

**MEMORY AND THE RE-INVENTION OF PLACE:
THE LEGACIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE
IN WARREN COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA**

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Geography.

Chapel Hill
2013

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Abstract

PAVITHRA VASUDEVAN: Memory and the re-invention of place:
The legacies of environmental justice in Warren County, North Carolina
(Under the direction of Sara Smith)

This thesis examines how toxicity is interwoven with structural racism to create a complicated historical legacy for residents of Warren County, North Carolina. Sept. 15th, 2012 marked the 30th anniversary of Warren County's historic protests against a toxic landfill. I explore how Warren County residents seek to reclaim their legacy as the 'birthplace of environmental justice' and re-create a sense of place through collective memory-making practices. Warren County's example reminds us that hope is an active and engaged process of transforming the material and cultural residues of the past to shape imaginaries for the future.

Reflecting the political commitment of critical / performance ethnography, this thesis is offered in the spirit of a dialogue, bridging the flows of knowledge between theory and practice, community conversations and academic debates. My work builds upon three pools of theory: scholarship on power and knowledge; political ecologies of waste and toxicity; and memory studies.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my collaborators in Warren County for welcoming me with equal parts curiosity and reluctance, and reminding me that hope is worth fighting for. Thanks in particular to Bill Kearney for taking stories as seriously as I do. I am fortunate to have stumbled into this project through the work of Carla Norwood, Gabriel Cumming and friend and colleague Tim Stallmann, who all strive to make research relevant.

I have been graced with exceptional mentors. Thank you to my committee – Sara, Renee, Scott, and Altha – for your consistent support, insightful feedback and intellectual camaraderie throughout this process. I am also grateful to Dottie Holland, Arturo Escobar, Steve Wing, Jean Dennison, Donna Houston, and Joseph Palis for asking difficult questions and reminding me of what is at stake. Ariel Dorfman, Thavolia Glymph, Wahneema Lubiano, and Crystal Fortwangler have been formative in my thinking and inspired me to return to graduate school.

Many many friends helped me talk through my project, reviewed drafts, and critiqued my work, including my brilliant cohort and colleagues at the UNC-Chapel Hill Department of Geography and my fellow political ecologists at THINKS! (THinkers in Nature, Knowledge & Society). Ajantha Subramanian and Vincent Brown reminded me often that scholars can be critical, creative and compassionate

all at once. A special thanks to Helen Orr, Haruna Suzuki, Mabel Gergan, Mike Dimpfl, Chris Courtheyn and Atiya Hussain – for everything. I am immensely grateful to my family for supporting me in innumerable ways and for striving to make the world beautiful and just. Lastly, I am blessed to walk my path with Snehal Patel, who first taught me the meaning of environmental justice many years ago now.

This research was conducted with funding and support from the Department of Geography, the Center for the Study of the American South, and the Graduate School Merit Fellowship of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. DGE-1144081. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

Parts of this thesis were previously published as Vasudevan, Pavithra (2012) “Performance and Proximity: Revisiting environmental justice in Warren County, North Carolina.” *Performance Research* 17.4, “On Ecology”: 18-26 [copyright Taylor & Francis].

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
A brief history	2
Understanding the context.....	4
Overview of the thesis.....	8
Summary of chapters.....	12
2. THE WARREN COUNTY CONTEXT	13
A celebration of community	16
The struggle against the toxic landfill	20
The legacies of racism	25
Conclusions	34
3. ON POWER AND KNOWLEDGE, OR METHODOLOGIES FOR COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH	36
Literature review: on power and knowledge	39
Producing knowledge: research as performance.....	42
Producing knowledge: a politics of proximity.....	47
Conclusions	52
4. ON LIVING WITH TOXICITY	54
Literature review: on living with toxicity.....	56
Negotiating toxicity: science and uncertainty	59

Negotiating toxicity: toxic legacies	69
Conclusions	74
5. ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE-MAKING	76
Literature review: on memory and place	79
Making/marking history: the archives of collective memory	82
Making/marking place: performances of collective memory	86
Conclusions	92
6. IN CLOSING, THE CULTURAL AND CRITICAL WORK OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE	93
REFERENCES	97

Chapter 1: Introduction

June 23, 2011

I follow Bill Kearney in his signature green pickup, I in my old Honda. We drive out of town, south down the major highway that connects Warrenton to Louisburg and then Raleigh. At some point, unmarked and unrecognizable to me, we take a couple of turns and suddenly, my car's bumping along down a windy dirt road. Bill navigates the potholes and bumps with ease. It is clear that he's ridden this road many times before. I expect to see something dramatic around each bend, but the vistas of rural North Carolina are endless; haystacks signal a farm in the distance, and stands of trees hint at the abundance of water and richness of soil. It's a beautiful day and scenic in the way that Warren County is, pastoral, but I'm mostly worried about my car which isn't quite built for off-roading. Round another bend, and Bill slows to a stop. I pull up and park just behind his pickup, and follow him up to a fence.

*This is it. A tall fence, a gate secured by a heavy chain and three padlocks. Bill opens the lock and we walk in to what seems like a peaceful natural park area. Anything but the infamous and toxic landfill it once was. It occurs to me in that moment that my basic scientific trivia of PCBs has me illprepared for this encounter. The land looks fertile – does this prove that the soil is free of toxins? Would PCBs cause the vegetation to die? Is it safe now, or should I not be walking here? **How did they know with any certainty, the residents of Warren County? How could they evaluate the extent of its toxicity, this thing that they couldn't see? And why would they believe it was made safe when they had been lied to before?***

We walk down a path leading to a large cement platform with an overhanging steel roof, a benevolent reminder of the remediation fight. Bill talks about how great it would be to hold outdoor concerts here, so tourists could come to Warren County from far and wide, and learn not only about environmental justice, but also take pleasure in the outdoors. I ask if the toxins are underneath the structure, confused about size, scale, remediation. He points to a hill next to the structure, where the soil was deposited after it was remediated. He tells me, it was sixty thousand tons of toxic waste. A hill the size of a football field. It was more real – and more unreal – than anything I had imagined, being there, walking towards that hill of what was once decidedly toxic waste. I

couldn't quite walk up to the hill that first time; I just looked at it and took some pictures. An attempt to retain control I suppose. I drove home that day completely overwhelmed. By the size of the hill, by the fear it evoked in me, by the realness of the place that I and others venerate as the Birthplace of Environmental Justice. Overwhelmed most of all, by the depth of the violence that underlies the site, and what it must have taken residents to continue hoping and struggling despite the fear and uncertainty, having their trust repeatedly broken, and their humanity denied.

The scene rendered above is edited from a journal entry documenting my first visit to the site of a former landfill in the Afton area of Warren County, North Carolina, proclaimed 'the birthplace of environmental justice' by activists and academics alike. In this chapter, I introduce the major themes and guiding questions of my ethnographic work in Warren County that I will elaborate upon in the chapters that follow. Beginning with an account of the history behind the landfill site, I suggest that toxicity is interwoven with structural racism to create a complicated historical legacy that residents of Warren County continue to negotiate today. I describe the current and ongoing efforts by some residents to commemorate this history as a kind of cultural work that is performed by communities to heal from the trauma of social and environmental injustice. By remembering and re-narrating their history, Warren County residents hope to transform both the people and the landscape into a model of health rather than waste.

A brief history

In 1978, the state of North Carolina chose a site in the community of Afton in Warren County to house forty thousand cubic yards of soil contaminated by illegal dumping of PCBs, a lethal toxin. Despite facing strong opposition from county

residents who were concerned about contamination, health and economic impacts, the state began construction of the landfill in the summer of 1982. Arguing that Warren County was chosen because the population was majority African American and poor, community leaders connected with regional and national civil rights organizing networks to fight the state's decision. Beginning on September 15, 1982, and continuing for six weeks, truckloads of PCB-contaminated soil were met by protestors laying themselves down in civil disobedience. This integration of environmentalism with civil rights has earned Warren County recognition as 'the birthplace of environmental justice' in the United States (Bullard 2005, McGurty 2007)¹.

Collective action failed to block the landfill in Warren County, but inspired marginalized communities across the country facing environmental risks. Indeed, the term 'environmental racism' was coined in reference to Warren County,² and came to exemplify how environmental hazards were significantly and primarily borne by poor communities of color, even as they were excluded from a white-dominated environmental movement. In 1993, it was determined that the Warren County landfill contained large quantities of water and could potentially leak into the groundwater. Warren County residents resumed their activism, demanding full citizen participation going forward. In 2003, driven by citizen demands, the state

¹ Warren County's 1982 protests are credited as a formative event in most scholarly and activist timelines of environmental justice in the United States. McGurty's *Transforming Environmentalism* (2007) traces this history from the 1978 PCB contamination through the 2003 remediation.

² Rev. Benjamin Chavis of the United Church of Christ's Racial Justice Commission (UCC 1987) is often given credit for the term, though among activists in North Carolina, it is said that the idea was initially expressed by a child participating in the Warren County protests.

initiated a remediation process to destroy the toxins on-site without transporting the materials elsewhere. The remediated landfill site was subsequently deeded to the county.

Today, the 120-acre landfill site, including the hill of remediated soil, has become a canvas for multiple narratives of remembrance and forgetting. Some in the community hope to leverage their iconic history to encourage local participation in cultural preservation efforts, health and wellness initiatives and sustainable economic development. Meanwhile, significant vocal opposition to using the landfill site as a park signals underlying and ongoing tensions that emerged through the remediation process. Some residents of Warren County, especially in the Afton area, continue to fear contamination from the PCBs despite assurances by authorities that the site is free of toxic chemicals. Remediation in Warren County has not resulted in resolution.

Understanding the context

I was confused and a little shocked the first time I visited the landfill site. I wondered, why isn't there a sign at the entrance to the landfill? Why is the gate padlocked? There was no marker, no sign, nothing to indicate the richness of history that underlies this seemingly unremarkable piece of land.

That history is the story of a predominantly black community which has fought against racism repeatedly, in its many forms. It is a story of capitalism's *uneven development*, of why certain places are marked for economic growth, while others are marked for decline and designated to contain waste. It is a story of a defining grassroots struggle against the seeming inevitability of these processes.

This story implicates not only the producers of toxic wastes and the governments that enable uneven development, but all of us – who benefit from capitalist production, yet deny or remain ignorant of the very real social and environmental costs of our lifestyles.

This integration of the social and the natural is one hallmark of what is called environmental justice. The environmental justice movement fundamentally challenged what constitutes the environment, in the process reshaping understandings of nature-society relationships and environmental practice. Questioning the primary focus of environmentalism on non-human species and distant or wilderness landscapes as objects apart from humans, environmental justice activists insisted that the environment is composed of people’s immediate surroundings, or the places “where we live, where we work, and where we play” (Alston 1991, cited in Agyeman 2005). In other words, the ‘environment’ in environmental justice was reimagined as a social space intimately interwoven with daily human life. Often described as a merging of social and ecological concerns (Di Chiro 1996), the struggles that composed the movement’s beginnings extended the Civil Rights framework and activism to link the environment with social and spatial inequalities (Taylor 2000). Specifically, they highlighted the unequal and localized burden of environmental risks, in the form of industrial and chemical waste, on communities that are predominantly low-income, racial minorities, rural and otherwise marginalized (Bullard 1994). Through collective and political action, environmental justice struggles revealed how their local environments came to be “associated with the daily smells and sights of blight along with an awareness of

ever-present danger and insult to one's body and to the community" (Allen 2009, 196), even as they articulated a vision of integrated social and ecological health (Lee 1992). As a network and as an articulation of a multiplicity of local struggles, the politics of the environmental justice movement recognize both geographic specificity and ecological unity, creating a *global sense of place* that stands in contrast to more universalizing forms of neoliberal globalization (Di Chiro 2003).

The politics of knowledge production has been an ongoing concern of environmental justice since its beginnings. Scholarship on environmental justice through the 1980s and into the 1990s focused heavily on quantitative risk and demographic analysis. In a special issue of *Antipode* reviewing environmental justice scholarship, Pulido (1996) critiqued this focus on statistical correlation of race and siting of hazards as an appropriation of the movement by academics that disregards the complex ways in which racist ideology is woven into the social fabric and intersects with multiple other forms of oppression. Quantitative analysis has become increasingly sophisticated and continues to dominate the breadth of the field. However, critical studies on environmental justice have proliferated in the past 15 years, linking local struggles with larger political economies, longer histories of colonization and oppression, and regional/global flows. A recent review cautions that this trend in multi-scalar theorizing risks disconnecting scholarship from the accessible language, everyday practices, and material conditions that are the subjects of its research (Holifield et al. 2009, 607).

An emergent strand of environmental justice scholarship calls for the inclusion of *poetics* and *pedagogy* in political analysis (Adamson et al. 2002).

Recognizing and building on the dual creative and critical contribution of environmental justice movements helps us ground social science discourses and pushes scholars to think beyond narrow scientific frameworks. That is to say, environmental justice is not only about the struggle to statistically prove that environmental hazards are linked to health concerns, though this is often a requisite and daunting task in itself. Environmental justice is equally about communities fighting to stay alive and even thrive, through efforts to promote community cohesion and public participation; to make toxic and waste areas livable; and to build visions of health and justice amidst ongoing crisis (Houston 2008).

In this project, I explore how some Warren County residents are commemorating their struggle against the toxic landfill. By activating a collective memory rooted in histories of wellness and resilience, the commemoration practices encourage community members to feel ownership over their socio-ecological futures. Cultural processes such as these, undertaken by communities actively seeking to heal from the traumas of contamination, are significant not only for the poetics of collectivity and justice that they articulate. Warren County residents, who have fought to stay on their land and attempt to transform the negative associations associated with the landfill, are engaged in using memory as a tool to re-create a sense of place. My task as a scholar then, is not only documenting the hard-fought victories of movements like Warren County's, but reflecting upon the pedagogical insights they offer us all in working towards and creating social and environmental justice.

Overview of the thesis

September 15th, 2012 marked the 30th anniversary of the collective action of Warren County residents against the siting of the PCB landfill in the Afton community. A day of commemoration, the “PCB Landfill Protest Reunion and Environmental Justice Birthplace Celebration” was organized by members of the Warren County Environmental Action Team (W.C. E.A.T.) over the course of the year. W.C. E.A.T. was formed as a community-research partnership process to support a diverse contingent of grassroots and county leaders in deliberating on how to commemorate the movement anniversary, and leverage this iconic history towards current social, environmental or economic development goals.

The focus of this thesis is on Warren County’s 30th anniversary commemoration as the ‘birthplace of environmental justice’. I hope to show how Warren County residents seek to transform associations with a troubled past into a source of value, by re-creating place through practices of memory-making. In this, I draw on three major pools of literature: scholarship on power and knowledge; political ecologies of waste and toxicity; and the artistic and activist practices of collective memory-making.

i. Power and knowledge

My research has developed in conjunction with Warren County’s 30th anniversary commemoration process. Community ownership over their own history has been a central concern throughout the commemoration process, reflected in the theme: “Telling Our Story, Building Our Future”. Thus, community concerns with

storytelling and ownership, or power and knowledge, have shaped the trajectory of my research theoretically and methodologically. My participation in W.C. E.A.T. has evolved through negotiating these concerns in dialogue. My specific role has been in part documentarian – recording the planning process and coordinating photography and videography the day of the event – and in part archivist – compiling visual and written materials from various sources to represent the community’s history.

