifice zone," rendering the people living within them completely unsafe and insecure.⁴² Each of these corrupt acts work to further subjugate people of color, recreating racial capitalism through environmental violence. Since Congress passed CERCLA in 1980, these sacrifice zones and the waste concentrated within them has actually gotten worse.⁴³ The Superfund program established to clean up these sites has been underfinanced, poorly managed, and overwhelmed with cases since the early 1990s, leading to situations in places like East Chicago, where clean up efforts requested in the 1980s did not begin until 2016.⁴⁴

³⁹ United States Environmental Protection Agency, "What is Superfund?"

⁴⁰ Daniel Faber, *Capitalizing on Environmental Injustice: The Polluter-Industrial Complex in the Age of Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

⁴¹ Robert D. Bullard, "Race and Environmental Justice in the United States," *The Yale Journal of International Law* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 1993): 319–35.

⁴² Robert D. Bullard et al., "Environmental Justice in the Twenty-First Century."

⁴³ Zoë Schlanger, "Race is the biggest indicator in the US of whether you live near toxic waste," This Landfill is Your Landfill, *Quartz*, Mar. 22, 2017, <https://qz.com/939612/race-is-the-biggest-indicator-in-the-us-of-whether-you-live-near-toxic-waste/>.

⁴⁴ Debbie Chizewer in discussion with the author, August 7, 2018.

In November of 1985, US Representative Pete Visclosky (IN-1) asked the EPA Region 5 administrator, the region responsible for East Chicago and large parts of the Great Lakes region, to implement a clean up of the toxic waste site at the USS Lead facility near the West Calumet Housing Complex because the Indiana Department of Health had found the facility responsible for lead contamination in the immediate area. The EPA conducted testing of the area, and found evidence of lead contamination on the land where the West Calumet complex stood. One month later, USS Lead ceased operations. Seven years later in 1992, the site was proposed for the Superfund National Priorities List, directly after USS Lead conveniently filed for bankruptcy.⁴⁵

Bankruptcy has often been a tool corporations utilize to avoid financial and legal responsibility in toxic waste disasters, making clean up more difficult and expensive. Bankruptcy is a tool of corruption and is inherent within the system of racial capitalism. By filing bankruptcy, the visibility of the responsible party is diminished, rendering the environmental violence they committed invisible as well. This violence impacts people like those in Calumet long after these companies disappear.

Julie Sze discusses a variety of other means through which corporations shift blame for pollution onto other entities, and how the neoliberal state, which increasingly privatizes pollution controls, health care, poverty, and the like, functions in allowing them to do so. In areas like East Chicago, where the community has fought back against corporate violence, businesses often try to discredit activists and political leaders by shifting blame for lead poisoning, poor performance in school, asthma, and other health problems onto parents and community leaders for not taking better care of their children, rather than acknowledging the deliberate poisoning they have been

⁴⁵ Reese, "TIMELINE: History of the USS Lead Superfund site in E.C."

engaging in.⁴⁶ Each of these noxious tactics should be seen as acts of corruption that are inherent within racial capitalism. These businesses are not breaking any laws because the legal system is structured in favor of them and against marginalized communities. Businesses like USS Lead have taken deliberate action to delegitimize violence and toxic pollution, and to separate themselves from their near complete responsibility in perpetuating racialized sacrifice zones.

Adding to Sze, Laura Pulido emphasizes that it is important to also acknowledge the government and political systems' fault in these matters. The city legitimized violence by constructing homes on lead and ignoring years of evidence proving the poisoning of adults and children. Furthermore, the larger state apparatuses of Indiana and the United States have constructed a legal system where bankruptcy becomes a way out for companies not willing to take fault for the violence they inflict upon marginalized communities, and have passed legislation that defunds environmental regulation and liberalizes pollution controls in the name of neoliberal market reforms. These decisions are emblematic of racial capitalism and the deliberate corporate and state violence employed against low-income communities of color.⁴⁷ This has led to what Malini Ranganathan calls racial liberalism, where the state's trend toward liberal reforms such as subsidization and cap and trade emissions controls have led to racialized market reforms that benefit white, high-income groups over lower income groups of color.⁴⁸

The Indiana Department of Health conducted a public health assessment of the Superfund site in 1994, yet noted no community health concerns after interviews with public health officials. Public health officials clearly neglected to screen for toxic lead contamination, because

⁴⁶ Julie Sze, "Denormalizing Embodied Toxicity," in *Racial Ecologies*, ed. Leilani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018).

⁴⁷ Laura Pulido, "Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2016.1213013>.

⁴⁸ Malini Ranganathan, "Thinking with Flint: Racial Liberalism and the Roots of an American Water Tragedy," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 17–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2016.1206583>.

in 1997, the East Chicago Health Department, Indiana Department of Health, and Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry offered free lead screening to the public, and found alarming rates of lead in the blood of many tested children and adults. They also found high rates of lead in the soil, between 1,000 and 1,400 parts per million (ppm), surrounding Carrie Gosch Elementary School, which is three times the maximum 400 ppm lead level that the EPA suggests is safe in soil. A new school was built in 1999, unearthing more lead in the process, and remained in operation until 2016.⁴⁹

Starting in 2003, the EPA began finding massive amounts of lead on residential properties beyond West Calumet, with some registering as high as 3,000 ppm. Between 2004 and 2006, the EPA's Resource Conservation and Recovery Act Corrective Action (RCRA) program referred these areas to the Superfund program. The EPA retested more yards again in the spring of 2006, leading to an emergency cleanup of 15 residences in 2008. The USS Lead Site was again referred to the EPA's Superfund National Priorities List at the end of 2008, and was finally added in April of 2009.⁵⁰ The correlation between the revelation that wealthier, middle-class housing was found to be contaminated with lead, and the final decision to actually create the Superfund site, reveals how the EPA prioritizes sites containing more "valuable" residents, namely whiter and wealthier ones with more agency. This idea perpetuates what Mel Chen calls the here/there narrative of lead, where lead that is "here" in whiter, wealthier neighborhoods matters more than lead that is "there," in lower-income neighborhoods of color. Lead poisoning tends to otherize marginalized communities, shifting blame onto them for their own toxic exposure, but when privileged communities become afflicted, they are relegated to the role of victim and agencies like the EPA and East Chicago city government begin to take stronger

⁴⁹ Reese, "TIMELINE: History of the USS Lead Superfund site in E.C."

⁵⁰ Reese, "TIMELINE: History of the USS Lead Superfund site in E.C."

action.⁵¹

It took the EPA seven years to begin clean up after the site was created in 2009, however, and the severity of lead levels found in children's blood in 2016 is what finally forced the East Chicago city government and the EPA to begin cleaning up the Calumet Superfund site. The portion of the Superfund site most severely impacted by lead exposure was the West Calumet Public Housing Complex, made up almost entirely of low-income Black and Hispanic people. For decades, the families, adults, seniors, and, most severely, children, forced to live in this complex through violent negligence on the part of ECHA and the East Chicago city government were subject to what Julie Sze calls landscapes of insecurity.⁵² Toxic exposure rendered lives and spaces insecure, stripping residents of the ability to live in a safe, clean community.