I approach research as a collaborative and engaged enterprise, in which there is “negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference” for research subjects (Madison 2005, 9). The methodologies adopted for the project are qualitative and evolving, comprising a mix of active participation in and observation of community dialogues, semi-structured interviews, and arts-based ethnographic methods. This project then is also an ongoing attempt to come face to face with the impacts of academics upon the places and people we study. Employing critical theory as a valuable tool for transformation, especially when grounded in community-based praxis, suggests that we may need to approach research praxis in new ways. In this thesis, I ask: **As scholars, how can we understand the challenges presented by a community’s relationship to prior histories of knowledge production? What opportunities do these present for alternate methods of knowledge production and dissemination?**

ii. Political ecologies of waste and toxicity

Toxics, the stuff of waste, diffuse through biophysical landscapes – through the land, water, air, as well as through the bodies that inhabit those landscapes.

Though toxicologists are tasked with understanding these complex chemical pathways, toxics can behave in ways that are difficult to predict and for that reason, to regulate or manage. Interdisciplinary work on these 'landscapes of exposure' to toxicity point to some serious challenges with negotiating toxicity: establishing chemical causes of illness is notoriously difficult, and furthermore, scientific expertise is complicated by interactions with government, institutional structures and other political entities (Mitman et al. 2004; Roberts and Langston 2008).

This thesis is an attempt to explore the many pieces of this puzzle that are intangible, but matter deeply to residents of toxic landscapes. Residents of those landscapes and places designated to contain waste often live amidst the ongoing uncertainty and fear of toxic contamination. Some take on the burden of educating themselves in the scientific and policy discussions that shape their lives, becoming grassroots community leaders (see Di Chiro 2004, for example). For many, everyday decisions must continue being made not knowing whether to believe in the conclusions reached by scientific or government authorities. In this sense, toxicity, like injustice, manifests not only in the biophysical landscape. Toxics can be understood to linger in the cultural landscape as well, raising questions about the relationship of people to their proximate surroundings: **What values are attached to the environment in areas that contain(ed) toxic waste? How are negative associations of waste negotiated, ignored, or transformed by communities that inhabit these landscapes of exposure?**

iii. Memory studies

Places like Warren County experience a profound violence that goes far beyond the particular instance of being chosen as waste sites. Laura Pulido (2000) describes how racism is 'sedimented' into the landscape through generational and historical uneven development at multiple scales that exceeds any single act and beyond the specific intentions of actors. The process is iterative: as these so-called 'sacrifice zones' come to be associated with contamination in the public imaginary, they become vulnerable to further injury and degradation (Houston 2013). This *sedimentation of injustice* may be most visible in physical landscapes of poverty and under-development, but is equally held in the cultural landscape, as communities must reckon with the internal and psychological violence of being made marginal.

Memory as a framework is helpful in understanding how communities come to understand the history of the place they live in. Collective or social memory can be understood as efforts to make meaning of the past in the present, an activity that is shaped by a multiplicity of political purposes (Said 2000). In 'wounded places' like Warren County, the re-narration of social memory offers the potential for healing (Till 2008). I reflect on the commemoration process in Warren County to understand how Warren County residents negotiate their historical legacy. **What practices of memory-making have Warren County residents engaged and what work do these do? What are the implications of these memory-making practices for environmental and social justice work more broadly?**

Summary of chapters

In the chapters that follow, I explore efforts by residents of Warren County to reclaim their legacy as the 'birthplace of environmental justice' and recreate a sense of place that promotes social-ecological health. Chapter 2 describes the backdrop necessary for understanding the remainder of the thesis, namely: details of the commemoration process, a history of Warren County's PCB struggle, and an introduction to the legacy of racism that informs contemporary events. In Chapter 3, I consider how knowledge and power come together in research – in environmental justice research, more broadly, and in Warren County, in particular – and describe the theories and methods that inform my practices as a researcher. In Chapter 4, I describe how toxics continue to matter to Warren County residents whether or not they are actually present, suggesting that healing from toxicity involves a host of political and cultural practices beyond physical remediation and management. Chapter 5 focuses on how memory-making practices are being used in Warren County to make sense of the past and rebuild a sense of place. In the concluding chapter, I consider what insights are gained for the social-ecological future of Warren County, and what lessons we might take from a broader understanding of environmental justice as cultural and critical practice.

Chapter 2: The Warren County Context

Sept. 15, 2012

The commemoration day has arrived. Thirty years ago today, Warren County residents, supported by civil rights activists, laid their bodies down across the highway. Line after line of bodies blocked the truckloads of contaminated soil, supported by community members marching in protest.

I am standing alongside the pews in Coley Springs Missionary Baptist Church, in Afton, Warren County, participating in the "PCB Landfill Protest Reunion and Environmental Justice Birthplace Celebration." The commemoration events are beginning here with a church service honoring and re-enacting the centrality of this particular church – and faith, more generally – to the ongoing struggle. Rev. Carson Jones, Jr., pastor of Coley Springs, leads the audience in worship, and Rev. Bill Kearney, assistant pastor at Coley Springs and organizer of the W.C. E.A.T. greets those assembled. The program is interspersed with songs of praise by the church choir of Coley Springs.

The program consists of numerous speakers, each a public figure central to the development of environmental justice as a concept, movement, and focus of scholarship and governance, including Dr. Charles Lee, a key player in the landmark "Toxic Wastes and Race" report (UCC 1987), serving now in the Environmental Protection Agency; Rev. Leon White, formerly the director of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice; Eva M. Clayton, who in 1992 became the first African-American elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from North Carolina since 1898; former Congressman Frank Balance; state Senator Doug Berger; notable civil rights leader Dr. Benjamin Chavis, Jr. as they keynote; and celebrated Warren County environmental justice activist Dollie Burwell, who introduces each speaker. The speakers celebrate the victories of environmental justice in its transformation from grassroots movement to a federally recognized and managed issue, and honor the courage of Warren County residents in fighting against racism, often sharing evocative anecdotes about how their own lives were changed by fighting for environmental justice. It may have been the initial protests in Warren County that inspired environmental justice, but it is clear from the program that the decades-long struggle was a triumph in more ways than one, with the former landfill site now remediated.

My task as a member of the W.C. E.A.T. is to coordinate documentation of the event with a group of volunteer photographers and videographers. While one volunteer records the speeches and dedications, I move around the hall, gathering B-roll or secondary footage of audience reactions – the clapping of hands, the knowing smiles, and the ‘amens’ in response to particularly poignant insights about justice, race, and the pride of place Warren County holds in environmental history.

It is time now for a slideshow presentation of the seminal 1982 PCB protests. While two youth members of the church fiddle with the computer and projector to get the slideshow going, I pause to give my eyes a rest from hours of focusing through the narrow camera viewfinder. I look around at those assembled, and consider that about half the audience are outsiders to Warren County: activists, environmentalists and students who traveled from all over to be here, because Warren County continues to be an inspiration and a reminder of what collective struggle can achieve.

The projector screen has been moved into place, and the lights have been dimmed. An instrumental track calls for the audience’s attention; the slideshow begins with a declaration: “Warren County Remembers. PCB Landfill Protests. 1982.” A series of newspaper clippings narrate the unfolding struggle. Photos of residents being arrested, reminiscent of civil disobedience strategies from an earlier era. Headlines announcing that Governor Jim Hunt will continue to deposit PCB-laden soil in Afton despite resident opposition. Images of police officers standing in lines and transportation workers in protective clothing.

*I notice that some Warren County residents who seemed content till then to listen and agree once in a while, have become animated. Many are taking their own photographs of the slides. One woman is videotaping the entire slideshow. The enormity and duration of the protests are brought to life by slide after slide of court records. On just one day, Oct. 29, 1982, 168 were arrested with the charge of “Impeding Traffic / Resisting Arrest.” People are craning their necks forward, pointing at the screen, and whispering to their neighbors, as they begin recognizing faces and names of family, friends and folks in the community. One slide records the source of these clippings with a dedication:
In memory of
Linzy Clifton (1949 – 2011)
Deacon, Coley Springs Baptist Church
who kept this newspaper record of the protests.*

The church service continues with the unveiling of a historic highway marker titled “PCB Protests” by a representative from the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office. When the formal program ends, a crowd forms as the speakers, dignitaries and residents take turns posing by the marker. Following the service in the church, people file out to begin the walk along the historic route of the protests march. Today, the march will not extend to the site of the

former landfill, the only unspoken acknowledgement of the contentious history and ongoing tensions that underlie the spirit of celebration.

The scene rendered above describes the 30th anniversary commemoration of the PCB protests in Warren County that is the focus of this thesis. Prior to the event, I had learned that the PCB protests are not often discussed by Warren County residents, and wondered why this inspiring history remained absent from school curricula and public discourse. As I observed the audience reactions to the slideshow, the significance of the commemoration began to crystallize for me. I had assumed that proximity meant that the protests were automatically a meaningful part of their history for Warren County residents. Their engagement with the slideshow, as if discovering their history anew, revealed to me that even those families that had participated in the protests did not necessarily *own* this narrative with pride. At a W.C. E.A.T. meeting following the commemoration, I asked whether people were talking about the event in church. I was told that the people of Warren County saw themselves as “just country folk, doing what we have to do.” The commemoration seems to have shifted that understanding. Hearing respected leaders speak of Warren County as a model of collective struggle has affirmed residents’ faith, given them a renewed sense of pride and a realization that their fight was no ordinary thing, but a real accomplishment. Beyond the initial fight to survive environmental disasters, the task of recuperation and recovery require even more work from overburdened communities to rebuild community, place, and memory.

As a member of the W.C. E.A.T., I was tasked with creating the slideshow memorial of the PCB protests.³ In that spirit, this chapter offers a curated history of aspects of Warren County's background necessary for understanding the commemoration. The chapter is composed of three sections, in reverse chronology: a description of the planning process leading up to the commemoration event; a brief history of the struggle against the toxic landfill and its remediation; and finally, a broad sweep of how racism is woven into Warren County's historical legacy.

The commemoration event encapsulates the many contradictions of Warren County's story. The formal program communicated a narrative of triumph and unity, of a community achieving safety from dangerous toxins; yet the commemoration planning process was fraught with conflicts and differing understandings. As I hope to illustrate in this chapter, these contradictions emerge from the inheritance of a long and deep history of racism that shapes residents' understandings of contemporary events. Negotiating these contradictions of inherited memory is crucial to the ongoing efforts of residents to envision – and create – a future that builds from their troubled historical legacies.

A celebration of community

It is no coincidence that the “PCB Landfill Protest Reunion and Environmental Justice Birthplace Celebration” on 9.15.12 was held at the Coley Springs Missionary Baptist Church. Coley Springs, an African-American church located about two miles from the site of the remediated landfill in the Afton area of

³ I will revisit the process of developing the slideshow in Chapter 3.

Warren County, was central to the struggle. Many among its congregation were particularly concerned about the proximity of the landfill to their homes and lands. Rev. William (Bill) Kearney, assistant to the pastor at Coley Springs Baptist Church, initiated the commemoration process and chairs the Warren County Environmental Action Team (W.C. E.A.T.). I first met Bill in April 2011, when he served as an advisor for a research project I was assisting in. It was clear to me then that Bill had for some time been considering how Warren County could leverage its historical legacy towards future development.⁴ In 2001, Bill introduced a Health Walk and Wellness Fair as part of the annual Family and Friends Day event at Coley Springs to promote health as a matter of community concern. Every year, church members walk 2 miles to the landfill site, a profoundly performative practice of memory-making that first drew me to this place. The 30th anniversary commemoration was envisioned by Bill as an expansion of the annual church event that would bring together the broader Warren County community in conversation about their history and what it could mean for their future:

I think of Environmental Justice as a baby birthed by Warren County. The baby has traveled nationally and internationally, which is well and good... but I think it's time we bring the baby back home. We need to own our story (William Kearney, 11.30.11).

Celebrating and negotiating their various historical legacies is an interest of many Warren County residents. Interestingly, Bill was not living in Warren County at the time of the protests. The collective history of his community is very much an

⁴ These initial conversations resulted in a collaborative short film, "Remembering Kearneytown", an interpretation of Warren County's PCB history through Bill's story. I will discuss the film further in Chapter 3.

inheritance for him, and the commemoration a conscious attempt to negotiate this inheritance. Others living in Warren County share this sense of the 30th anniversary being a valuable opportunity to re-narrate the importance of history to Warren County's future development. Around the time that Bill had begun planning for the commemoration event, environmental activist and long-time white resident Deborah Ferruccio, who was a key figure in the PCB protests, had written an op-ed in the local newspaper. She called on Warren County residents to remember the history of struggle and remain wary of government bodies seeking to relax environmental regulations:

We will celebrate that Warren County is not an ongoing toxic waste dumping grounds, as it would have become without the formidable opposition of dedicated citizens, and we are now free to base our county's economy on a healthy and safe environment, using our county's best assets - its land, lakes, and good people - to build a future we will be proud to pass on to our children (Ferruccio 2011).

Recognizing the confluence of interests, Bill called together a planning committee as a self-conscious effort to facilitate conversation among a diverse group of people who had a stake in Warren County's economic, political and cultural development, or resources to bring to the table. The first meeting of the committee, later named the Warren County Environmental Action Team (W.C. E.A.T.) was held on February 8, 2012. The committee met once or twice monthly thereafter, and has continued meeting monthly since the commemoration event on September 15, 2012. Central to this initiative is the claim that the PCB struggle is claimed by many outside of Warren County – including activists and scholars – yet the community, broadly defined does not share in the 'ownership' of the history. In his role as a

church and community leader, Bill has frequently served as a liaison between the Baptist church network, local government and community bodies, and academic/research institutions in the region. The committee emerged from Bill's recent collaborations, formed as a coalition of researchers, state-wide environmental nonprofits, and key stakeholders in Warren County, including leaders from the PCB protests such as Deborah Ferruccio and Dollie Burwell, as well as representatives from Warren County's departments of parks and recreation, economic development, public school system and the County Manager's office. Bill's work on the commemoration is supported by his nomination as a "Research Engaged Community Scholar" of the North Carolina Translational and Clinical Sciences Institute (NC TraCS), building on a longstanding research partnership with the Center For Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. The planning process leading up to the commemoration day constitutes the first phase of this community research process; building on lessons learned, the second phase consists of surveying Warren County residents on their opinions regarding the landfill site and concerns about toxicity towards a resolution process.