The Superfund site is divided into three zones, with zone 1, the location of the West Calumet Housing Complex, receiving highest priority. Between 2014 and 2015, the EPA conducted more testing on the soil in zones 1, 2, and 3. The data, however, was not provided to the city of East Chicago until May of 2016. Throughout 2016, the EPA continuously withheld information from the city, despite requests from Mayor Anthony Copeland for a more robust cleanup plan and a plan to relocate residents of West Calumet. Mayor Copeland and ECHA decided in July of 2016 to tear down the West Calumet Housing Complex, despite concerns from the EPA that the decision was not necessary.⁵³ The complex was demolished in April of 2018, and over 1,100 residents have been forced to relocate without much additional assistance from ECHA.⁵⁴ The clean up process for zones 2 and 3 is on-going.

⁵¹ Mel Y. Chen, "Lead's Racial Matters," in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁵² Dillon and Sze, "Police Power and Particulate Matters."

⁵³ Reese, "TIMELINE: History of the USS Lead Superfund site in E.C."

⁵⁴ "What Happened To The East Chicago Residents Forced Out By Pollution?" narrated by Kevin Stark, Curious City, *WBEZ91.5CHICAGO*, August 18, 2018.

Residents have speculated what would be built atop the former housing complex. Many have speculated about plans for a new factory or industrial facility. While some residents are somewhat excited by the job prospects, most remain frustrated by the continual displacement and encroachment by industry into formerly residential communities. For example, residents of Marktown, a National Historic Site and planned worker community constructed in 1917 for workers at the Indiana Harbor Works factory, have faced increasingly intense industrial encroachment for decades. When walking through Marktown, it's impossible to find a backyard that isn't cluttered by their neighbors, the BP Refinery and ArcelorMittal steel mills. The neighborhood smells of burnt oil and industrial pollution, and residents are being forced out by the purchase and destruction of their homes by BP. BP has plans to buy most of the properties, knock them down, and create a green space. Residents suspect this is more or less a move to silence complaints about pollution coming from the refinery.⁵⁵

Similar things are happening throughout the city, as neighborhood after neighborhood is abandoned, destroyed, and turned into zones of industrial activity. This sort of organized and forced abandonment by industry and East Chicago's political system erases the existence of residents still living in the town. The forgotten existence of residents allows industry and capital to continue recreating themselves.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, rather than spending money to restore these spaces, the city has invested \$15.5 million in restoring the waterfront on Lake Michigan and heavily subsidizing BP's \$3.8 billion expansion project.⁵⁷⁵⁸ Most of the jobs BP offers are not

⁵⁵ Margie (Marktown resident) in discussion with the author, December 19, 2018.

⁵⁶ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning," in *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁵⁷ Joseph S. Pete, "East Chicago lakefront gets \$15.5 million makeover with 25-foot-tall beach ball and possible jet ski rentals," *NWI Times* (Munster, IN), Mar. 29, 2018, https://www.nwitimes.com/business/local/east-chicago-lakefront-gets-million-makeover-with--foot-tall/article_e269182f-3ad0-5064-89dd-f136c5d61ac3.html.

⁵⁸ Kari Lydersen, "Surrounded by Industry and Out of a Job in Indiana's BP 'Boomtown,'" *Working, In These Times*, Feb. 21, 2013, http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/14622/surrounded_by_industry_and_out_of_a_job_in_east_chicago.

even available to East Chicago residents, who have lower education and skill levels than residents of nearby towns. Furthermore, those that work at BP often make high enough salaries to live outside of the city, and are less apt to complain about pollution and toxic waste produced by the refinery.⁵⁹

Zone 2 represents another aspect of organized abandonment and the processes through which the residents who continue to live there are forgotten and neglected. Many of the homes in zone 2 are abandoned, and those residents who continue to live there have faced enormous difficulty trying to obtain money for lead remediation and clean up.

Parts of zones 2 and 3 represent the wealthier aspects of the Superfund site. The decision by the EPA to separate the site into specific zones has largely divided activist groups along class and racial lines. Activist groups such as Calumet Lives Matter and the Community Strategy Group were the initial folks who brought the issue to the national spotlight, and who organized to force the EPA and Indiana State agencies to begin remediating much of the area in West Calumet. The Community Advisory Group is newly formed, and is working to bring the issues facing zone 2 and 3 residents to light. Many of these activists are highlighted in later portions of this project. Members from all three organizations were crucial in organizing to ensure transparency between the EPA and city government, they brought outside media attention to the issue, and have protested against former EPA Director Scott Pruitt and President Trump's proposed decision to cut funding by 78% from EPA Environmental Justice Programs and EPA's Region 5 operations.⁶⁰ They continue to challenge decisions made by Mayor Copeland, the City Council, the Indiana State Government and the EPA.

Violence exists on multi-scalar dimensions in East Chicago. When the EPA and city

⁵⁹ Thomas in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

⁶⁰ Schlanger, "Race is the biggest indicator in the US of whether you live near toxic waste."

government site areas like the USS Lead Superfund site, Laura Pulido suggests they erase the violence occurring outside the mapped zones of waste.⁶¹ In doing so, the violence against low-income residents of color outside the site is further normalized as a part of the lived experience of an East Chicago resident. Environmental injustice exists at such an ambiguous scale, that it's almost impossible to quantify where the lead stops. Hilda Kurtz notes how the ambiguously scalar nature of environmental injustice absolves corporations of liability.⁶² When an oil company pollutes groundwater, the waste can travel for miles, but its source is nearly impossible to identify.

The failure to address these everyday violences by mainstream environmental movements has erased their existence and challenged the agency of local activists to solve the problems themselves.⁶³ When corrupt practices like those of BP, ArcelorMittal, and the EPA exist at such a global scale, the merely localized scale of East Chicago workers, residents, and activists prevents them from mitigating the consequences of corporate actions.⁶⁴ Existing at a global and national scale allows corporations and political agencies to erase or neglect the claims made by those at the local.

As the corporate-industrial complex and the neoliberal state continue to align themselves through lawmaking, subsidized violence, and award-granting for so-called green activity, people of color and low-income folks are forced to bear the violence that inevitably results from such

⁶¹ Laura Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (March 2000): 12–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0004-5608.00182>.

⁶² Hilda E. Kurtz, "Scale Frames and Counter-Scale Frames: Constructing the Problem of Environmental Injustice," *Political Geography* 22, no. 8 (2003): 887–916, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2003.09.001>.

⁶³ Ranganathan, "The Environment as Freedom."

⁶⁴ John Gledhill, "Introduction: Old Economy, New Economy; Old Corruption, New Corruption," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 47, no. 3 (2003): 130-35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23170099>.

waste-making activities.⁶⁵ The pollution and environmental toxicity the residents of East Chicago face have developed through compounded institutional and systemic phenomena of the inextricable linkages between corruption and racial capitalism. Academics like Nik Heynen have called for the implementation of an abolition ecology, influenced by W.E.B. Du Bois abolitionist ideologies and Marxist ideas of the Black Radical Tradition, that would destroy white supremacist ideologies in property rights and environmentalism which have rendered low-income folks of color unfree.⁶⁶ Through the field work I conducted in East Chicago, I reveal conclusions that build upon Heynen's idea of abolition ecology, working to suggest how cultural and political approaches can undermine the systemic racism, classism, and corruption associated with racial capitalism that concentrates ecological violence in low-income communities of color like East Chicago.

⁶⁵ Jonathan Katz, "ArcelorMittal Receives EPA Recognition," *Environment*, *IndustryWeek*, Mar. 14, 2008, <https://www.industryweek.com/environment/arcelormittal-receives-epa-recognition>.

⁶⁶ Nik Heynen, "Toward an Abolition Ecology," *Abolition* (December 29, 2016), <https://abolitionjournal.org/toward-an-abolition-ecology/>.