There were challenges throughout the commemoration planning process. The diversity of the committee allowed for a variety of perspectives to surface, and with these, longstanding tensions. It was evident from the very first meeting that there were serious differences in opinion about the safety of the landfill site, the understandings of the PCB history that were represented by these positions, and the resulting visions for how to move forward. Despite attempts to work through

differences towards commonly articulated goals of celebration and education, the conflicts resulted in Deborah pulling out of the committee and publicly questioning the intentions of the organizers (Ferruccio 2012). Additionally, participation in the committee meeting by residents remained variable, reflecting the concern articulated repeatedly that the history is not ‘owned’ by those living in the communities most affected by the struggle against toxic dumping. Bill’s vision of his role as a neutral facilitator was complicated by his position in the Coley Springs church; however, through the planning process, Bill’s family and church began to take on much of the work in planning the event. The resulting commemoration event clearly reflects the outcomes of this process of negotiations, as the importance of the church was highlighted and a distinct ‘community’ in the area of Afton honored as the ‘birthplace of environmental justice.’

The tensions of the commemoration process reflect differences in interpreting what happened in Warren County and its significance. In the next section, I offer a brief history of the movement to oppose the landfill and then to remediate it, a case study of how toxicity is entangled with issues of governance and culture.

The struggle against the toxic landfill

Environmental justice emerged in Warren County at the crossroads of poor industrial regulation and structural racism. The toxic waste in question, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), are synthetic compounds that were used in industrial manufacturing and commercial products between 1929 and 1977. Extremely stable chemically, they remain in the environment for indefinite periods of time. They

adsorb to sediments and once they enter the food chain, to fatty tissues in organisms, increasing in concentration up the food chain. Between mid-1960s and mid-1970s growing evidence demonstrated that PCBs caused severe health problems, leading to a ban on their manufacture in 1976 (McGurty 2007, 25-9). In 1978, just before enforcement and compliance measures were scheduled to take effect, a waste-hauling company illegally dumped over 30,000 gallons of PCB-contaminated transformer oil along the shoulders of 243 miles of roads of 14 counties in North Carolina (Barnes 2004, 1; USEPAa 2012). A site in the Afton community of Warren County was selected by the state of North Carolina to house the contaminated soil.

In *Transforming Environmentalism*, Eileen McGurty describes how Warren County residents organized a campaign to oppose the proposed landfill in the Afton area, beginning in 1978. Local residents, concerned about groundwater contamination and economic ramifications, formed the “Warren County Citizens Concerned About PCBs”, a majority white opposition group led by Ken and Deborah Ferruccio (McGurty 2007, 51). The group argued that the landfill was forced upon them by government colluding with industry. Their claims were furthered by the actions of the state and the Environmental Protection Agency, who repeatedly dismissed citizen concerns, used inaccessible scientific and technical language, and lacked transparency in their decision-making process. Activists recognized that assurances by authorities of the supposedly superior design of the proposed landfill and minimal risk of exposure were “steeped in interpretation of scientific data that was influenced by political and economic considerations” (58); in response, the

residents' campaign emphasized scientific uncertainties to build opposition to the siting decision. As McGurty outlines, when four years of organized local resistance based on scientific research failed to block the landfill, the explanatory framework was shifted to 'environmental racism', highlighting the differential impacts of environmental hazards (83). Drawing on the organizing traditions of the Civil Rights era, the Concerned Citizens and the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice formed a coalition to engage in civil disobedience against the impending transfer of contaminants to the landfill (95). The movement in this period is recognized for bringing blacks and whites together in multiracial partnership; at the same time, black political leadership became a central organizing principle, through the mobilizing efforts of local leaders like Dollie Burwell as well as the involvement of notable civil rights personas like Ben Chavis (98-9).

Deposition of the contaminated soil in Warren County began in September 15, 1982. Caravans of trucks (7000 trucks in all) delivering the toxic soil were greeted by massive protests that saw over 500 people arrested over the course of six weeks (Exchange Project 2006). Allied with civil rights leaders, the event drew attention from national media, and inspired the first study undertaken by the U.S. federal government, at the behest of the Congressional Black Caucus, linking racial demography to waste siting (USGAO 1983; Bullard 2004), as well as a landmark report by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice that provided clearer statistical evidence across a broader geography of the entire U.S. (UCC 1987). It is this merging of civil rights and environmentalism that has earned

Warren County the iconic moniker of being the “birthplace of environmental justice” (Bullard 1994).

Environmental justice activists often point to Warren County as a formative event for the movement. Whether this is true in a literal sense is less important than the meanings that movement participants and observers attach to the events... Warren County was not the first time citizens challenged the equity of an environmental decision, nor was it the first articulation of a relationship between environmental quality and social oppression. The Warren County events, however, were significant in the crystallization of environmental justice in three ways: opponents of a hazardous waste landfill were arrested for civil disobedience, people of color were involved in a disruptive collective action against environmental regulatory agencies, and national-level civil rights activists supported an environmental issue through disruptive collective action (McGurty 2007, 6-7).

The 1982 protests failed to block the landfill. Construction of the landfill was completed in July 1983 and based on soil testing to confirm that toxics guidelines were being followed, in 1986 the site was taken off the National Priorities List, no longer considered an active Superfund site (USEPA 2012). However, the discovery in 1993 that the PCB landfill contained 1.5 million gallons of water that could potentially breach the liner and leak, ignited residents who had already been negotiating fears of contamination in their everyday lives (Barnes 2004, 4; McGurty 2007, 142). Warren County residents, supported now by their iconic status and the lessons of the larger environmental justice movement, initiated a remarkable process, demanding citizen participation on par with the state in all decision-making. The Citizens/State Joint Warren County PCB Landfill Working Group (“the Working Group”) was the first of its kind to operate in conjunction with a formal government agency, the NC Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources (DEHNR). Upon the insistence of the Working Group, two scientists with

different areas of expertise were eventually selected in March 1996 as independent science advisors to evaluate the landfill, accountable to the Working Group but paid for by the state (Barnes 2004, 6). Both scientists expressed concerns about the alleged safety of the site, and pushed forward the citizens' demands for remediation of the toxins on-site rather than simply removing the water from the landfill or transporting the toxins to another potential site, which would likely burden a similarly poor community of color (McGurty 2007, 153-4). Concerned that Warren County could become a civil rights battlefield again, the DEHNR eventually agreed to on-site remediation; however, the state never formally acknowledged the risks of exposure that the citizens feared and put forward as the reason for detoxification.

The landfill was remediated in 2003 using a technology selected by the Working Group, known as 'Base Catalyzed Decomposition' (BCD). In the two-part BCD process, 72000 tons of contaminated soil were first treated through 'thermal desorption', where the soil was heated to a temperature of 800 degrees (TD*X n.d.), separating the PCBs into a highly concentrated condensate oil. The second phase of BCD is dechlorination of the concentrated PCB oil in order to make the substance less toxic. In Warren County, the state decided to ship the 5000 gallons of condensate oil collected from thermal desorption to Kansas to be incinerated (TD*X n.d.; Lyons and Cook 2007). The remediation process ultimately cost \$18 million to complete, and the soil in the landfill site was treated to 0.2ppm PCBs, ten times cleaner than federal standards (TD*X n.d.; Exchange Project 2006).

The Afton site was ceded to the county in 2004 without apology or acknowledgement of culpability by the state government and EPA. County leaders

see the remediated site as a valuable opportunity to reverse the stigma associated with the toxic landfill, and since 2004, have occasionally floated plans to open a recreational facility or park on the site. However, some residents⁵ have opposed any future use of the site, signaling ongoing concerns about the safety of the site and/or the surrounding areas. For Deborah Ferruccio (2012), one of the more vocal opponents, any plans to use the site and assurances of its safety are “a government-driven narrative” that lacks transparency and independent scientific verification.

How do we understand this split among those who have been involved in fighting the landfill from the start?⁶ In the next section, I focus on one aspect, by looking at how the long and deep history of racism in Warren County informs different understandings of the meaning of past events.

The legacies of racism

In the struggle against the toxic landfill, the question of how and why race matters repeatedly emerged within efforts to build collective process. McGurty frames the problem as a tension in environmental justice between multiracial coalition-building and leadership by people of color (McGurty 2007, 155). In McGurty’s account, these differences are particularly evident with regards to

⁵ It is unclear whether opposition to the use of the park is limited to a vocal minority, or is more widespread among residents.

⁶ There are multiple issues at play in the disagreement over the safety of the site, as I have understood them to be expressed by various stakeholders. These include the role of ‘leaders’ and what constitutes the ‘grassroots’; critiques of the government/state as a unified whole versus the multiplicity of spaces of governance that allow for progressive politics at various scales; and questions of science and its relationship to the political. These issues reflect the debates and tensions of environmental justice as a whole, and are beyond the scope of this thesis.

questions of leadership in the environmental justice movement. The Working Group was initially co-chaired in 1993 by black resident and activist Dollie Burwell⁷ and Ken Ferruccio, a white transplant to Warren County who, along with his ex-wife Deborah, initiated the grassroots opposition to the landfill (Granados and Stasio 2011). The subsequent conflicts that developed reflect the disparate experiences and approaches of the two leaders, especially in relationship to the State and governance.

For Dollie, the landfill siting was only possible because of the historical disenfranchisement of the black population:

Clearly, many people, black people in the county, even some whites I think, felt like if this county hadn't been predominantly black it wouldn't have been chosen [for the landfill]. And I think people already felt poor. You know. They felt a sense of poverty, those who were involved politically felt like it was just as much about being politically impotent as it was race... When I say politically impotent, I mean that Warren County has always been predominantly black... a lot of the people who lived in Warren County were tenant farmers. Even when they were able to register and vote, you know, the owners of the farms would not permit them - pretty much told them, you don't need to get involved in this stuff. So I think people just had a mental history of not voting and even when they were able to, they didn't, when they were able to, they were not given permission. When that barrier was overcome, I think just their own social cultural thinking - they didn't see the importance of registering to vote (Dollie Burwell, 6.27.12).

Following the PCB protests, Dollie was actively involved in driving voter registration efforts for Warren County's black residents, which has had a significant impact on black electoral leadership. In 1982, Warren County became the first county in North Carolina to have a black majority on its County Board of

⁷ Dollie Burwell's family is from Warren County and neighboring Vance County. Her leadership and experience in the environmental justice movement is explored in depth in *Crazy for Democracy* (Kaplan 1997).

Commissioners. Among those elected in 1982 was Eva Clayton, whose subsequent election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1992 would make her the first African American Representative from North Carolina since Reconstruction (Exchange Project 2006, 3; McGurty 2007, 150). In this explanatory framework, toxicity is brought to Warren County because the majority black population is associated with a lack of political clout; the solution therefore, is re-engagement with the State to prevent any further threats:

I think that PCBs changed that [political impotence]. Because I think a lot of people felt like, if we had a high number of blacks in this county - high percentage of people registering to vote in this county - politically, they might have made another decision. So I think for some people, they felt like it was just as much about the politics as it was about race (Dollie Burwell, 6.27.12).

Ken Ferruccio, on the other hand, remained wary of State collusion with industry and hesitant about making compromises with the government. When a black state official, Henry Lancaster, was added as a third co-chair to the Working Group, conflict intensified between Dollie and Ken. Eventually, Ken would claim that the process had been co-opted by the state to the benefit of minority political leaders such as Dollie⁸ (McGurty 2007, 157). Due to the conflicts in leadership, Ken left his position as co-chair in 1996 though he remained active in the Working Group.

⁸ Ken's concerns about State co-optation of the community process were exacerbated by incidents such as the replacement of the Joint Working Group by a more conventional Citizen Advisory Board. These events certainly raise questions about how 'communities' and movements engage with formal bodies of governance. However, I focus here only on the implications of these concerns with regards to race and racism. McGurty (2007, 156-7) describes how Ken, apparently speaking on behalf of the black population of Warren County, denounced the black leadership as sacrificing their own.

In the Working Group, the question of racial identity came to the fore in the selection of an independent science advisor. The choice was between Joel Hirschhorn, a white engineer with extensive experience in remediation technologies and risk assessment, and Patrick Barnes, a black geologist whose consulting firm specialized in supporting communities of color with environmental contamination issues (McGurty 2007, 158). Dollie and others believed that in addition to his scientific expertise, Barnes' commitment to working closely with community members and making information accessible made him a more suitable candidate:

Patrick would explain to them that he had full control over samples. He would randomly sample, and stuff was sent to labs. If the soil didn't meet the requirements, it had to go back through, so everything went back through if it didn't meet the requirements.... Patrick was really good I think at sending newsletters and making sure people was kept up with what was happening. When they put in 4 or 5 new monitoring wells around the site, he let people know why (Dollie Burwell, 6.27.12).

Barnes understood that economic development was a significant aspect of environmental justice, and promoted subcontracting in the detoxification process to local and minority-owned companies (Barnes 2004, 23).⁹ Hirschhorn, on the other hand, insisted that the detoxification was only a scientific process that must remain set apart from economics and civil rights (McGurty 2007, 160). Ken Ferruccio supported Hirschhorn, arguing that it was qualifications and not race that mattered, a complicated claim to make given that one of the central tenets articulated by environmental justice movements was the leadership by people of color in

⁹ Also, a comprehensive Community Outreach and Involvement plan was implemented to provide training and jobs locally to the extent possible through the process of detoxification, though the stigma discouraged some from working on the project (Barnes 2004, 21-2).

processes affecting their communities. Hirschhorn felt discriminated against and claimed superior expertise to Barnes, a stance that expressed racist undertones to black members of the Working Group.

According to McGurty (2007, 160), this process of selecting an advisor led to a clear division in the Working Group along racial lines. Ultimately, though both candidates were critical of the state's position on the safety of the landfill, Barnes was retained to oversee the completion of the detoxification for his ability to collaborate with state officials (McGurty 2007, 159). To this day, Deborah and Ken question the safety of the site and the buffer area, claiming that there was never independent oversight of the detoxification (Ferruccio 2012; Granados and Stasio 2011). The Ferruccios' position argues that the selection of Barnes as the advisor *privileged race over science*, implying that "independent scientific oversight" or neutrality of science was only possible with a white scientist. McGurty (2007, 162) suggests that the focus on racial identity allowed the State to respond in order to "keep a lid on racial politics", rather than addressing the underlying questions of toxicity, in a sense reinforcing racism rather than dismantling it.

Warren County's 1982 protests are often described by residents – both black and white – as a true multiracial moment, a sentiment that was repeatedly highlighted during the commemoration event: "Oh, the power of people ... gathered together as a mighty force... We can build on the strength of community to work together to move the county forward" (Bertadean Baker, cited in Weldon 2012). For those who participated, the six weeks of collective action against the landfill were quite possibly a transformative experience of racial solidarity. Linda Worth, County

Manager, was twenty-five years old at the time, working for then Attorney Frank Ballance who aided the protestors with their arrests. She recalls the significance of that moment:

So, as you've heard, the minority population, which is the white community, joined together with the black community which was not something that usually happened... we forgot about our differences, or our perceived differences and we joined together. That was one good thing that came out of this. The community found a way to bridge the gap between us and come together for common cause, which was something that I don't ever recall having happened, and it may not have happened since then. So, despite what happened to us, I do think that was one good thing that did come out of it (Linda Worth, 6.20.12).

How and why did this exceptional coalition come about? Linda goes on to offer an explanation:

I think you would have seen more of the white community that was in the vicinity of where they were looking to dump that decided, 'ok, now I know these black folk. They know how to protest! They always had to protest for their rights.' You know what I'm saying? So I think they said, 'well, we're going to enlist their help, and we're just going to see what they can do to help us fight this thing' (Linda Worth, 6.20.12).

McGurty (2007, 110) similarly argues that the racial bridges created in 1982 were based upon a solidarity that was “grounded in a sense of political powerlessness,” which for white participants in the protests, was likely tied to the rurality and poverty of the county; for black residents, the incidents reiterated the racialized nature of their historical legacy, and confirmed the need for community self-determination.

Race is fundamental to understanding toxicity in Warren County. For many environmental justice scholars and activists, Warren County's PCB protest has become a vivid illustration of the link between toxicity and racism. While the state

has maintained that race was never a factor in the selection of a PCB landfill site,¹⁰ it is commonly believed that race was in fact the driving factor in choosing a site that was scientifically unsuitable. Robert Bullard points to an intersection of factors that made Warren County “vulnerable to a ‘quadruple whammy’ of being mostly black, poor, rural and political powerless” (Bullard 2004). As is often cited, the population of Warren County in the late 70s and early 80s was over 60% black, compared to 24.2% in NC overall (ibid.). As the “textbook case of environmental racism” (ibid.), Warren County has become iconic not only for its fight against toxicity, but also for how it exemplifies the association of landfills with poor communities of color (USGAO 1983). The environmental racism framework was crucial in drawing attention to how the burden of environmental hazards were unequally shared:

Environmental racism highlighted the possibility that the entire waste management framework could result in an inequitable distribution of risk where communities with resources, knowledge, and political power would not be host to waste facilities but communities that were poor and lacked political clout would be unduly burdened (McGurty 2007, 83).

The close linking of Warren County’s racial and income demographics as an explanatory cause of the landfill siting has sparked an entire industry of research dedicated to proving (or disproving) whether observable spatial patterns may be attributed to race or class. The appeal of this line of research is understandable: measureable indices aid civil rights arguments that racism is not merely personal prejudice, but an institutionalized and observable phenomenon that is *provable*.

¹⁰ Race as a factor was made explicit only in the 1982 NAACP suit against the state, and dismissed by the court since previous lawsuits – by the county and private landowners – had not employed race in arguing against the siting (Exchange Project 2006, 8).

Certainly, the demographic association of waste siting with communities of color has had profound consequences in Warren County and well beyond. Environmental justice concerns have been incorporated into the State apparatus, often marked by President Clinton signing Executive Order 12898 into law in 1994, outlining federal policy around environmental justice for minority and low-income populations (Cutter 1995).

However, in a sense, it is irrelevant whether or not Warren County was chosen for a toxic landfill site *because* of race. Laura Pulido (1996) has poignantly critiqued this focus on waste siting and neighborhood demographics as an academic fetish, underlying which is the assumption that racism can be understood as discrete and intentional acts. Racism, she argues, “can scarcely be extricated from our collective social life and structures” (149), and is central to the ways in which political economies and cultural ideologies are reproduced, rather than an abnormality or exceptional circumstance. In particular, Pulido (2000) demonstrates that visible instances of racism – such as the siting of landfills in poor communities of color – are products of much larger, and often unconscious, processes of spatial development that repeatedly privilege whites. She calls for “research that seeks to understand what race means to people and how racism shapes lives and places” (33).

What is clear in Warren County, is that racism means different things to different people, and the meaning and significance of racism in people’s lives is itself differentiated by race. Some, like Deborah Ferruccio, might argue that *race does not matter*:

You know, one of the things that's so fascinating about Warren County, is that even though it has been the poorest county with a high minority count, it was once the richest county – that was pre-Civil War. What Warren County citizens have had, is this incredible relationship underneath it, between blacks and whites. We were able to do something, Ken and me, and this community – particularly of Afton residents – we just dug in and did what people do... there was never a question from the beginning of you're black and I'm white... or being outsiders. Because when you have the gun to your head, you don't say, 'I don't really like you to help me', you'll take whomever (Deborah Ferruccio, in Granados and Stasio 2011).

Deborah reminds us of a historical narrative that is often repeated by white residents in particular, that antebellum Warren County was an agricultural stronghold, and once the richest county in North Carolina.¹¹ Through the nineteenth century and into the mid-twentieth century, locally-based agricultural processing infrastructure, such as cotton mills and dairies dotted the landscape, and access to rail lines running up and down the Eastern Seaboard ensured the economic success of Warren County (Stallmann 2012, 118). Residents describe how the soil in Warren County was so fertile that the famed “Ridgeway cantaloupes” were listed by name on the menu of the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York City. In the mid-twentieth century, tobacco replaced both cotton and produce to become the dominant crop. However, the ‘tobacco buyout’, beginning in 2004, ended the quota system guaranteeing prices to farmers, resulting in small farmers without a viable livelihood (Brown 2005). Warren County is now consistently ranked as a Tier 1 county, indicating that it is among the most economically distressed counties in the state (NCDC 2013).

¹¹ I repeatedly heard this narrative in a community research project I assisted with on regional food production in Warren County, in which interviews with more than 70 community members were compiled into a 30-minute documentary (Growing Opportunities 2011).

The narrative arc of prosperity to decline is often shared by residents of Warren County seeking to revive the county economically by drawing on the possibilities that their history represents. However, multiple histories are threaded within this narrative. For example, the mythology of the Ridgeway cantaloupe masks how racial tensions led to separate cantaloupe growers' associations:

My grandparents were cantaloupe farmers, my parents were cantaloupe farmers, and that's pretty much what people did here in Ridgeway, is cantaloupe farming. It was black farmers and white farmers, and they also had their different associations. It was just one association, but then there were some issues about everybody being equally, so that's when the black people decided they would do their own cantaloupe (Earlean Suitte Henderson, in Growing Opportunities 2011).

Undergirding the antebellum riches of Warren County was an economy built on slave labor, as Dollie reminded me:

During slavery, do you know who lived in Warren County? 13000 slaves, 600 free blacks and only 4000 whites. Even now, political power has not translated into economic power for blacks in Warren County (Dollie Burwell, 7.12.12).

Economic decline today has affected the county as a whole, but the impacts are of poverty are significantly different by race.¹² Whether in times of prosperity or decline, the experience of living in Warren County has been a racialized one.

Conclusions

Mildred, an elderly black resident I interviewed, refuses to settle on any easy answers, wondering still why the toxic legacies are her community's inheritance:

¹² Between 1993 and 2003, approximately 94 percent of African-American farmers in North Carolina lost all or part of their land, a rate three times that of white farmers for the same time period (Curtis et al. 2010, 35).

I mean, you had more counties. And I think they was going to put it someplace else, and they fought it, just like we did. And I don't think they put it there... They should have took it back to the people who put... all that chemical stuff down on the road - should have bundled it up and took it back to them. So they bringed it out of the city, I guess, I don't know where they brought it from. But why here? Why they put it on the roads of North Carolina? Why not... nowhere really. Why not put it in barrels and seal it? And dump it, some place...after you put it on the side of the roads, it sinks in the ground. I don't know, see, too many questions and no answers. First the question should be, why Afton? Well, a lot of people said we's a poor neighborhood. And, you know, poor neighborhood and we didn't have no say. And, we did fight, but they was gonna do it anyway. Regardless of how you feel, we gonna do it anyway.... But what we want doesn't matter. Your citizenship doesn't matter, like we throwed-away stepchildren (Mildred Kearney, 5.22.12).

Racism is present not only in the visible and concrete instances of discrimination, such as the siting of a toxic landfill in a predominantly black rural area, but in the very unequal and complex patterns of development that create places like Warren County as sacrifice zones for environmental harms. The scars of racism are long and deep, internalized in how people make sense of their pasts and shaping their very ability to 'see' racism. These toxic legacies continue to impact Warren County today, shaping the relationship of residents to their histories, communities, to the land itself. Toxicity speaks to a broader geography where its very meaning is interwoven with political and cultural histories. In this context, the commemoration process is significant for Warren County because it is an attempt to reshape residents' imaginaries of themselves and their sense of place, by transforming the inheritance of marginality (whether of waste or poverty) into a source of value. This story is a thread in an alternate narrative that resists the arc of decline, that chooses instead, to offer hope.

Chapter 3: On power and knowledge, or methodologies for collaborative research

Aug. 24, 2012

For the September 15th event, I was tasked with creating a slideshow of images from the 1982 PCB protests. Dollie Burwell put me in touch with a journalist, Lacey¹³, who had captured the passion and tenor of the protests 30 years ago through an arresting series of photographs. Lacey had subsequently reprinted her photographs in a booklet, and the images had become iconic representations of Warren County and the burgeoning environmental justice movement. Lacey had been an undergraduate student at the time of the protests, and Dollie, recalling her participation fondly, used one of her photographs in a draft flyer for the commemoration event.

I emailed Lacey with appreciation for her photography, informing her that that a slideshow including her photos would be shown at the commemoration event to honor the community's fight for environmental justice. I received a concerned reply that no one had asked her for permission. We scheduled a phone conversation to discuss the use of the photographs.

Over the phone, I stated clearly that the event was being organized by a grassroots coalition led by Warren County residents, and that there was no commercial benefit. The major purpose of the commemorations was for Warren County residents – those who were engaged 30 years ago but others as well, youth today for instance – to be able to reflect upon and share their stories from this significant history. I attempted to communicate the importance of Lacey's photographs for this celebration. Dollie had shared with me that people would tear out pages from her copy of the booklet because they did not have their own photographs from the event documenting their participation or their families'.

Lacey repeatedly shared that she was happy to help the celebration in any way possible, but expressed hesitation about the committee using her photographs: "My concern is I am trying to protect the copyright of the images... I want to just make sure whatever you guys do with the photos that someone just doesn't

¹³ Pseudonym.

take them and use them however they want.” She reiterated that the copyright of the images must be protected.

In response to the legalistic and propriety language of copyright Lacey used, I stated more explicitly that the drive behind these events was for Warren County residents to regain community ownership of their story. I expressed the sentiment of many residents that various people – be it journalists, or academics – have told Warren County’s story and benefited, to which Lacey replied that she had not particularly benefited monetarily from the Warren County events herself.

Finally, Lacey insisted on a written agreement, which she shared was “just standard practice for anyone who wants to use a copyrighted image.” The agreement would be for one-time use only by the committee for the commemoration event. I mentioned making the photos available for future educational purposes within Warren County, but she made it clear that any further uses would require other conversations with her. Her primary concern seemed to be that the photographs could be posted on the Internet: “I don’t want this to be up on the web because once it’s on the web, that’s public domain, and you lose copyright.”

And then, laughing a little, she said: “you know, since you’re there [in Warren County] and I’m not, try to communicate this with them. When you are in a public space, anyone can take a photo of you. Anyone, because it’s a public area. Of course, I couldn’t just go into people’s homes and take photos. That’s private. But there’s a difference between the public and the private. That’s just basic journalism.”

She continued: “I don’t think people have capitalized – or made money – off of Warren County... I think some education needs to happen here. It’s like if you went on vacation with your family, or whoever. If you take photos of them, in public, those photos are yours. You know, they were all public figures. Once they were on the public road, anyone could take a picture and it would belong to them [the photographers]. That’s just Journalism 101.”

I offer the ethnographic vignette above as an illustration of how the production of knowledge is embedded in relations and understandings of power. Dollie and others on the W.C. E.A.T. were profoundly disappointed by Lacey’s unwillingness to share her photographs with the community more freely, and made a decision not to use the photographs in the commemoration event. The exchange

with Lacey illustrates conflicting understandings of knowledge itself. On the one hand, we have a white journalist who wants to ‘educate’ a black community that photography in public spaces is ethically appropriate and the resulting products by (copyright) law, belong to the individual who takes the photographs. On the other hand, we have a black community claiming collective ownership of their history, yet without access to the material evidence of it.

The control that Lacey wanted to exert over the use of the photographs she took 30 years ago reminded me that the practices through which knowledge is produced and the objects that circulate that knowledge – whether photographs or articles, are themselves embroiled in (and reproduce) circuits of power. The refusal by the W.C. E.A.T. to use Lacey’s photographs on her conditions offers a valuable insight: the legalistic and proprietary language of copyright overlays and reproduces structural relations of power that can further dispossess people who do not have control over the institutions of knowledge production. In my role as curator of the slideshow, the exchange with Lacey illuminated for me what was at stake in Warren County when people talked about ‘owning’ their histories. What does it mean for us as researchers to find ourselves implicated in relations of power? How might we actively incorporate a more nuanced understanding of power into both thinking and doing research differently? How might knowledge itself change if we understood it as emerging from collaboration?

In this chapter, I share my *methodology*, or how I understand and approach the production of knowledge in my own work. I begin with a review of the theories of methodology from which I draw inspiration and strategy: critical/feminist

approaches; engaged or activist scholarship; and visual methodologies. I then shift my focus to a collaborative film, “Remembering Kearneytown”, that I produced with Rev. Bill Kearney prior to the inception of the W.C. E.A.T. I reflect on the film as a case study of collaborative research using critical performance ethnography, and discuss how lessons that emerged from making the film have shaped my subsequent research. My experience in Warren County suggests that the knowledge we produce – whether as researchers, journalists or artists – is fundamentally influenced by the ways we think about power, and in turn, leaves a trace upon the places we travel and the products we create. How might we take on this responsibility with more intentionality?

Literature review: on power and knowledge

Critical scholarship on environmental justice draws on theory that actively considers the politics of research practice, and the relationship between power and knowledge. Postcolonial, indigenous and black scholars have long argued that the enterprise of research is historically intertwined with Western imperial ambitions. Critiquing the underlying assumptions of Eurocentrism and white superiority that are universalized as ‘reason’, these scholars have called for the decolonization of the academy and of knowledge itself (for example, Fanon 1968; Said 1978; Escobar 1995; Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Feminist scholars emphasize that the complexities of identity, politics, positionality, and even the body of the researcher and the researched are implicated, demanding self-reflexivity about the process of conducting research (Moss 2002; Tolia-Kelly 2010). For many feminist scholars, claims of research being ‘objective’ are premised upon an omniscient perspective.

This 'god trick' produces knowledge that is seemingly universal, abstracted as theory by supposedly impartial observers. Donna Haraway (1988) famously challenged this 'view from nowhere' with the notion of situated knowledges, arguing that all knowledge is both partial and situated, contingent upon specific historical and geographical circumstances.