We're Not Going Anywhere

Notes from the Field

Perched on the edge of her couch, Akeeshea affirmed to me something she had relayed to dozens of reporters since the story first broke in 2016, “The lead is not going to leave my body, so why would I leave?”⁶⁷ For Akeeshea, leaving East Chicago means running away from her support system. It means leaving her community to be reindustrialized and sold to a new corporation. It means giving up on the vision that ‘West Cal’ will be clean. Akeeshea’s story is one defined by motherhood, family, community, pain, and resilience. Through her eyes and words, I portray the story of motherhood, pain, and activism as shaped by her life in Calumet.

Even Before Myself, I Make Sure They’re Good

Akeeshea starts every day with her youngest son. Before he leaves for school, she makes him breakfast, packs his bag, and sends him on his way. She talked repeatedly about the passion she has for motherhood, for loving her children well, and for being a supportive parent. She doesn’t have a working vehicle, so she relies on the help of family members and friends to drive her to various basketball games, school events, doctor’s appointments, and community meetings. Most week nights are spent cheering for her son, a 6’1” local basketball star. After the games are over, they head home, eat dinner, do homework, and end the night affirming how much they love each other: “I never let them leave my sight without telling them I love them, because you never know what might happen. Them or me, you never know.”⁶⁸

Akeeshea also has two older sons. She is a 42-year-old Black single mother and grandmother, having had her oldest son when she was just 14. Akeeshea and her boys moved to

⁶⁷ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, December 20, 2018.

⁶⁸ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, December 20, 2018.

West Calumet in 2004, the same year she had her youngest son.

Growing up in the Superfund site, she had always heard rumors from family and neighbors about lead and its prevalence in their community, but most were dismissed and never taken seriously. Most people had gardens and grew fresh food in their backyards. Akeeshea fondly remembers a peach tree at her grandma's neighbor's house. Now she wonders what toxins she was consuming while growing up in Calumet. When she moved to West Calumet, there was never a clause in her rent agreement that stated the complex was built atop a former lead refinery, despite ECHA, the city, and HUD knowing about the contaminants long before 2004.⁶⁹

In 2016, when the EPA presented its zone 1 testing results to the city of East Chicago, test results revealed that Akeeshea's home was contaminated with severely high levels of lead. The outside of her home tested at 92,000 ppm, and the inside tested at 32,000 ppm. This means that 9.2% of the outside of her home was filled with lead, and 3.2% of the inside. These levels were beyond alarming, and they don't even take into consideration the other toxins Akeeshea and her sons were exposed to. She was one of over 1,100 residents who were then forced out of West Calumet under Mayor Copeland's plans to demolish the complex.⁷⁰

Residents were provided almost no assistance when moving out of the complex. Akeeshea was forced to leave behind lead contaminated furniture, furniture which was then turned around and sold by the East Chicago Housing Authority.⁷¹ Because most West Calumet residents were living in public or subsidized housing, the process of finding new residences restricted Akeeshea and others to specific properties that accepted Section 8 housing vouchers,

⁶⁹ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, March 16, 2019.

⁷⁰ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, December 20, 2018.

⁷¹ ECHA sold resident's furniture and appliances on their website immediately following the eviction of West Calumet residents. (Dorothy Tucker, "Housing Authority Selling Items From Contaminated Site," *CBS Chicago* (Chicago, IL), Apr. 6, 2017, <https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2017/04/06/east-chicago-ind-housing-authority-sells-appliances-from-lead-contaminated-site/>).

many of which were still located in the Superfund site. Furthermore, all residents were forcibly removed in one fell swoop during the summer of 2016, meaning each resident was competing to find what limited housing was available in the area. Akeeshea's application paperwork for a new housing voucher sat for months. Housing authority officials showed no sense of urgency regarding her case or others. Many of her friends and neighbors from West Calumet left East Chicago, finally giving up on the community many of them had called home since childhood.⁷²

Even though Akeeshea and her family have faced unprecedented levels of environmental racism and toxic exposure, she never considered leaving East Chicago. Her family and the community in Calumet are what keep her going. Living in West Calumet she found a community that supported each other. When a neighbor needed someone to watch their kids, no one hesitated to help out. The decision to knock down the housing complex didn't just displace over 1,100 people, it destroyed a community built on love and compassion. Rick, Sherry, and Maritza, fellow activists and residents of the neighborhood, echoed this idea, describing the importance of home and community in East Chicago, and their individual desires to fight for change for their neighbors and community members.

Akeeshea is still able to find community with her family, who all live within a two-block radius of her grandmother's house. Moving away from East Chicago was never an option, because she knows her family is a support system she could never leave behind. Her family and her community have provided her with a sense of hope and purpose in the midst of marginalization. She never imagined her family and her community would face the level of toxic exposure they have while living on the USS Lead Superfund Site, but the support of her family members and community, and the love she has for her sons keeps her fighting, every day, for

⁷² Akeeshea in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

environmental justice in East Chicago.

Pain is a Daily Process

I first met Akeeshea at Maritza's house in zone 3. Maritza is Akeeshea's friend and a fellow activist with the Community Advisory Group (CAG). Maritza's neighbor, Rick, a long-time zone 3 resident and retired steel worker, also joined the conversation. As we talked, it became clear how the themes of jobs and home have shaped many of the common experiences of Superfund site residents. Akeeshea has lived her entire life within the area now known as the USS Lead Superfund Site, born just one year after the West Calumet Public Housing Complex was built. She grew up in zone 2, her sons grew up in zone 2 and zone 1, and she moved to zone 3 after being forced out of her home in West Calumet. Akeeshea now lives down the street from Rick and Maritza. She lives on the edge of the tracks, right off Chicago Avenue, one of the main roads in town. Trains hauling oil, coal, steel, chemicals, and other industrial outputs from factories nearby can be heard from every room in her house. With three sons, quiet has never been something she is used to. But even during the time she is home alone, industrial pollution in all its forms has become a part of her daily lived experience. Rick has lived in zone 3 for decades. His parents, who immigrated to East Chicago from Croatia, lived just down the street. Maritza's parents immigrated from Puerto Rico to Chicago, and then landed in East Chicago, where they worked in city government.⁷³

Rick worked at Inland Steel, now owned by ArcelorMittal, for 37 years. He worked with Akeeshea's mother and many of her other family members. Akeeshea's oldest son works at the US Steel Mill. The jobs were a way to make a living, and still are. Rick noted that, despite the pollution, he always chose to stay in East Chicago because it was close to work. The situation in

⁷³ Akeeshea, Rick, and Maritza in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

the Superfund site, however, has led many of them to question why they were forced to sacrifice their health for the sake of jobs.⁷⁴

Rick has COPD and arthritis. Akeeshea and Maritza, neither of whom ever even worked in the mills, have started losing teeth. Maritza requires the use of service dogs, and prescription pill bottles line her home, each one treating a different ailment from the effects of lead, arsenic, and other poisons. Akeeshea's health problems escalated rapidly during her time in the West Calumet Housing Complex. She developed arthritis and lost 50-60% of her bone mass, and had a hysterectomy that forced her to enter menopause at age 29. These ailments qualified her for Disability Benefits, which have become her only means of financially supporting her sons. Toxicity has stripped her life from her.⁷⁵

The East Chicago Health Department has known about the high lead levels in Akeeshea's youngest son's blood since he was at least 3 years old. The Health Department started tracking lead levels in his blood when he was born, however, she was never informed of the tests. After obtaining documents from an attorney, she found that in 2007 her son tested at a nine micrograms per deciliter lead level, one microgram below the CDC's so-called "level of concern."⁷⁶ In 2008, he suffered from scarlet fever, a disease so rare that less than 20,000 people are treated for it each year in the United States.⁷⁷ Today, he has severe ADHD, and other developmental disabilities.