The call for situated knowledge production has been taken up by 'activist scholars', a loose term that refers to those who attempt to develop approaches to research with a commitment to social justice and anti-oppression principles. Hale (2008, 13) argues that the use of situated or partial objectivity by activist-scholars promotes methodological rigor by offering "a deeper and more sustained analysis of the sociopolitical conditions that frame the research question and the research process." Engaged or activist scholarship can take many forms. Some critical scholars emphasize that the 'subjects' of research are better understood as agents, with awareness of their own conditions, that we draw on in creating co-creating knowledge (Freire 2000; Conquergood 2002). Social movements, for example, often enact "knowledge-practices" – whether in the form of stories or new methods of communication – that are not only representing an external reality, but actively producing theories of the world that may go unrecognized by conventional academic approaches (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008). Other lineages of engaged scholarship emphasize the use of participatory methods (Kindon et al. 2007), and understand theory as grounded in, and emergent from, field research (Charmaz 2006).

The incorporation of visual media in ethnographic research inherits a complicated lineage. Where early uses of the visual generally emphasized images as merely illustrations of objective observations of the ethnographic 'Other', contemporary critical methodologies seek to understand the visual both "as a form of 'experience' [that relates to other sensory and embodied forms] and as a medium for its representation" (Pink 2006, 17). This dual approach reflects a more nuanced understanding of the visual as representing external realities, but also producing meanings about social conditions (Rose 2001). Visual methodologies have become a helpful tool for those interested in engaged scholarship. Participatory photo methods are a helpful tool in building meaningful research projects with community collaborators (Strack et al. 2004; Kindon et al. 2007) and video is capable of fostering meaningful and generative collective dialogue on contentious issues (Cumming and Norwood 2012). The incorporation of enduring visual artifacts, such as drawings, photo and video, allow for the remembrance of past events and the passage of evidence between generations (Tolia-Kelly 2010). In geography, scholars have called for holistic visual methodologies that understand scale as heterotopic, integrating the individual stories of humanistic film with larger questions of social theory (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997). In addition, the use of video as a research tool in recent geographic work suggests that participatory video techniques may enable a shift in the power relations of research (Kindon 2003). However, as Diana Taylor points out, collective memory comprises not only the enduring archive of histories, formally and informally documented, but also the repertoire of the

ephemeral and performative, whether publicly staged events or community remembrance practices (Taylor 2003).

In the next section, I reflect on a key moment in my interactions with Rev. Bill Kearney, which shifted my research practice towards taking questions of power and knowledge more seriously. I use the framework of critical/performance ethnography to describe how I have negotiated and incorporated understandings of knowledge production as a power-laden process in my research in Warren County.

Producing knowledge: research as performance

Sept. 13, 2011

I am sitting across from Bill at a popular eatery in Warrenton, our now familiar meeting place. We have had several conversations prior to this where I have learned from Bill that the community's historic struggle for justice, though researched in great depth and documented by many, remains mostly unspoken about. Area schools rarely teach a history that has inspired countless other communities to struggle for their own rights and well-being. Excited by the possibility that my research could have local relevance, I share my idea for a video project. I want to interview the church elders who participated in the protests two decades earlier, and work with the community's youth. My enthusiasm is stopped in its tracks by Bill's quiet and firm challenge:

"Who would have ownership of the video? I don't mean to sound harsh or bold... My thought is, Warren County has a story. And before we realize the power of story, my concern is that we don't give it away, that we have ownership. Because otherwise, we get dumped on twice."

In this rendering of a scene from my fieldwork, we hear a concern once again about ownership of visual media. Rev. Bill Kearney, representing himself as part of a larger community that has been repeatedly disenfranchised, cautions that in telling their story, Warren County residents might be ceding control over their history. The object in negotiation, a collaborative video project, becomes the nexus for intersecting and often competitive regimes of knowledge production – on the one

hand, a university research-driven process, and on the other, a community remembrance process. In Bill Kearney's challenge, we hear resonances of past interactions that have left a trace in Warren County, and a warning about how future collaboration may replicate past exploitation.

Bill is not alone in hesitating to share his story. Many residents of Warren County express frustration and sometimes anger, that their history has been appropriated by 'outsiders' for their own purposes.¹⁴ Each time I enter Warren County, residents interact not only with me, but also with the traces of past interactions, some of which have clearly take on an exploitative hue. Often we speak of research in terms of content (of our theories, data, findings) or form (methods, research questions, assumptions). The uncertainties of residents with regards to researchers coming into Warren County is a reminder that the *process* of conducting research, throughout a study and often long past, is itself composed of interactions that produce meaning for people. That is to say, the practices of research are a form of meaning-making in themselves, and speak to social relations and understandings of knowledge. In this sense, research can be understood as a kind of *performative*¹⁵ practice that does not simply present evidence or represent an external reality, but through repetition, does work in the world of reinforcing certain ideas.

¹⁴ It is unclear at times whether people are referring to academics, journalists, or activists who may have visited Warren County at the time of the protests or in the twenty-year struggle that ensued.

¹⁵ Drawing on Butler's adaptation of Austin's 'speech-act' theory, Hamera and Conquergood (2006, 422), describes a performative as "both an agent of, and a product of, the social and political surround in which it circulates... [whose] effects are reinforced through repetition."

The practices of conducting fieldwork can also be understood as a *performance*¹⁶ where researchers and research subjects often play prescribed roles that follow conventions based on previous experiences, scripted rules, and internalized expectations. If we consider research as performance, it becomes clear that academic researchers are key actors in the production of knowledge, and their interpretation of events becomes intimately interwoven into how community members understand the history of the movement. In Warren County, for instance, residents initially wanted the waste moved elsewhere, but as time progressed, environmental justice lessons, in part shaped by academics, led them to insist on in-situ remediation. Dollie shared with me how the flows of knowledge fed back into the decision to push for on-site remediation:

...As I was going around the country to talk about what had happened in Warren County, even before the cleanup started... I heard from folk who talked about the Cancer Alley. We knew nothing - I knew nothing about the Cancer Alley in Louisiana. I knew nothing about Rob Bullard and the whole research piece he did in Texas. So I started you know, bringing that information back to people and letting them know, that in black communities all over, people were suffering - the cancer rate was high... you could tell that people had suffered from health effects of living next to a chemical waste facility or working in a plant, or working in some of those industries. So maybe as someone who talked to people often about the effects that toxic waste facilities had on other communities, maybe that led to people thinking twice about putting it somewhere else (Dollie Burwell, 6.27.12).

Research has been entangled in Warren County's struggle from its very beginnings. The use of scientific research by local residents to mobilize against the

¹⁶ Performance can be defined simply as “the many practices and events—dance, theatre, ritual, political rallies, funerals—that involve theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event appropriate behaviors” (Taylor 2003, 3).

siting of the landfill was lauded by researchers as a model citizen-science effort to hold governments accountable (Geiser and Waneck 1983). Some activists in Warren County today draw on this framing to herald the movement as being first and foremost a 'citizen-science' endeavor, a perspective that at times conflicts with the more popularly recognized civil rights framing. Warren County's iconic position as the 'birthplace of environmental justice' is itself due in part to scholars and activists outside the community who cite this case study as exemplifying their arguments about environmental racism (Bullard 1994). As Warren County residents try to make sense of their past, these academic constructions – of 'environmental racism', of the 'birthplace of environmental justice' – emerge once again as active players rather than mere representations of reality.

If research on environmental justice is understood as a form of performance, our roles and intentionality in playing our parts becomes a key question for us as scholars. How might our objectification of knowledge further distance communities from their lived experiences and dispossess them of their stories? As Bill voiced, communities such as Warren County are dumped on twice or made doubly marginal -- in the first place by environmental inequity, and then again by being made peripheral to the very research in which their lives, bodies, and landscapes are the central objects of study.

Drawing on critical/performance ethnography, I approach research in Warren County as a fundamentally political process, *dialogic* in its relationship to informants or collaborators, and therefore evolving in relationship to community processes (Conquergood 2002; Madison 2005). Performance ethnography's

insistence on researcher reflexivity as well as the dialogic process of knowledge production offers a helpful aide in research praxis. Conquergood (2002) explores the difference between research *as performance* and research *as objective study* by contrasting two lineages of 'doing ethnography'. He illustrates the first with a passage from Frederick Douglass' life narrative suggesting that a greater understanding of the oppression of slavery is made possible by listening to improvised slave songs than by reading textual accounts. This "experiential, participatory epistemology" (Conquergood 2002, 149) is contrasted by Conquergood with Clifford Geertz's classic description of reading the culture of others over their shoulders, as though a text. Geertz's idealized ethnographer functions in Conquergood's imagination "like an overseer or a spy" (150) who aims to secretly uncover Knowledge of the Other, presumably without consent. Applied to environmental justice, conventional academic discourses that interpret ethnographic evidence as *text* turn life experiences into an object separate from the research subject, a *thing* able to be read, possessed, even stolen by the ethnographer.

Performance ethnography distinguishes itself from other modalities of engaged scholarship by insisting not only on self-reflexivity, but on an intentional positioning of the researcher's person in relationship to the community. The ethics of dialogic performance demand of us a refusal to read over the shoulder, choosing instead to engage in face-to-face conversation and co-performance of research. If we listen closely, the dialogue of performance ethnography can offer "that type of productive warning in the dangerous hollows between what the community says,

what I hear, and vice versa” (Craft et al. 2010, 70). Questions of ownership and control of knowledge are central to any research project; as Bill gently reminded me, regardless of good intentions, research often serves to control precisely by dispossessing and distancing knowledge from its sources. Thus, the researcher cannot occupy a neutral position, but rather, makes an intentional and political choice to intervene actively with awareness of the attendant consequences and responsibilities. The scholar’s toolkit of theory and methods offers an *active* and *activist* intervention (Madison 2005). For environmental justice scholars seeking to build on a vision of a more democratic society, a mode of inquiry premised on dialogue between researcher and researched allows for greater accountability to the communities in question and the material realities of research both within and outside of the academy.

In the next section, I focus on “Remembering Kearneytown”, a short film I produced with Rev. Bill Kearney. I examine the film as a case study of dialogic knowledge production, which has informed my subsequent research.

Producing knowledge: a politics of proximity

Oct. 4, 2011

It started like this. Bill and I were in conversation about doing a project with the youth ministry in his church. The conversation kept returning to issues of trust and control. The last time we met, I asked him if he would be willing to help me with an assignment on autobiographical ethnography. Would he take some photographs that show me what Warren County and environmental justice meant to him?

When we met today, Bill described his photographic journey to me:

The bottomline is, how do you tell a fish he’s wet? So I said, why don’t I just go with the inspiration I get everyday when I carry my camera. Don’t be trying to tell a big story about why... don’t give it any thought, just take the picture.... I had brought, at first, a subconscious behavior response to a conscious level, and

it wasn't working for me. I went back to being who I am, and guess what, those things that catch my eye, I gave it a second look or third look (William Kearney, 10.4.11).

“Remembering Kearneytown” was an accidental research project. Initially, Bill and I were in conversation about how to share the environmental justice history with younger generations and a broader audience outside of the church community, as the thirtieth anniversary of the protests approached. Through the photography exercise in autobiographical ethnography I describe above, it became clear that Bill’s oral history and imaginary for the future could be a powerful archival source and affective prompt to inspire community dialogue. The film reflects this sense of collaboration in the creative process itself. Interviews were scripted and actively re-enacted to hone the message; iterative storyboarding allowed for the narrative arc to satisfy both research and community goals; and theory and lived experience mutually informed the selection of evocative visual evidence. The dialogic production of the film as well as the emphasis on performance – of Bill the oral historian, as well as myself the researcher/videographer – frames the film as a piece of a larger critical ethnography repertoire, rather than a stand-alone research product.

Given histories of distance and dispossession, how might we employ theory and the camera as tools of radical intervention? The camera, like other visual technologies, has a long and problematic lineage of distancing “the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power” (Haraway 1988, 581). In response, critical ethnographic filmmakers engage what Haraway labels a “feminist objectivity” that offers a limited field of vision, asking viewers,

along with filmmakers, “to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (583). This insistence on a ‘politics of the proximate’ makes dialogic knowledge-production possible; re-centering and critically engaging with the lived experiences of research subjects allows for co-performance of research that is relevant and responsible. Though Bill and I had ‘collaborated’ for some time, the conditions of our work shifted only when I ceded control. Until I asked Bill to take photographs and share what was important to him *on his own terms*, my attempts to make my research participatory only served to maintain a problematic distance between myself and the community with which I was attempting to work.

The film reflects a politics of proximity stylistically and substantially. First, Warren County’s history is clearly situated through the vision and voice of Bill Kearney. The film begins with a series of still photographs taken by Bill, and the audience is introduced to his interests in promoting social and environmental health in the community. Second, the film locates the history of environmental justice not only in Warren County generally, but in the more immediate community of Afton surrounding the landfill site. We learn from Bill that generations of his family are buried at the Coley Springs cemetery just down the street from the landfill, and that the area, once known as Kearneytown, is now invisibilized by a sign that proclaims it Limertown. The film is titled “Remembering Kearneytown” to make visible the racialized histories that are often erased from collective histories and official archives. As the camera rolls, Bill, as an autobiographical ethnographer, expresses his hope that his community might build upon their historical legacies to engage in creating a more socially and environmentally just society today. As the filmmaker, I

chose to use an autoethnographic style, where “the first-person voice-over ...is intently and unambiguously subjective” (Russell 1999, 277). Unlike traditional documentary forms which present a cultural stereotyped Other through the eyes of a “conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988, 581), experimental ethnographies enact an intentionally partial view, drawing the viewer in closer through a view that is located in a particular body and place.

Why create a film? The annual Coley Springs church walk to the landfill is a performative act intended to transmit cultural memory in the community. Yet with the passing of time, generational gaps in understanding and knowledge are emerging. Participants in the movement who are elders now fear that youth are ignorant of the community history, and seek ways to communicate the significance of their cultural memories so that memory can matter. The commemorative walk to the landfill in many ways works out the legacy of toxicity *through* the body. The film in turn attempts to underscore the reasons why embodied practices, such as the church walk, are particularly significant for residents of Warren County, through the perspective and stories of Bill Kearney.

Initially, my research plans included showing the film in separate youth and adult focus groups to explore generational differences in memory, followed by an intergenerational focus group discussion on the significance of this environmental history and toxicity. However, due to a number of reasons – some logistical, and others reflecting the ambivalent attitude of residents towards research – the focus groups were very poorly attended. We decided to shelve the focus groups at that point, though we may now revisit the possibility of public showings of the film to

generate community dialogue. As disappointed as I was at the time in the ‘failure’ of the focus groups, I have since learned that the film has played a different role in the larger commemoration process as well as in my own research. I believe that for Rev. Kearney, making the film was instrumental in helping him articulate his vision for Warren County’s future as a re-narration of the past. Through iterative performances – first, in telling me his story, and then honing it through re-enactments – he secured his position as an oral historian of his community’s legacy of Warren County (Pollock 2005).