In the time since Akeeshea was forced out of her home, she has faced an uphill battle in her attempts to obtain financial assistance regarding the medical care of her children. Dr. Mark

⁷⁴ Akeeshea, Rick, and Maritza in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

⁷⁵ Akeeshea, Rick, and Maritza in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

⁷⁶ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, December 20, 2018.

⁷⁷ "Group A Streptococcal (GAS) Disease: Surveillance," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed February 9, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/groupastrep/surveillance.html>.

Johnson, regional director of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) has told her for months that her middle son would be provided treatment for bone problems and would receive further testing at the Mayo Clinic in Chicago, promises that have fallen empty. After repeatedly being questioned by Akeeshea at community meetings, Dr. Johnson has started intentionally showing up late to meetings, arriving after Akeeshea leaves to pick up her youngest son from school. Dr. Gerri Browning, an East Chicago Health Department official, has repeatedly questioned the correlation between health problems faced by residents and the former lead poisoned homes they lived in, even though research from the EPA, CDC, and other organizations more than proves causation.⁷⁸

Pain is a daily process for every resident I spoke with. Some mornings are spent paralyzed by failing joints and stomach pain. Some Sundays are spent sitting out of church choir because breathing is too hard. Some nights are sleepless, some days are exhausting. The coldest days are the hardest. Despite the pain, resilience is what defines these residents and their attitudes towards toxicity. While toxic pollution has impacted their lives on a great scale, they are working steadfast to ensure it doesn't define their future.

It's Our Lives On the Line

Activism in East Chicago reached its peak between 2016 and 2017. Many groups have slowed their work, as community organizers and leaders have become exhausted. The CAG, however, is newly formed, and as Maritza told me in October they're, "coming out strong and coming out fast."⁷⁹ Their goal is to force EPA to implement clean up plans for all three zones, to further test untested contaminated homes in zones 2 and 3, and to pursue legal recourse for the health problems violently inflicted upon residents by the legacies of toxicity in Calumet.

⁷⁸ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, March 16, 2019.

⁷⁹ Maritza in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

As one of the CAG's main organizers, Akeeshea's day often includes meetings with various other community leaders, faith groups, public officials, and other activists. Her friendship with Maritza has empowered each of them to fight through immense physical and emotional pain, organizing daily meetings, letter writing campaigns, and working with lawyers to advocate for change in the city.⁸⁰

After activism on the part of Akeeshea and Maritza during a meeting with Indiana state officials in 2016, they were able to secure \$2,000 for each resident to subsidize some moving costs. As she noted, however, this was only enough money to buy furniture for one room in a home. When Akeeshea finally secured a new home located in zone 3 of the Superfund site, she was told by HUD and ECHA officials that testing would be conducted in all new residences. She has lived in her new home for almost two years, and nothing, from the water to the ground outside, has ever been tested.⁸¹

Activists Sherry and Thomas were also successful in obtaining certain benefits for residents. Sherry and Akeeshea worked closely together when the crisis reached its height in 2016 through Calumet Lives Matter, an activist group established to fight for the rights of those living in zones 1 and 2. Thomas and Sherry also established the Community Strategy Group to unite communities around East Chicago and the Calumet Region around issues of environmental justice. These groups were able to force the Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb to declare a state of emergency, something former Governor and now Vice President Mike Pence refused to do.⁸² They also secured Section 8 housing vouchers for evicted West Calumet residents, secured

⁸⁰ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, March 16, 2019.

⁸¹ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

⁸² Pence's administration cited already having provided sufficient resources as the reason for not declaring a state of emergency in East Chicago. (Craig Lyons, "Holcomb grants East Chicago disaster request Pence denied," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), Feb. 9, 2017, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/news/ct-ptb-east-chicago-disaster-st-0210-20170209-story.html>.)

bottled water donations, and forced the city to replace some lead contaminated water service lines.⁸³ As Akeeshea has since noted, however, the replacement of lines in the city has been halted due to concerns the lead pipes would further contaminate soil during removal. Furthermore, the city and other organizations have stopped providing clean water to residents, and many have been forced to spend hundreds of dollars on bottled water or else face further possible contamination.⁸⁴ Ultimately, in 2017, Housing and Urban Development (HUD) rewarded ECHA \$4 million to demolish the West Calumet Housing Complex.⁸⁵ But as far as Akeeshea is concerned, this money was never used to assist the people actually affected by the demolition decision.

The institutional burdens imposed upon residents like Akeeshea have led many of them to question the legitimacy of organizations like the local St. Catherine Hospital, Medicaid, the Housing Authority, and other public officials, especially when these organizations fail to show any concern for the continued problems residents face. Maritza talks about the complete failure in communication between the various agencies involved in East Chicago, and described the ‘divide and conquer’ tactic used by many of them.⁸⁶ By constructing division through zoning and by exacerbating existing social stratifications, neglecting health problems to the point of crisis, and failing to show a sense of urgency in clean up efforts, ‘divide and conquer’ serves to ultimately exhaust and silence residents.

The theme of ‘divide and conquer’ extends beyond the walls of community meetings. Seretha, an East Chicago resident and former steel-worker, details the vast amount of division in

⁸³ Thomas and Sherry in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

⁸⁴ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, March 16, 2019.

⁸⁵ Lauren Cross, “HUD awards East Chicago \$4 million for demolition of West Calumet housing site,” *NWI Times* (Munster, IN), Sept. 15, 2017, https://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/lake/hud-awards-east-chicago-million-for-demolition-of-west-calumet/article_e459a7fa-508c-52ad-80c1-81c75d14ba67.html.

⁸⁶ Maritza in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

the city. Primarily, this division is between the Harbor and Calumet regions of the city.⁸⁷ As I detailed in the historical overview in the first chapter, one of East Chicago's first nicknames was the "Twin City," because the Harbor and Calumet were physically divided by train tracks until an overpass was built in the 1970s. These two cities within a city have stark rivalries with one another. From different high schools to different gangs and other organized crime organizations, the Harbor and Calumet communities struggle to work together. Akeeshea and Sherry talked to me about how the mayor is from the Harbor side of town, and therefore seems to not really care about what is happening in Calumet.⁸⁸ Akeeshea even called Calumet a black hole, a place that has seen none of the redevelopment and investment seen in the Harbor.⁸⁹ This also explains why many Harbor residents fail to support the initiatives of the Calumet community, with some even questioning the legitimacy of Calumet residents' claims about lead and arsenic poisoning.

Akeeshea's activism with the Community Advisory Group (CAG) has given her a voice and the opportunity to fight for change. For the majority of her life, she has been a mother. Her experiences with motherhood have given her a resilience and passion to fight to protect her own children, and children throughout East Chicago. She has faced more hardships than most people can imagine, but her love for her sons is what drives her to imagine an environmentally just East Chicago. Every time she sees her sons, the last thing she tells them is how much they are loved, because she doesn't know the ways in which lead will continue poisoning her family and her community. Through her eyes, however, a more equal and more just East Chicago is being envisioned, and with every new day, Akeeshea finds a new chance for hope, for change, and for justice.