“Remembering Kearneytown” was not only the first phase of a larger critical ethnographic project for me, but a revelatory experience that allowed me to shift from an *intention* to encourage community participation in my research towards a *commitment* to actual collaboration. The methods I employed to facilitate dialogue in making this product, the film, became a model for me of the larger process of research. I began to see how anecdotes I may have recorded from Bill Kearney as ‘evidence’ in one or two isolated interviews, shifted as he was able to process the meaning of these stories for himself with time and reflection. Where I may have thought I was only gathering data previously, it was clear in this process that data is embedded in political analyses that inform my narrative. In a different project, I may have walked away after the initial conversations with Bill deciding not to work in Warren County because of the concerns with ownership and trust. Through the film however, I learned how trust is built, through dialogue with our co-creators.

Bill Kearney’s challenge around ownership made me reflect on the very question of knowledge – whose knowledge is considered, what we recognize as

knowledge and what is dismissed, and what it would mean to take seriously the claim that people are agents in their own lives and worlds. In this chapter, I suggest that performance offers us a different perspective on and approach to studying environmental justice, in which knowledge is produced through and implicated in material and embodied interactions. I build on recent scholarship that recognizes environmental justice as doing valuable critical work through cultural practices. Communities living amidst toxic wastelands generate complex ecological understandings that acknowledge environmental harm, and also transform these damaged landscapes into sites of ongoing life and resilience (Houston 2008; Adamson et al. 2002). Throughout the thesis, I share stories from my research process to illustrate Dwight Conquergood's credo that "*proximity, not objectivity*, becomes an epistemological point of departure and return" (emphasis mine, Conquergood 2002, 149). To do justice to environmental justice, our research must not reify or replicate the power dynamics that already marginalize certain bodies and landscapes as recipients of waste.

Conclusions

Warren County offers an interesting challenge for those of us who are in the business of producing knowledge. Questions of ownership – of stories, of material artifacts, and in a sense of history itself – have become recurring concerns in Warren County, and have shaped the trajectory of my research, from my questions to the ways in which I choose to, and am able to, engage with residents. However, as I learned through the process of creating the film, these fundamental challenges to

what research means are valuable opportunities to reflect upon our intentions and consider the outcomes of our presence and practices. Collaborative community-based research can serve as an active dialogue, bridging the flows of knowledge between theory and practice, community conversations and academic debates.

I have continued to bring this sense of research as a performance to my subsequent work. Building upon the insights from making the film, my 'official' role as a participant-observer in the W.C. E.A.T. revolves around understanding and documenting the 'story' of the commemoration process itself. My theorizing of toxicity, memory, and race builds from this practice, and is supplemented by semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the commemoration process, as well as informal conversations with county residents. In particular, I pay attention to shifts, moments of contestation, and articulations of how the past is being negotiated in the present.

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, the committee decided not to use the original photographs of the protests for the commemorative slideshow. Instead, I created a slideshow out of a scrapbook of newspaper clippings collected by a member of the church, a reminder of the importance of collective memory. During the commemoration event, the community's intense interest in the story narrated by the slideshow reiterated the power of visual media, and catalyzed interest in creating a 'community-owned' archive, which I will be working on with the W.C. E.A.T., going forward in my research.

Chapter 4: On living with toxicity

February 8, 2012

It is the first planning meeting of the EJ planning committee that will become the Warren County Environmental Action Team (W.C. E.A.T.). There are 15 people sitting around the conference table at the Warren County Memorial Library, including the County Manager, the Recreational Director for Warren County, the Director of the Economic Development Commission, the Assistant Editor of "The Warren Record", the Director of Technical Education for Warren County schools, a representative from the statewide nonprofit Toxic Free North Carolina, research partners from UNC, as well as several key leaders from the anti-PCB movement. Bill Kearney, who has convened the meeting, welcomes the participants:¹⁷

"The timing is right for us to come together and piece together our story. You ask the average resident here in Warrenton, and they don't even know about what happened. In telling our story, we build our future. We're now in a green economy. My vision is that someday people will actually come to Warren County to walk that two mile stretch, with markers along the way."

We go around the table, each person sharing why the PCB history continues to be significant to Warren County. Many have a longstanding personal involvement in the struggle, and all express an interest in leveraging Warren County's iconic history toward local social or economic development. It is clear even from the introductions that 'the site', the site of the former PCB landfill, is the subject of ongoing controversy. Bill outlines his initial ideas for a commemoration event: a memorial service at the Coley Springs Baptist Church, followed by a 2-mile health walk in coordination with the Health Department, ending in an educational event at the former landfill site.

The underlying tensions about the site erupt. On the one hand, Deborah argues that the site continues to be a threat to the community and that most people are concerned still about safety. Insistent that higher levels of PCBs have been measured near the landfill, Deborah suggests that "in the end, the only way to ensure justice is with sound science." If the march is to walk to the landfill site, it stops at the gate; nothing should happen on the landfill that would bring

¹⁷ Quotes from this meeting are recreated from handwritten field notes and may be paraphrased.

more attention to such a notorious location. On the other hand, Dollie responds that not only has the site been remediated, but it was done so with the intention of facilitating future recreational plans. One of the goals of the celebration for Dollie is making research and facts about the site's remediation available to people to allay their anxieties. She suggests that those who don't feel safe are a minority, that "the land you're sitting on is not as clean as the land out there [at the site]."

In the rendering above, we witness how the safety of the landfill site becomes a stumbling block from the very beginning of the 30th anniversary commemoration process. A month later, Bill Kearney began the second meeting with a conflict resolution activity to bring attention to the 'gorilla in the room,' an acknowledgement of how the landfill site, the PCBs, and different understandings of the history by extension, continue to play an active role in discussions of Warren County's future. If the site was effectively remediated in 2003, how might we understand these tensions about the landfill site and ongoing concerns about safety? In this chapter, I attempt to understand how and why toxicity lingers in Warren County.

In environmental justice scholarship, toxic waste is often engaged with *objectively* as a distinct and measurable entity to be managed and regulated, or *conceptually* as an aspect of society associated with marginality. Yet toxicity emerges in the everyday life of Warren County residents in complicated ways that defy easy categorization. PCBs are present both in the physical interactions of bodies with elements of the landscape, whether water, land or air, as well as in the ways that they signal larger narratives. Rather than understanding toxins as inert matter or discrete entities, I understand them as being *brought to life* through their material interaction with human bodies and the landscape, becoming real through

the questions they raise and conflicts they catalyze. I draw on scholarship in geography to explore how toxicity complicates simplistic understanding of bodies and the landscapes they inhabit. I begin the chapter by reviewing academic work that defines waste, where it is, and why it matters. I then use these understandings to explore toxicity in Warren County. I consider how toxins persist in the physical and imaginative landscape, regardless of the physical presence or absence of the chemical waste itself. I end by reflecting on what toxicity in Warren County may teach us, suggesting that toxins in particular – and waste in general – is a matter not only for technical or scientific intervention, but for cultural and political concern.

Literature review: on living with toxicity

What is waste? Much has been written on the social construction of waste as a category, and the societal demarcation of what is considered *waste*, marginal, polluted, and therefore taboo, from what is considered *valuable*, clean, and pure (Douglas 1966; Thompson 1979). Broadly speaking, waste and value are theorized as a relational ontology. That is, how we construct value – social norms of ‘decency’ and morality – depend upon the categorization and expulsion of that which is considered waste, whether from the private space of the home, or from public spaces of society at large (Lupton and Miller 1992). Waste is popularly understood as objects that no longer have value, and conventional approaches tend to frame waste as an issue of purely technical management. Moore’s (2010) work clearly posits that waste is not only a technical matter, but a political one. Where waste is defined as objects and goods that no longer have economic value, Moore demonstrates that waste material continues to produce value in its global trade as a

commodity. Where waste is often blackboxed as an objective and static entity or object, Moore describes how definitions of waste shift in various contexts; what is someone's trash may be someone else's treasure, in the form of a resource base for livelihoods. Rather than a simple material object, we can start to understand that waste has its own 'life cycle' that is a matter of politics from beginning to end. In the *beginning* of its cycle, there is no clear definition of waste. Rather, "waste is what is 'managed as waste'" (Moore 2010, 134), defined and constructed as waste politically, through regulation policies at multiple scales that categorize what is to be treated as hazardous and what is municipal solid waste. Where waste *ends* up, or the siting of disposal facilities is also a political matter that may appear to be based on simple factors such as cheap land, but is ultimately tied to processes of uneven development.

What happens to materials that are categorized as waste? Where do they go? Waste is conceptually framed as that which is expelled, superfluous, or otherwise "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966), yet waste is also always *in place* somewhere, as certain places are designated to contain material substances that are rejected (Lynch 1990). These 'landscapes of waste' where rejected material is processed and stored are often framed as marginal or peripheral geographies. However, Gidwani and Reddy (2011) argue that the bodies and landscapes marked for waste are *made* marginal in order to externalize the health and environmental costs of production to maximize profit for capital. Moore (2010, 143) maps waste as a global and transnational flow that operates "across an always uneven terrain of development and power." The end sites of these flows are local nodes where the waste is

deposited and comes to 'live' the remainder of its time; the impacts of waste are felt most deeply in these local nodes. The uneven geography of waste was the focus of early EJ efforts in the U.S., which fought against the siting of landfills primarily in poor and black communities (Bullard 2000).

However, as Moore (2009) suggests, thinking of the places and communities that bear the costs of waste as victimized spaces requiring intervention is too simplistic. Degraded landscapes of waste can also be reframed as sites that challenge the conventional separation of value and waste by asserting values that subvert or exceed political economy. For instance, aesthetic engagement with waste sites can enhance public understanding of the devastation of industrial processes (Engler 2004) and provoke witnesses/participants to rethink how environmental decisions are made (Pezzullo 2007). Cultural politics can also employ the presence and visibility of waste areas as a political tool to question state authority (Moore 2009). Furthermore, discursively framing wastelands as marginal may serve to further victimize inhabitants, for whom the everyday experience of the environment may be ambivalent, rather than averse, and conflicted rather than collective (Johnson and Niemeyer 2008).

Gregson and Crang (2010) point out that waste is often blackboxed in scholarship, and call for scholars to reconsider waste not only in symbolic terms nor as an object of scientific or technical management, but as actual physical matter. Toxins from waste diffuse through both human and non-human bodies as well as the land, water, and air in these so-called 'landscapes of exposure' (Mitman et al. 2004), raising important questions about the limits of scientific knowledge

production, and the assumptions of certainty that drive regulation and governance of industrial processes (Roberts and Langston 2008). If “different matters matter differently” (Gregson and Crang 2010, 1027), then we must consider the particularities of the waste and the specificities of the context. For Moore (2009, 2010), the matter of which waste is composed is in part how waste comes to be political. As Moore’s work on garbage in Oaxaca suggests, the power of household trash as a political tool lies in the contradiction between the materiality of trash – a smelly ecology, which attracts pests and repels society – and modern expectations of cleanliness and order. In other words, the political potential of waste lies in the “entanglements of meaning and materiality” (Kirsch 2012, 4). In this chapter, I consider the persistence, politics, and potential of toxicity through these entanglements in Warren County.

Negotiating toxicity: science and uncertainty

Waste, by definition, is the stuff that no longer matters, what we dispose of because it no longer has value. However, waste endures, and in its persistence, the materiality or ‘stuff’ of waste comes to matter once again in different ways. In Warren County, toxicity has lingered despite the remediation of the landfill site in 2003.¹⁸ In this section, I explore ongoing concerns about toxicity and attempt to understand how waste came to matter to residents and how toxicity continues to matter in very physical and material ways.

¹⁸ Chapter 2 describes the process through which the site was detoxified.

Water always bubbles up in Warren County's various histories. A state highway marker not far from the church and landfill proclaims that Shocco Springs was a famous wellness resort in the 1800's. Bill Kearney showed me a picture of the marker and shared a story his grandma, Marie Jones, used to tell. Her grandfather was a carriage driver who brought people to Warren County all the way from Washington, D.C. to rejuvenate in the healing waters of the local springs. "Warren County's got lots of resources. We got a lot of surface water in Warren County." As we listen to Bill's voice tell this story in the film, "Remembering Kearneytown", we watch an image of a still pool, trees reflected in the water, all silence and shadows. Our eyes follow a stream, slowly trickling down the side of a country road. Now we see water pouring out of a pipe, the image slowed down, air bubbles popping, dirt and oil in the water more evident.

So when you think about PCBs and contamination, you think about the 20-year period that the toxic was in the ground. Was our water table affected? Our land? Our air? Some say the wells weren't... some say the local wells were contaminated with PCBs. If you look at the research, there were some families that actually claimed they had stomach cancer because of the contaminants in the well (William Kearney, 10.4.11).

We watch Bill washing his hands, the camera zooms in, the motion slows. Water and skin.

The everyday experience of toxicity for many residents of Warren County is specifically connected to water. Especially for those who lived in Afton, the fear that PCBs would contaminate their water supply and poison future generations was the biggest motivating factor to participating in the protests against the PCB landfill. At a public hearing of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1979, one citizen

declared, “The children of the future coming on in eastern North Carolina will have to drink what you destroy” (William Brauer, quoted in McGurty 2007, 55). When we first talked about water, Bill described reactions to the county putting in water lines some ten years ago¹⁹.

So people say, why all of a sudden we got water? Is there something that the health department or the county knows? There’s still a suspicion... As long as you have these suspicions, how do you get through them? It’s not really talked about, it’s just riding there, on their backs (William Kearney, 10.4.11).

In conversations with residents, I have learned that concerns about toxicity are not generally openly discussed. However, these concerns emerge particularly in response to discussions about how to use the former landfill site. Following remediation, the 120-acre property including the former landfill, was ceded to the county government for its use. Local officials, in conjunction with some of the residents who participated in the remediation process, proposed the creation of a much-needed park on the site. There are currently no park facilities in Afton, and the potential of using the land for recreational purposes was a consideration throughout the remediation process, with the Working Group insisting that any fixtures installed on the site – such as lightpoles and concrete surfaces – be designed for longer-term use (Burwell 6.27.12; WCBC 2002, 76). However, the future use of the site is heavily contested. Deborah and Ken Ferruccio have been the most visible opponents of any public use of the site, citing evidence of contamination in the land

¹⁹ Prior to water lines being put in, most residents lived off wells close to or on their property.

outside of the landfill site from when the landfill leaked.²⁰ The Ferruccios' distrust of government and EPA claims of the site's safety may be traced to the sharp disagreements that emerged during the remediation process²¹. However, general public opinion regarding the safety of the site and adjacent areas remains unclear, and it is this generalized uncertainty that I explore here.

Angelena Kearney-Dunlap²² was living elsewhere when the PCB landfill was announced, but she heard about it because her family lives in the immediate vicinity.