⁸⁷ Seretha in discussion with the author, October 21, 2018.

⁸⁸ Sherry in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

⁸⁹ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, March 16, 2019.

Mother Lead

As a creative supplement to this paper, I have worked with Akeeshea and others to compile a short documentary film that visually informs, complicates, and presents the arguments and visual realities described in this paper. The paper and the film are meant to be “read” together. As an artist, I believe academic research can be made stronger by artistic representations. The paper is not visualized, personified, or fully experienced without a viewing of the film. A viewing of the film without the in-depth analysis, theoretical and historical frameworks, and background presented in the paper leads to a limited understanding of the situation’s contextual significance.

The film follows the story of Akeeshea, from my first time meeting her in October of 2018, to my most recent visit in March. Her narrative is amplified as it is in the paper because her experiences and perspective, as well as how she is situated as an activist, mother, and community leader, give her a proper platform from which to speak for her community. Her stories and experiences are visualized through archival footage, ethnographic footage, and various shots of the cityscape.

Objectives

The documentary, titled *Mother Lead*, accomplishes three main objectives. First, it visualizes and artistically presents the narrative of Akeeshea, other East Chicago residents, and the city itself through archival footage, long shots, interview footage, and ethnographic scenes. By working collaboratively with Akeeshea and other people I met during field work, my hope was to creatively and collaboratively construct a film that holds true to the experiences, histories, and legacies of toxicity faced by those living in the Superfund site and beyond. My voice is almost entirely removed from the film. The story is told by Akeeshea, and every shot is chosen

to show a specific experience East Chicago residents face. It is titled *Mother Lead* to invoke three thoughts in the viewer. It can be pronounced in two ways, like the poison, lead, or like the call to action, lead. By pronouncing it using the word lead as associated with poisoning, it invokes two thoughts. First, it suggests that the environmental justice movement in East Chicago is “mother led,” which is the case. Second, it suggests that lead, as a poison, is the mother of all problems faced by residents. It is something seemingly inescapable. Third, when the word lead is pronounced like the call to action, it becomes a call to action, for other mother’s and people in East Chicago to unite for justice.

Second, the film seeks to challenge typical forms of environmental and documentary filmmaking. Documentary films have historically been a form of “otherizing” marginalized communities, subjecting people and places to the lens and perspective of the filmmaker. Films that focus on the environment often romanticize the so-called natural world, but neglect to explore the ways in which the environment can be weaponized against people of color and low-income people. This documentary seeks to challenge these problems by grounding the film in the narratives of the East Chicago community. By uplifting their voices, the film presents a unique opportunity for Akeeshea and other residents to literally speak for themselves, further adding to the analysis and stories presented in the paper.

Finally, *Mother Lead* experiments with filmmaking techniques to artistically show and present specific theories and ethnographic observations. Long takes serve to meditate on the environments found in East Chicago: the built environment, the natural environment, the poisoned environment, and the exclusionary environment. These are presented throughout the film, often contrasting one another. For example, bright yellow flowers growing on the property of a steel mill are emphasized to highlight the contrast between them and a passing train. Close-

ups are used to focus on specific “natural” elements like water and air, to show how they have been altered by the industrial landscape, and to ultimately emphasize the literal proximity of East Chicago residents to the poisoned environment. Various shots, specifically during some interviews, are edited in a way that presents multiple shots simultaneously by montaging them on top of each other. For example, when Akeeshea discusses the different neighborhoods she has lived in, a map of the Superfund site, which has forced her to think of Calumet in an entirely new way, is juxtaposed over her face.

Mother Lead's objectives work to add to the narrative presented in this paper. Ultimately, the film further develops my thesis, that racial capitalism and corporate corruption compound legacies of toxicity in low income communities of color, and visualizes the processes through which this is done, and the experiences of those who live through it.

Limitations

While *Mother Lead* develops and presents new questions concerning this research, I faced many limitations as both filmmaker and observer. Throughout the process of creating the film, I sought to elevate the voices of Akeeshea and other East Chicago community members as much as possible. I did this by collaborating with Akeeshea on editing and narration, consistently seeking feedback in the editing process, and by seeking direction from other folks throughout the process of shooting and editing the film. Because I have not personally experienced what Akeeshea and others have, however, I was still limited in my ability to completely convey the personal reality faced by residents of the Superfund site. Although limited in this capacity, *Mother Lead* still works to elevate and emphasize historically marginalized narratives, and I believe it works to show how privileged filmmakers like myself can work with communities rather than simply analyze them from a distance.

Film, like any art form, is a limited medium. It is able to craft complex narratives and visually experiment with what is presented to the naked eye. It can question itself, through editing and raising visual questions, sometimes leaving them for the audience to answer on their own. For all that film can do, it also faces restrictions. The camera is limited to what it captures, leaving what is left unseen to the audience's imagination. Editing crafts only a particular narrative, one that can be contrasted by a new creative endeavor. In *Mother Lead*, for example, Akeeshea's narrative presents a powerful yet small part of the East Chicago story.

I believe, however, these limitations are actually what make film so powerful. Every new narrative and experiment done on camera or through editing informs the next narrative. This film does not exist in a vacuum; it exists informed by the films that have influenced me, Akeeshea, and other's to visually express stories in a way that serves them justice. Furthermore, it exists informed by the research presented in the rest of this paper. As you watch *Mother Lead*, you see the complexity of Akeeshea's story come to life, and you are presented with my creative observation of what external and internal realities appear like to the residents of East Chicago, Indiana.

Rendered Invisible

Visibility as Resistance to Racial Capitalism and Toxic Erasure

Through field work, filmmaking, and historical and theoretical analysis, many observations, conclusions, and questions about the Superfund site in East Chicago, and environmental injustice issues more generally, have become clear. I have broken up my observations into four sections, focusing specifically on home, community, health, and activism in East Chicago. I analyze these observations through the lens of racial capitalism and the systems of corruption sustained through it. These observations can be used to more adequately address and mitigate systems of environmental racism and injustice.

Corruption as a Tool of Racial Capitalism

As I conducted research, it became clear there was a large gap in theory that considers the connection between racial capitalism, corruption, and the realities of environmental injustice. Through my conversations with residents in the field work I conducted over the last year, the problem of corruption became a prevalent theme. Building upon the theories of Cedric Robinson, Nik Heynen, Laura Pulido, Julie Sze, and John Gledhill, I propose a new application of racial capitalism theory that distinguishes the role of corruption in environmental injustice. Racial capitalism relies upon corruption to compound legacies of toxic exposure in places like East Chicago by amplifying the initial problem and exacerbating it through a failure to actually create and implement solutions. My field work in East Chicago reveals how corruption is utilized to further oppress, silence, and marginalize already devastated communities, and to recreate the unequal systems of industrial capitalism.

East Chicago is Home

Throughout my conversations with Akeeshea and other residents of the Superfund site, it

became clear that many residents have an understanding of “home” that is almost entirely shaped by the pressing reality that they live in spaces quite literally built on lead. This concept renders them completely insecure, both physically and mentally. The concept of home as a space of comfort and safety is stripped away from residents, who know that the water, dust, and furniture in their homes could be a source of daily poisoning. Home becomes a place of latent fear, of slow violence, and premature death. Akeeshea talked about the toxic memories of bathing her sons in water that was most likely contaminated with lead.⁹⁰ Mothers and parents are forced to care for their children, knowing that the spaces they occupy may be literally killing them.