I asked her what she recalls of her mother's reaction at the time:

Just the lack of knowledge of PCBs. That this stuff was found on the roadsides - a chemical that was sprayed on roadsides and now it was being stored in the community and they just didn't know what to expect. The unknown... the unknown (Angelena Kearney-Dunlap, 6.20.12).

Toxicity is repeatedly experienced in Warren County as uncertainty. In an interview, I asked Mildred, an elderly black resident whose cousin lives close to the landfill site, whether she thought the site was safe:

Mildred: What I'm saying, if you put a park there, you got to put water there. To drink. Who gonna drink it? I won't put a cow there to drink it. Because I'm not sure, 'cos you gonna have to go deep down. And maybe it's safe, I don't know. But I don't want to trust it. 'Cos there's going to be always something there, that part of the land will probably never be used... maybe if you go test it now, it might not be nothing there.

Pavithra: Would you trust it, if someone went and tested it and said..

Mildred: (shaking head emphatically) Mmm-mmm. Cos I guess it's the idea - the next time I get sick, I'm going to say, that's the part they missed! (Mildred Kearney, 5.22.12).

²⁰ Concerns about the safety of the landfill were put forward as the reason that the Ferruccios did not participate in the commemoration process (Weldon 2012).

²¹ See Chapter 2 for an elaboration.

²² Angelena, one of Bill Kearney's sisters, has been an active member of the W.C. E.A.T. as a member of the Coley Springs community and is Clerk to the Warren County Board.

Mildred and I had a good laugh about her blaming the PCBs the next time she got sick; the idea was only funny because the uncertainty of toxicity is so real in Warren County. Uncertainty, and the fears of health and safety it raises, are material concerns that appear to cross racial lines. A white county resident who does not live in the immediate surroundings of the landfill was sympathetic to the difficulties faced by the local community, and wondered what she would do in their place: "It's a tough question. Would you send your child to play on a playground there? I believe that it [the landfill site] was remediated, but I'm not sure I could do that." If the landfill site has been detoxified, as the EPA and final remediation report would lead us to believe, how might we understand the ongoing concerns about safety?

When I talk about Warren County to those unfamiliar with the history, they always want to know, well, is it safe? Was it cleaned up or not? For those of us looking in on this situation, it might appear that there are only two options with regards to the toxins: present (unsafe) or absent (safe). In that case, remediation can be understood as having done its job of removing 'the bad stuff.' However such a clear-cut dichotomy does not speak to the lived reality. The residents of Warren County are burdened by an uncertainty that permeates decision-making. Whether to drink water, or not. Whether to walk to the landfill, or not. Whether to allow children onto the site, or not. The stakes are higher when bodies, health, and safety are on the line.

The uncertainty becomes understandable when we consider that remediation is a scientific solution to what is framed as a scientific problem of

toxicity. In the case of Warren County, the scientific solution worked: testing of soil indicates that the PCB level in the soil was well below federal standards (TD*X n.d.; Exchange Project 2006; Barnes 2004). However, scientific practices have not been neutral in the history of Warren County. In siting the landfill in Warren County, state officials claimed that exposure to contaminants would be minimal and insufficient to pose health risks, in spite of the proximity of the landfill to groundwater, on the grounds that PCBs are chemical compounds that bind to solids and shy away from water. Aware of the limits of scientific certainty, as threshold and dosage levels were shifted seemingly arbitrarily, citizens walked out of public meetings in protest of scientific arguments that invalidated their embodied concerns for their own health and the health of future generations. I have been told that some residents only drink bottled water for fear their groundwater remains contaminated.

Scientific uncertainty was a crucial factor in the campaign opposing the landfill, and part of a complex and historical interplay between institutionalized research and local knowledges in Warren County. In choosing to site the landfill in Warren County, government agencies were found to be culpable in misrepresenting risk to the community, often using scientific and technical language to promote thinly veiled political decisions that served to further disenfranchise the population (McGurty 2007, 57-9). The landfill site was only 13 feet above groundwater, rather than the 50-foot standard prescribed to minimize risk of contamination; ten years after its construction, despite promises by state authorities to the contrary, the landfill had leaked. The negligence of the state in the initial construction was followed by negligence on the part of the Environmental Protection Agency in

monitoring. However, the relationship of the environmental justice movement to scientific research is not simply one of critique. McGurty (2007, 54) describes how local movement leaders both challenged and strategically employed science to build collective action against the initial siting and for remediation of the toxic landfill. Rather than completely discounting the validity of scientific research, movement organizers incorporated the lived experiences of their communities to push forward a scientific agenda on the environmental and health risks of PCBs and waste management technologies.

Residents continue to suggest additional testing to allay their fears, though the issue of how and whether to trust science is complicated by past experiences. Carol, a white resident who was involved in the initial organizing to oppose the landfill, is hopeful about the outcomes of independent scientific oversight:

If they could do the testing, if there's a way they could test the land all around the areas, and prove that the testing people were - I don't know, the right kind of people to do it... trusted - and the results could be trusted, whether it was independent people or several independent people, that's what it would take to prove to me that it's ok. If they could test that land, all the way around, and the water and everything, if it's all clean again, then the people could trust the government (Carol Bland, 6.20.12).

However, the non-neutrality of science, and in particular, the relationship of science to questions of governance, politics and race, re-emerge through much of the struggle against the PCB landfill. During the commemoration process, for example, the selection of Patrick Barnes as a scientific advisor was in part premised upon his experience and ability to work well with communities of color, an acknowledgement of how the scientist's positionality and racial identity affects the reception of

scientific findings.²³ As residents of Warren County are well aware, the production of scientific knowledge is woven through and through with questions of power – what knowledge is produced (or ignored), who is involved, and how historical and cultural contexts inform scientific practices. Roberts and Langston (2008, 630) suggest that the ‘shadow spaces’ in what is known about toxicity, framed in terms of uncertainty, in fact “raises questions about the politics of neutrality.” Science, at least in Warren County, has not been a neutral arbiter and believing in science, it appears, may require some level of faith.

Residents’ uncertainty about the persistence of toxins may be better understood as a reasonable skepticism of how much we can and do know through science. In particular, concerns about whether toxins are already present in their bodies, and the possible health effects of these, are difficult to assuage with any certainty. Our knowledge of how toxins ‘work’ are often developed in labs, and “the field, the lab’s antithesis, is messy, complicated, and chaotic” (Roberts and Langston 2008, 631). Expertise on chemical pathways of toxins is often complicated in real-world situations; new diseases emerge through the interactions of environmental hazards with the bodies that live among them, and scientific methods and evidence may lag behind the impacts that are feared or experienced (Nash 2006). Emergent work in the field of epigenetics suggests that exposure to environmental toxins may even alter gene expression, complicating understandings that we take for granted in public health or policy (Guthman 2012). Toxins become much less ‘manageable’

²³ See Chapter 2 for an elaboration.

when the complexity of toxic interactions and questions of scientific expertise are taken into account.

As Bill shared, residents of Afton fear that incidences of cancer in their families are caused by PCBs that may have leaked from the landfill prior to the remediation, diffusing through the landscape. Even for those who trust that the soil in the landfill was successfully detoxified, PCBs may be lurking somewhere around the corner, active and indeterminable:

I have confidence that that method they used – that cost, oh, a tremendous amount of money! – it worked. I do believe in my heart that the state would not have transferred that property to Warren County to be used as we please, if it was not clean. I don't think the EPA would put themselves out there for that kind of liability if it was not. BUT, the fact still remains that those PCBs lay in that site, for years! Before they were detoxified. So what happened during the course of that time? You see what I'm saying? Where did they go? What did they do? We know water was in the landfill, so did it seep into the water table? Did it contaminate the land around it? I don't know! It's something to think about. We've got a lot of incidence of cancer in that particular quadrant of that county, is it attributable to the PCBs? I don't know (Linda Worth, 6.20.12).

To date, these claims have not been verified by medical testing; however, even with testing, proving causality could be complicated. As Dollie pointed out to me, Warren County has long been a 'landscape of exposure' to toxicity:

My parents and their parents and their parents... they would take their hand and fertilize with pesticides. I mean, they never put on gloves when they were spreading the fertilizer. Even keeping the weeds and the worms off of the crops, they manually sprayed. When people farm now, I think you may see an airplane doing it or something. But they did all that themselves, and they never thought they were in danger, their health. So, I don't think they were conscious of the term environment, and I think that went all the way up until the PCB movement, the environmental justice movement in Warren County. I don't think Warren County citizens really thought about the environment. I think it's different now. I think that people are conscious. I think that's why you have

folks saying, wondering, if the landfill is safe. I think that [the PCB movement] brought an awareness of toxins, chemicals (Burwell, 6.27.12).

The uncertainties experienced by residents reflect how toxicity lingers in Warren County – as cancer in the body, contamination in the water, or concerns about the landfill site – despite scientific evidence that the landfill site was remediated. Even key players in the remediation process did not have a uniform response with regards to safety and future use, with some believing that the site has “the cleanest dirt in Warren County” (Clinton Alston, quoted in Barnes 2004, 26) and others stating that significant community education and marketing would be required to overcome the stigma of the site. The W.C. E.A.T. has inherited this contested legacy. Bill Kearney plans to conduct community-wide surveys of residents’ opinions about toxicity and safety, in conjunction with the UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, to better understand how widespread these concerns are and how to proceed. Additionally, community testing of the soil in and around the landfill site has been proposed to increase public access to the scientific evidence of decontamination. It remains to be seen whether education and democratic participation may in fact resolve the uncertainties of living with toxicity.

Warren County exemplifies the fight for ‘biological citizenship’ by communities demanding social and political change in response to being assaulted by chemicals (Murphy 2008). Certainly, “increased public awareness of exposures has always been a driving impetus in changing and modifying regulatory policies” (Roberts and Langston 2008, 632) and the fears of Warren County residents were crucial in driving forward a more just solution. However, the mobility of toxins and their

complex interactions with bodies and environments ensures that they linger in the social landscape, complicating efforts to resolve concerns regarding health and safety with any certainty.

Negotiating toxicity: toxic legacies

Toxins move in and through bodies as they do through the landscape, determined by their chemical properties and molecular interactions. The mobility and unpredictability of toxins challenges any comfort we may take in thinking of our bodies and internal organs as separate from the world outside. In this way, the presence or fear of toxins “shifts the register of materiality from the indifferent stuff of a world ‘out there’ ... to the intimate fabric of corporeality that includes and redistributes the ‘in here’ of human being” (Whatmore 2006, 602). Toxicity has thus become an active political player in Warren County, a ‘gorilla in the room’ to be reckoned with as everyday decisions are made and the future of the county is planned. As we become increasingly aware of the possible presence of toxins in and out of our bodies, we are forced to rethink how we understand toxins, but also how to make sense of our social world. In this section, I consider how toxicity has become intertwined with the social and political life of residents of Warren County, and how the materiality of toxicity has become entangled with processes of meaning-making (Kirsch 2012).

The toxic landfill site signifies multiple larger narratives for many residents of Warren County. As I was leaving the Warren County library one day, I bumped into a young African-American man walking in and we struck up a conversation. The

young man, Marcus²⁴ asked if I was visiting Warren County. When I told him I was doing research about the PCB history, he immediately began telling me what it meant to him. He didn't remember the protests – he was only three at the time – but he still remembers hearing about the events over the years, and being scared. I asked what he was scared about, and he described for me with passionate anger how he feared as a child that the landfill would burst: “We basically live in a toxic cesspool and who wants that! This being a poor and black county, that's why it was chosen” (Marcus, 6.20.12). He paused for a minute, lost in his reflections. Turning back to me he said that it was about race, and that it was deep, deeper than most people realized.

Marcus' sentiments reflect a general sense among black residents of Warren County that PCBs are another toxic legacy in an ongoing history of racism. The insistence on the part of the State to deposit the contaminated soil in Warren County was a clear signal to residents of Afton that they were so marginal as to not count:

So the mere fact that the state was so adamant about scooping up these PCBs that were disposed of along all of these roadsides and putting them somewhere where they couldn't hurt everybody, meant that this is something really really bad (Worth, 6.20.12).

For many, the selection of Afton for a landfill site was itself evidence of racism, as the site was found to be otherwise technically and scientifically unsuitable for a landfill:

Folk who lived in Afton, they were really feeling devalued. In terms of, you know, their life and their health was not valued as much as someone somewhere else. Clearly, many people, black people in the county, even some

²⁴ Pseudonym

whites I think, felt like if this county hadn't been predominantly black it wouldn't have been chosen. The reason for that, was all the scientific stuff they went against, to put it here (Dollie Burwell, 6.27.12).

The toxicity of the landfill site symbolizes those narratives even as its physical presence reiterates the material and structural ways that racism is reproduced. Andre²⁵, a black shopkeeper in Warrenton, told me about the conversations he used to have with customers during the remediation process. Contractors and workers associated with the cleanup of the landfill would visit his store and talk about how lethal the toxins were (Andre, 6.20.12). Many were sympathetic of the community that had to live with the toxins. Andre's analysis of the impact of the landfill was that Afton was permanently damaged from it, that the value of the surrounding area had greatly decreased in value, and that no new businesses or residents would move into the area. His sentiments were echoed by the County Manager, Linda Worth, who described how she believes the site has impacted the potential for economic development in the area:

It's probably had a negative effect on Warren County. The fact that we're majority minority. We're Tier 1 county, by virtue of the state ranking us Tier 1, which means we're economically distressed. We've always been known as a 'poor' county...When industries and businesses look for a site to locate or expand, they do their homework. This is part of who we are, this is part of our history (Linda Worth, 6.20.12).

In evaluating the remediation process, science advisor Barnes interviewed some key participations of the detoxification process. The feedback regarding economic impact was varied. Clinton Alston, a County Commissioner at the time, "indicated

²⁵ Pseudonym

that he knew for a fact that the Twitty farm was denied a Perdue Chicken facility because of its proximity to the PCB landfill” (Barnes 2004, 26).

Andre’s analysis speaks to the ways in which the association of toxicity with permanent damage reproduces racism and poverty spatially and structurally. Whether the landfill site was chosen because of the racial and class composition of the surrounding areas, as environmental justice scholars and activists assert, or whether the site was chosen for its geological suitability, as the state and the EPA insisted, is not the issue here. Rather, as Pulido (2000, 17) illustrates, the “sedimentation of racial inequality”²⁶ in the landscape is not a consequence of “discrete and hostile acts.” Racism is better understood as a “dynamic sociospatial process” (13), a structural inequality that is produced through iterative histories of underdevelopment of areas that are primarily populated by people of color. That is, histories of racism produced the conditions that made Afton a ‘candidate’ for a toxic landfill, regardless of intentionality. Marcus’s anger about Afton being a ‘toxic cesspool’ reflects how sites of environmental harm often become ‘sacrifice zones’ that are “made through the material transformation of places and through the public narration of them as already polluted and ruined... [creating] conditions for further environmental injury” (Houston 2013, 420). Black residents of Warren County, in inferring that lower property values and the permanent scarring of Afton are associated with the landfill, reflect this awareness of how racism is iteratively and spatially produced.