During a conversation with Akeeshea in December, she talked about the housing competition that ensued after over 1,100 people were evicted from West Calumet at the exact same time. Former neighbors were pitted against each other in a quick effort to try to find housing in East Chicago that accepted Section 8 housing vouchers. There were limited options available, and some residents were forced to move as far away as Las Vegas and Houston. By dividing these residents, the Housing Authority was able to diminish the former unity and activism that had been mobilized when the Superfund site was initially declared. Furthermore, the decision to knock down the facility, despite no recommendation to do so from the EPA, was negligent at best. The fact that HUD supported the decision and even funded the demolition shows a lack of communication between government agencies, and an overall failure to adequately care for residents of public housing communities.⁹¹ Lead remediation became a tool to diminish community solidarity. These acts of negligence and intentional division have been pervasive since the site was initially declared, and can be seen as corrupt acts that seek to further prolong justice for Superfund site residents.

⁹⁰ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, March 16, 2019.

⁹¹ Cross, “HUD awards East Chicago \$4 million for demolition of West Calumet housing site.”

As I talked with residents, one of the most prevalent themes of our conversations was that East Chicago was home. In a literal sense, residents couldn't imagine living anywhere else. This was something echoed by every person I talked to, from Akeeshea to Sherry to Seretha. Folks like Sherry even moved back to East Chicago after time away, because for them it was their community, the place where they were comfortable, loved, and supported. For them to leave meant losing that support network, losing people who understood what they were going through. Akeeshea highlighted that she could never leave, because justice for her, her sons, and her neighbors was more important than anything else. In another sense, these residents were forced to stay. For residents like Akeeshea, leaving meant abandoning her community, and facing the possibility of being invalidated elsewhere. She described the fear of moving somewhere where neighbors and doctors wouldn't believe her stories and experiences.⁹² By isolating toxic waste in low income communities of color, racial capitalism relies upon the threat of leaving as a tool to exert further slow violence upon communities.

Actions taken by the EPA, the city, and other public institutions have forced East Chicago residents to constantly redefine the physical boundaries of home. For some of them, this created a constantly shaken foundation, one where it was hard to mobilize and actively resist the efforts of corporate encroachment and political negligence. For most, however, they have been grounded in a concept of home not tied to the ground they live on, but to the people, spaces, and culture defining what they love most about East Chicago.

Divide and Conquer

Community is at the core of what it means to be from East Chicago. Calumet Day happens every year in July, and it's a celebration of the neighborhood, the culture, and the

⁹² Akeeshea in discussion with the author, December 20, 2018.

residents that make up a strong and diverse community in East Chicago. Neighborhoods around the city have similar events that celebrate their identity and importance to the city. They're a statement that those neighborhoods exist in strong numbers, despite abandonment, population decrease, and industrial encroachment.

Within the last decade, corporate industry and political inaction have cannibalized three neighborhoods in the Calumet section of town. Thomas described the process to me in October. Essentially, residents living in these neighborhoods are subject to extreme toxicity. These neighborhoods are then deemed unsafe to live in, the residents leave, the homes are demolished, and new gated industrial parks are constructed. This is what happened to West Calumet, where many residents believe a new industry will take over any day now, and is what's happening to neighborhoods like Marktown. In a city where only 17% of the land is zoned for residential use, this threat is alarming. Neighborhood after neighborhood become the sacrifice zones of industry.⁹³ Inaction on the part of the city government, and decisions like those of BP in Marktown, reveal the corrupt actions institutions are taking to relegate residents to zones of toxic exposure, destroy communities and neighborhoods, and eventually reindustrialize. The immobility of residents, mostly as a result of income levels and strong community ties, forces them to move to other contaminated parts of the city, where they are then poisoned, remarginalized, and eventually redisplaced.

Within East Chicago and the Superfund site, there is also evidence of constructed division. The Calumet neighborhood has historically been divided along class lines, emblematic of the industrial worker-centric economy that defines East Chicago. When the site was first established, the EPA divided it into three zones. These zones are almost identical to the sort of

⁹³ Thomas in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

race and class-based lines of the neighborhood. Zone 1 is mostly low-income residents of color, zone 2 is mostly low-income and middle-income Black residents, and zone 3 is mostly middle-income residents of varying racial identities. The EPA asserted that these zones were created based on priority, with zone 1 receiving the highest clean up priority. This initially makes sense and represents the ways in which toxic exposure is scalar in terms of race and class: the lower a resident's income and the darker a resident's skin tone, the more likely to be exposed to toxic poisoning. The decision by the EPA to divide the site, however, actually exacerbated the deep-seeded racial and class-based problems of the neighborhood. In the initial wave of activism in 2016, activist groups focusing on zone 1 and parts of zone 2 like Calumet Lives Matter, ran into conflict with other groups like the CAG, which sought to work within the site as a whole. This tension was evident in conversations I had with Maritza and Sherry, who highlighted the differences in approach and priorities between the two groups. By dividing the site into these specific zones, the EPA displayed negligence, both in terms of its understanding of all the issues facing the community, and in its further dividing the residents of the Superfund site. These sorts of negligent decisions are emblematic of the ways racial capitalism relies on corruption to seep into the legal decisions made by federal organizations.

The creation of the Superfund site has also affected the way residents conceptually visualize the physical spaces they occupy. Prior to 2009, the idea of living in a zone would be nonexistent. The neighborhoods, streets, and housing complexes had different names. When speaking to residents now, however, they almost never refer to the location of their former homes, their neighbor's homes, or their relatives' homes without using terms like zone 1 or zone 2. Every time Akeeshea would discuss her grandmother's home, she would highlight its location in zone 2, despite the fact that her grandmother has lived there for over 60 years. This sort of

language is pervasive in the documentary, and in the countless interviews I conducted with residents. It is possible that they used this language with me because they knew I had no understanding of the neighborhood outside of the context of the Superfund site. The reality, however, is that when they speak about their neighborhoods, they are using language that privileges the arbitrary lines of the Superfund site over other historical borders, markers, and names. The result is that the Calumet community has been forced to understand itself today through the lens of toxic classification.

Lead in the Brain

Perhaps the most alarming problems residents face today are the effects of toxic poisoning on their health. While I outlined most of these effects in the second chapter, this section serves to show how government and corporate entities have utilized corruption to exert violence on residents.

During a toxic tour that Thomas gave me in October, he pointed out countless chemical, lead, steel, oil, and aluminum factories.⁹⁴ When you look at the Indiana Harbor Canal, you can see oil floating down it. On a cold day, pollution clouds from factories and mills are visible for miles. Laws that legalize corruption have allowed corporations to pollute neighborhoods throughout East Chicago, facing residents with some of the highest cancer rates in Indiana and the Rust Belt region. These corporations exist at such a global scale, that when the pollution is too much and residents are forced to leave, they merely buy the homes, knock them down, and erase any semblance of residential living. These corporations are almost never held liable for the health problems they exert on residents. Because the line from factory to pollutant to health effect is so untraceable, slow death has essentially become a legalized form of murder.

⁹⁴ Thomas in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

Government institutions have been as complicit in the slow violence imposed upon residents. Through disinformation, negligence, and inaction, they've prolonged exposure for many. Inaction has been the source of many historical problems. Akeeshea talked to me about how Mayor Copeland knew about the problems facing residents of the Superfund site since before he entered office in 2010 yet displayed no sense of urgency in relocating residents or working with state and federal organizations to institute a clean up effort.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the corporate-city alliance that exists in East Chicago is pervasive. According to Thomas, corporations pour millions of dollars into every mayoral election. Whoever becomes mayor is essentially obliged to support industry in all its forms.⁹⁶ In this way, corporations use legalized corruption through campaign financing to control elected city officials. In doing so, they are able to reinvent racial capitalism by controlling policies, actions, and clean up efforts that serve to erase legacies of toxicity and render residents' toxic bodies invisible.

Disinformation and negligence have made it exhausting for residents and activist groups to work with local, state, and federal agencies. At community meetings, officials with the East Chicago Health Department and ATSDR question residents' claims that living on toxic land is at all related to the health problems they face.⁹⁷ By not believing residents and mothers, these organizations are showing symptoms of institutional racism seen in environmental justice failures across the country. Women of color are often told they're exaggerating, lying, or too uneducated to actually understand the problems they face. In truth, these organizations have no desire to believe, support, or work with these communities. Furthermore, these departments fail to inform residents of new findings, new research, and new possibilities for treatment. Maritza

⁹⁵ Akeeshea in discussion with the author, March 16, 2019.

⁹⁶ Thomas in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

⁹⁷ Akeeshea, Rick, and Maritza in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

talks about the institutional failure to communicate. For example, the Indiana Department of Health will conduct a test and the East Chicago Health Department will turn around and conduct the same test. Rather than communicating findings and results with each other, departments are neglecting to inform one another, thereby prolonging treatment and creating greater organizational failure. Ultimately, these findings are not being communicated with residents' physicians, leaving residents to tell their doctors and their children's doctors about the health ailments they face, some of which they may not even know or fully understand.⁹⁸

The health problems that residents face are the most pressing, yet are receiving the least amount of institutional support. Organizational failure is reharmed these residents. By exhausting them, each day becomes a literal battle for survival. Akeeshea has been on the verge of tears in conversation, because of pain, or because of the reality that one day she might not be there to support her children. The fact that these organizations and corporations show no sense of urgency in getting care for these residents shows how corruption is being used to slowly silence contaminated communities, and is undoubtedly tied to a racist apathy for the physical, emotional, and mental pain that people of color in East Chicago and elsewhere are forced to endure for the sake of corporate control and corporate profits.

We're Gonna Fight to Get What's Right

Despite the mountain of institutional obstacles and violences imposed upon the residents of the Superfund site, there remains a passion and a desire to fight for justice in their community. As Maritza discussed with me in October, they have begun to understand how the EPA, the city, and other organizations attempt to control and shift the narrative. In growing to understand their tactics, they are able to outsmart the officials who seek to keep them silent. Some of these ways

⁹⁸ Maritza in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

are small, like getting back in line even though residents are only allowed to ask one question at community meetings. Other ways are more substantial, like receiving a \$50,000 TAG grant from the EPA for new testing and new legal support.⁹⁹

While there is passion, hope, and small opportunities for change, organizational corruption continues to make activism in East Chicago an uphill battle. The tactics discussed previously, like disinformation, negligence, and constructed division, have exhausted many activists. Sherry and Thomas discussed that, after three years of working every day to fight for change, they were so exhausted that they could not press on.¹⁰⁰ As I have mentioned, many of these activists are elderly, in severely bad health, or both. The political and corporate structure fails to acknowledge residents' requests, and many residents have been so exhausted by the lack of change that they decide it isn't worth it to continue fighting. Companies like BP have more environmental lawyers protecting their one refinery, than the residents have on all sides. Exhausting the voices of residents becomes a tool to remove them from the reindustrialization equation.

Because EPA, the city, and the state control when meetings are held and under what terms, residents are constantly on the defense. The creation of the CAG is seeking to change this by further incorporating residents' perspectives in decision-making, but the historical silencing of activist voices in community meetings shows these organizations are reluctant to hearing demands from residents. Furthermore, EPA, the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM), and others frequently cancel, postpone, reschedule meetings, and introduce arbitrary rules in hearings that limit time for questions and the like.¹⁰¹ As corrupt

⁹⁹ Maritza in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas and Sherry in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

¹⁰¹ Maritza in discussion with the author, October 20, 2018.

practices continue to silence community activists, changes seem more unlikely. Nevertheless, as Akeeshea highlighted to me in March, Maritza and her will keep fighting until what's right and what's just is achieved for Calumet.

Expanding on Corruption as a Tool of Racial Capitalism

Corruption itself exists on multi-scalar levels, which is one of the reasons it is such a powerful weapon. There are cases of toxic exposure and poisoning that impact residents of many racial and socioeconomic backgrounds across the country. What my research seeks to highlight, however, is the more significant scale of pollution and corruption that low-income communities of color are subject to, and how corruption's scalar nature works to inflict the violences of racial capitalism upon these places. While white communities may face similar levels of disinformation for instance, the negligence, inaction, and intentional siting of waste facilities, toxic dumping grounds, pollutant-prone industry, and other noxious locales in neighborhoods of color exists at an astounding scale. Wealthy white people being subject to intense toxic exposure seems to be an abnormal occurrence, while subjecting low-income people of color to industrial poisoning is a necessary component of racial capitalism. When Akeeshea visited Washington DC to discuss her story with EPA officials, she met people from across the United States experiencing similar levels of pollution, and, as she noted, "all of them were black and brown." Because these problems are so pervasive, my observations can be applied beyond the city limits of East Chicago to understand phenomena facing similar communities across the country.

First of all, the relationship between corruption and racial capitalism can be used to understand the trends of industrialization, deindustrialization, and reindustrialization that have occurred in many of these places in the United States. At the height of industrialization from the early 1900s to the 1950s, people of color were exposed to the worst forms of waste from

factories and mills through zoning laws and other forms of racist legal housing practices. When deindustrialization reached its height as globalization came to the forefront in the 1980s and 1990s, these same residents were faced with increasing unemployment, community abandonment, and a decreasing social safety net from the government. Finally, as toxins from industrialization continue to afflict residents today, they are forced out of their neighborhoods, which are then destroyed and reindustrialized. By constantly reforming itself through industrialized, globalized, and neoliberal economic choices, racial capitalism used new forms of corruption to weaponize the environment against communities of color.

These ideas can also be applied to understand corporate governance, both the states role in regulating corporations and the way in which corporations literally govern environmentally unjust spaces like East Chicago. As neoliberal market reforms began to shape environmental regulation post-1970s, corporations began to regulate their own pollution. As a result, corrupt decisions sited industrial waste in neighborhoods of color and away from white neighborhoods. Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) movements, led by white environmentalists who wanted neighborhoods free of industrial pollution, shaped this process. Also, as corporations gained more control of the government through campaign donations and finance reforms, corruption changed from bribes to election control. In instances like Flint, where the state government completely took over the city government, people of color were reharmed through dedemocratization efforts that placed city decisions in the control of state officials, which led to the ultimate contamination of lead in public water. The corporations which polluted the water were not held responsible, nor was the political system which exacerbated the toxic legacy of the Flint River.¹⁰² To this day, environmental violence is being exerted over Flint's residents, who

¹⁰² Ranganathan, "Thinking with Flint."

still don't have access to clean water.

Finally, the barriers to activism and failures to effectively implement solutions, like cleaning up contaminated neighborhoods, have been major systemic harms emblematic of the way corruption reproduces racial capitalism in low-income communities of color. On many Native American reservations across the United States, for example, nuclear waste has poisoned countless water supplies. Clean up efforts, however, have been minimal. In East Chicago, the problem is similar, where zones 1, 2, and 3, to this day, have seen no effective plan for clean up put into place. Activists are exhausted by the lack of urgency by federal organizations, and the lack of legal framework to work through to achieve justice goals.

The idea that corruption is an essential instrument of racial capitalism can be applied to a multitude of other cases of environmental injustice, and overall works to understand how these problems arise, persist, and are recreated through actions taken by the political and corporate state. While there are remaining gaps in the application of this theory that I address in the conclusion, I believe my observations can be utilized to more holistically understand the problems of environmental injustice, and to implement solutions-oriented policies to work with communities facing such weaponized environmental violence.

Conclusion

During my final trip to East Chicago in March, Akeeshea consistently echoed one theme: remembrance. Every time she talked about what she envisioned for her life and for the life of East Chicago, she talked about making people remember who lived in West Calumet, who died from and are living with toxic exposure, and who still live in the homes throughout the neighborhood. As corporations try to reindustrialize, erasing the history of the complex, Akeeshea wants to make people remember who was there, what was done to them, and what can be learned from the slow violence inflicted on her, her children, her friends, and her neighbors. To conclude, I discuss the limitations I faced in my research, opportunities for further research, and possible large scale solutions that will more effectively address environmental injustice.

Many field work-based projects extend over many months, with researchers or filmmakers having day-to-day conversations with residents, professionals, activists, and others. Because I was only able to travel to East Chicago for four weekends throughout the year, I was not able to conduct the prolific research that many other researchers and filmmakers in my field have. While I was able to remain in contact with residents like Akeeshea during my time away from East Chicago, if this project were to continue, it would be better served by field work that is conducted daily for an extended period of time.

Furthermore, I was only able to interview six residents during my trips to East Chicago. Had I spent a greater amount of time there, I would have liked to interview more residents, activists, and city officials. Akeeshea's story is powerful and important, but her narrative is just one of the many stories of residents in the Superfund site. Additionally, I was not able to interview EPA officials, legal experts, politicians, or business executives who implement city, state, and federal-level policies, who oversee the Superfund site, or who work with the massive

corporate industries still in operation. These interviews would have fostered additional questions and research observations, and, in the future, would serve to further complicate and develop this research.

Finally, the application of corruption as a symptom of racial capitalism is limited by one case study of East Chicago. Applying this theory to other situations of environmental injustice would complicate, question, and further develop an understanding of the relationship between corruption, racial capitalism, and environmental violence.

This research has presented many opportunities for further application of the theory of racial capitalism and its reliance on corruption as a means of recreating itself. Further research looking at corruption in other spaces of environmental injustice would greatly benefit the theory, and would provide new opportunities to understand how corruption and racial capitalism compound, erase, and remake legacies of toxicity.

Additionally, research that looks at the role of corruption in recreating racial capitalism in places like Flint, East Los Angeles, rural Louisiana, and other cases of environmental injustice should be explored. My research goes beyond analyzing East Chicago solely through the lens of racial capitalism, and looks at the specific use of corruption in reproducing environmental violence as a primary component to racial capitalism. Further application of my research presents an opportunity to foster new understandings of environmental justice issues. Moreover, research that identifies other instruments of racial capitalism, explored by Malini Ranganathan in her piece about racial liberalism, are crucial to develop a more thorough awareness of the ways in which corporate and political entities employ the system to environmentally oppress low income people of color.

Furthermore, environmental justice research that uses field work to understand the

cultural and political impacts of toxic exposure would strengthen and build upon this research. Political and cultural ecological research has generally looked at broad trends, actions, and applied existing theory to understand environmental justice issues. By incorporating personal narratives through ethnographic field work into new research frameworks, new opportunities to understand challenges, possible solutions, and new applications of theory would arise. This project has brought a unique perspective to existing research in anthropology and geography, and future endeavors should consider the importance of field work, personal narratives, and interdisciplinary approaches to research to bring new ideas, analysis, and questions to the table.

During my time in East Chicago, many of the residents I interviewed stressed their hope for change in the midst of community devastation. This research focused on understanding the problems faced by residents through a new lens. Further research in East Chicago and elsewhere should incorporate solutions-based approaches to working with communities affected by environmental racism and environmental injustice. While I do not have the in-depth legal, cultural, and political understanding of these issues to suggest detailed solutions to the problems faced by residents, my work in East Chicago has illuminated some broad systemic changes that begin to reckon with how low-income communities of color can seek justice in similar situations.

On the political side, national, state, and municipal governments need to incorporate environmental justice legislation into existing regulatory frameworks. Most legislation concerning the environment focuses on removing waste from certain areas, namely white and wealthy ones, but does not regulate what happens to the waste that is removed. This waste is often illegally dumped onto underserved communities or buried in the ground. Laws based on NIMBY principles exacerbate this problem, and create cleaner wealthy communities, and dirtier low-income ones. Ideally, the legal system should not exist to remake racial capitalism, but

rather as a means of combatting it. Furthermore, legislation that considers the economic weight of healthcare costs for people affected by toxic exposure must be explored. One of the main problems faced by residents of East Chicago is the fact that they cannot afford to see dentists, oncologists, and other doctors to seek treatment for their problems. Legislation that provides reparations for people forced to live in such contaminated zones must be implemented.

Culturally, communities need to work to ally themselves based on common goals. In many environmental justice movements across the country, mothers are on the frontlines fighting for justice. Communities should look to the women who are leading these movements for solutions, and work to find ways to force organizations like the EPA to work with them rather than around them. There are real and pervasive cultural tensions and problems that communities like East Chicago face. These tensions must be acknowledged and understood before various activist groups can work together. People like Akeeshea, who are willing to work through these problems in order to achieve the best results for the entire community, must be elevated and looked to as leaders who can foster conversations and solutions to the problems their communities confront on a daily basis.

Finally, and more generally, there needs to be a cultural shift in thought. This shift needs to reframe the way people understand our relationship to the environment, health, and other people. This shift needs to prioritize life over racial capitalism's desire to turn people of color and the environment into products of waste, production, and consumption. Film has been a powerful medium through which I have presented Akeeshea's story, and the situation in East Chicago. Academics, artists, and activists should work to foster new engagements with environmental justice problems by elevating the stories of community members who engage with these problems on a daily basis. This research has been powerful and effective because I sought

to elevate the voices of those who understood this issue on a personal level. If artists, academics, and activists can use their talents and expertise to elevate the voices of others facing similar trauma, change will be more effectively achieved.

When I asked Akeeshea what her hope was for East Chicago, she had a simple answer. “Just clean,” she said. The desires of most residents are not far-fetched. They want to live away from toxicity, in spaces that are safe and healthy, where they can raise their children without the fear of lead poisoning and other ailments. Akeeshea was weary of this desire, however, because she knows that if toxicity is removed from her neighborhood, it must be moved somewhere else. In mitigating problems of environmental justice, solutions must ensure that the problem is not relocated elsewhere. The narratives of those living in the USS Lead Superfund site in East Chicago are vital to understanding the changes needed in communities exposed to extreme toxicity. There is a lot of work to be done to dismantle the system of racial capitalism. By engaging with the tools it relies upon, such as corruption, a more profound look at solutions is presented. Calumet is a community of complexities. Built on love and toxic ground, formed through barbeques and environmental violence, and persisting through resilient friendships. In imagining a future for Calumet, we must look to women like Akeeshea who already know what it looks like.

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