²⁶ Oliver and Shapiro 1995, cited in Pulido 2000, 16.

This spatio-temporal understanding of the racism as a toxic legacy infuses residents' understandings of the past, and explains the silence around the PCB history locally, a history that has become an iconic example and point of pride for environmental justice elsewhere. In 2011, Laurie Baker, the principal of a Warren County high school decided that the upcoming 30th anniversary of the PCB protests would serve as an opportune pedagogical tool. The school was awarded a grant by the Warren Education Fund to implement a school-wide project where students would conduct research in multiple subjects inspired by the PCB struggle. In the process, Laurie had a surprising revelation: the project had official support from the school district superintendent, but parents were reluctant to allow their students to learn the history until it was framed in terms of 'positive' concepts such as resistance. Laurie described to me that the students understood now that this was a watershed event, but the broader community continues to be ambivalent:

Have you actually been to the site? So you know. You would never know [it was there] if you didn't know where you were going. It's like the place never existed. So we had kids that went down there and took pictures of it. We just thought, we should probably somehow mark this in our community. We had some talks about doing a monument and designing something. But... the feedback we got from parents was, we don't want to act like this ever happened. So we thought, well we could geo-cache it, because it's hidden but if you're looking for it, you can find it (Laurie Baker, 9.5.12).

We can read the parents' hesitation as a recognition that what happened in Warren County was because of marginalization; repeating that historical narrative has the impact of reiterating marginalization psychologically and discursively in the young people. If residents understand toxicity as an embodiment of injustices of the past, it also serves as a reminder of a possible future of continued injustice. Silence then, is

understandable as both a refusal to identify with marginalization, and at the same time, an everpresent suspicion 'riding on people's backs.'

Conclusions

Materiality and meaning are deeply entangled in Warren County, where residents are negotiating a complicated history of toxic contamination, racial discrimination, and issues around power and knowledge concerning academics, government officials and activists. Though the physical presence of toxins is contested, they linger regardless in material concerns about health and safety, and in symbolic ways that tie the site to legacies of racism. The significance of the PCB landfill site varies greatly among Warren County residents. For some, the association of waste and racism cannot be overcome, and they advocate for the landfill to be permanently closed, as mistrust of science and government removes any certainty of safety or complete remediation. For others, the site is symbolic of resistance, an opportunity to overcome past injustice, that is only 'wasted' if it is not taken advantage of:

But, when you talk about looking to the future, I think we can flip that around and make that a positive. In what we do with it. What we do with it - if we redevelop the site. And it's not just something that has happened here in Warren County, it's all over. You have sites that are redeveloped using federal dollars, and they become thriving parts of the community. And I feel real strongly that can happen here. But if our own people won't embrace that, there's nothing we can do. If I was to recommend to the Board of Commissioners to invest thousands of dollars out there, to make a state of the art recreational facility for our citizens to use, and nobody goes, or takes advantage of it, we may as well not have even done it. It's a waste! (Linda Worth, 6.20.12).

As reminders and residues of historical legacies, toxins become political actors that shape everyday decision-making and visions of the future in Warren County. Thinking of waste in terms of management or remediation alone is a scientific or technocratic attempt to solve a problem with toxicity; however, uncertainties of science, issues of governance, and the cultural linkages of waste with marginalization (whether racism or poverty) make toxins powerful political players. In this sense, toxic waste continues to matter to Warren County residents whether or not they are actually present, suggesting that healing from toxicity involves a host of political and cultural practices beyond physical remediation and management. In the next chapter, I look at the shaping of collective memory in Warren County as a political and cultural effort to negotiate toxic legacies.

Chapter 5: On collective memory and the politics of place-making

March 12, 2012

Today is the second monthly meeting of the committee formed to celebrate Warren County's environmental justice legacy.

When I worked with Bill on the film last fall, he had photographed the state highway marker nearest the church in Afton, about an antebellum wellness resort in the area called Shocco Springs. On my drives up to Warren County, I have started paying more attention to the visual landscape, noticing what is marked and what is no longer visible. I brought this insight to the previous meeting, asking why there was nothing to signal the historic struggle against the PCB landfill. The committee decided to look into how to get a state highway marker.

Today, Linda Worth, the County Manager, reports back to the committee that they can apply for a marker through the NC Department of Cultural Resources²⁷. The decision about which markers should be installed is made by a committee that meets twice a year. Linda is uncertain about whether the committee would find this history to be appropriate for the highway marker program, and points out that the application is due within a short time. However, the committee decides that the marker is worth pursuing and would be a fitting complement to the commemoration activities.

The marker occupies a brief moment of consensus in an otherwise tense conversation. The meeting today is primarily focused on the commemoration events – whether to have one event or multiple, when and where they should be held. The conversation weaves between logistical questions of what to do in the present and historical narratives of what these actions mean, punctuated by Deborah's opposition to doing anything on or near the landfill site. Should a public celebration of the PCB protests be held at the armory, located closer to downtown Warrenton, or at the church, in the rural area of Afton where the

²⁷ The NC Highway Historical Marker Program, established in 1935 by the General Assembly, recognizes and marks events of statewide historical significance. The NC Department of Cultural Resources administers the program, supported by an Advisory Committee composed of university/college faculty with expertise in the state's history, who determine the merit and authenticity of proposals they receive as well as the wording of approved markers (www.ncmarkers.com).

landfill was sited? Rev. Carson Jones, the pastor of Coley Springs, contextualizes the commemoration: "To commemorate, you always go back to where you started. In terms of commemoration, [marching from] Coley Springs to the dump was the route used by the protestors."

Several white residents who were involved at various stages of the PCB protests are present at the meeting, and express concerns about holding the event at Afton. The reasons shared begin with logistical issues about space and technical needs, but quickly shift to more political questions. Elizabeth²⁸, a white high school teacher and longtime resident, states: "Having it at the armory puts it on neutral ground..." and a little later, clarifies: "If it's going to be at the church, it's not on neutral territory...I'm not talking about black, white, whatever. I'm talking about an organization." Carol, who put an advertisement in the paper calling for people to gather to discuss the landfill in 1978, is more explicit about race: "When we started organizing [against the landfill]... one of the first things that we said, we perceived the whole thing as [affecting] the whole county... When we called [people by phone], we called everybody!" Deborah discusses the early organizing as a moment of unity: "It was that kind of cohesiveness in the courthouse that made it so it wasn't weird for white people to come to a black church." Carol reminds people that what was at stake was "the land of the county, and it is for everybody. I think it's what united us."

Bill responds to the insistence on shifting the event away from Coley Springs: "I'm not here to tell you what to do or not do... this is a loose committee structure; my focus was on what are you doing this year, what is everyone doing, and how can we mesh our efforts together." He resituates the commemoration in Afton, reminding those present that the church holds an annual health walk, and in honor of the 30th anniversary of the PCB protests, are inviting the wider community to join in and participate. He makes his position clear: "It's definitely a Warren County story, but let's mark it at the Afton community."

Gabe Cumming, the Economic Development Commissioner, suggests that the committee's long-term vision should not be eclipsed by disagreements about the landfill site, particularly in terms of leveraging the legacy for economic development that benefits the county. Deborah's response makes the stakes clear: "If I am involved, and I find out that the government decides to build a park [on the site], I will feel betrayed." Bill reminds the committee of their roles: "I think that if we get together factual information, the community can make its own decisions. Otherwise, it's like putting up a lock and saying we're protecting people." The meeting ends without further resolution.

²⁸ Pseudonym.

In the scene rendered above, we witness discussions about two practices of memory. The first, a marker to be placed alongside a state highway, an *object* of remembrance that the committee agreed upon. The second, a community day to celebrate this legacy, a *performance* of remembrance laden with competing desires and contested narratives. Over time, physical objects that record memory come to represent 'history' – seen as a neutral, unmediated representation of what truly happened in the past. However, performances complicate history and remind us that our understanding of the past is both partial and political, as the meanings we assign to historical events are capable of being re-invented. Taken together, objects and performances reveal how collective memory is shaped through processes of negotiating the meaning of past events, characterized by disjunctures and contradictions. If we understand the 30th anniversary commemoration process as an effort to map the origins of environmental justice onto the landscape of Warren County, we might ask, where exactly is the 'birthplace' of environmental justice? Why is the marking of history in place significant and what work does commemoration do?

This chapter looks at ideas of memory and place-making. Memory here is understood to be collective and social. Choosing where to commemorate the PCB protests is also a struggle over what is being commemorated, who owns this history, and how they hope to shape the future of the place in question. I begin the chapter with a review of relevant scholarship on how collective memory shapes places, and in particular, the importance of memory studies to environmental justice. I then revisit the W.C. E.A.T.'s commemoration discussion, beginning with the marker and

other material objects of memory in Warren County, to understand how they gain significance as people struggle over the meaning of past events. Finally, I reflect on the commemoration planning process as a performance of memory that seeks to transform histories of violence and trauma. As I hope to illustrate in this chapter, it is through these collective memory practices that places are re-made in what Said (2000, 178) calls “a social, political and historical enterprise,” a creative labor undertaken by communities to transform toxic and troubled histories into a source of value for alternate futures.

Literature review: on memory and place

Geographers are interested in places because people *live in places*. That is, places are where the experiences of everyday life and people’s understanding of their own identity intersect with the networks of economic relations and social imaginaries (Adams et al. 2001). In particular, a focus on place “highlights the weaving together of social relations and human-environment interactions” (xiv), creating a more textured understanding of how these strands create the worlds we inhabit and the meanings we make of them.

Memory is not only individual but also a collective socio-cultural phenomenon. In a sense, memory is the story we tell ourselves about history, and this narrative has tremendous political and social potential. The past is narrated in the present through ‘acts of memory’ that may serve as a form of collective agency and healing (Bal 1999). In public and private, history is shared, stories are retold, and historical moments, layered in multiple accounts of remembering, are re-made and erased in the present (Pollock 2005).

Social or collective memory shapes how people understand their relationship to and 'sense of place', and places in turn are shaped by social imaginaries, becoming "the reservoirs of human content, like memory or gardens" (Jeff Kelly 2005, as cited by Karen Till 2008, 108). Karen Till (2008, 101) describes how 'wounded places', as sites of past violence or trauma are linked to social memory. Capable of wounding again or able to heal, these reservoirs of affect are transformed into active sites of memory practice by activists and artists who "acknowledge the ways that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their world." Waste sites in particular can evoke strong associations or serve as markers of social history (Hardesty 2001). Through community practices, environmental justice efforts seek to transform places that are wounded into places of care and responsibility. As Houston (2008, 186) suggests, "This is difficult and painstaking work, which is aimed at a project of remaking and recuperating places that have been dismissed as suitable for sacrifice, unnatural, wastelands, or even as mundanely urban or suburban." Such memory work is constituted not only by the *archive*, history held in media and forms that endure – i.e. text, film, and other primarily visual/material traces. Memory is also the *repertoire* of that which is performed, embodied in practice, and situated in place (Taylor 2003). For example, practices of storytelling (Houston 2013) and toxic tours (Pezzullo 2007) utilized by communities exemplify how embodied artistic and activist work have the creative potential to re-make cultural and political meanings of places that have undergone environmental harm (Till 2008).

Edward Said (2000, 185) argues that “collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified and endowed with political meaning.” Said’s work explores Palestinian efforts to reclaim a collective historical reality as political resistance to Zionist narratives that invisibilize Palestinian inhabitants in order to justify the establishment of the Israeli state. That is to say, the construction of collective memory and the parallel invention of the meaning of places can be understood as an “...unending cultural struggle over territory, which necessarily involves memories, narratives and physical structures” (Said 2000, 182). In environmental justice efforts, collective memory-making processes attempt to ‘recode’ geographies that are marginalized with new “meanings that are useful for political empowerment and environmental change” (Di Chiro 2003, 214). Explorations of the stories and bodies missing from official or conventional archives allows for the creation of alternate genealogies (Nyong’o 2009). Such alternate genealogies may also be constructed through practices such as the re-naming of public areas or streets in honor of African-American heroes (Alderman 2003); in the building and sharing of domestic items in the immigrant home (Tolia-Kelly 2010); and in cookbooks that envision an imagined community resisting dominant capitalist narratives (Ruffin 2007).

In this chapter, I consider the memory-making practices in Warren County as political claims that serve to sustain and make visible raced, classed, imaginative and real landscapes that are otherwise erased or submerged. In the next section, I consider the significance of the new highway historical marker in Warren County as an archival object.

Making/marking history: the archives of collective memory

The 'PCB Protests' highway marker has been installed on State Highway 401, South of Warrenton. The sign reads simply:

“Toxic waste illegally dumped along N.C. roads was moved to landfill 2 mi. E., 1982. Protests sparked environmental justice movement in U.S..”

Decades of contentious (and ongoing) history are reduced to a simple explanation of a toxic landfill siting and protests opposing it. Listed now in the State Highway database of notable statewide historical sites, we might say that Warren County's significance in the mythology of environmental justice has been cemented and institutionalized through the installation of the marker in place. The physical marker is now an element of a larger archive of environmental justice, Warren County and Southern U.S. history. Diana Taylor (2003, 19) defines archival memory as “documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change.” These artifacts are the source materials for making history, as events of the past are compiled and interpreted into narratives, most often by scholars.

There are of course other archival materials related to Warren County's PCB history. Interviews with participants and organizers of the struggle have been collected over time; some are housed in the library collections at UNC-Chapel Hill, and many of these inform McGurty's defining environmental history of Warren County. Deborah Ferruccio and her ex-husband Ken, both central to the movement, have collected a vast amount of documentation related to the history, including photographs, meeting notes, letters and newspaper articles. Their narrative of

Warren County's history is presented as a digital archive that Deborah curates²⁹ and has also been compiled into a book (currently unpublished). As I outline in Chapter 3, photographs of the protest events are legally owned by the photographers, and have not been made available to most residents of Warren County. The local library has limited documentation of the struggle; I have been told that materials they did have were removed without the knowledge of the librarians.

It is notable that much of the primary archives related to the history are the private property of a few individuals. In contrast, communication of the history among the community of Afton, central to the struggle, is primarily embodied through the annual church walk to the landfill, though this performance of memory was mostly implicit until the 30th anniversary. As I discovered through the commemoration process, even the sharing of history among family members is limited. The concentration of archival materials outside of the Afton community is unsurprising if we consider, as Taylor (2003, 19) points out, that conventionally, "archival memory succeeds in separating the source of 'knowledge' from the knower – in time and/or space." These enduring artifacts often gain importance outside of the lived histories/geographies through which they come to be produced. However, as we see in Warren County, questions of ownership and knowledge become central issues when archives are embroiled in contemporary struggles over collective memory.

Histories of African-American communities and struggles for resistance are rarely marked in the visual landscape of the South. Public landmarks, such as

²⁹ <http://www.ncpcbarchives.com/>

historical markers and monuments, have historically been used to legitimize the values and narratives of elites. For example, Bishir (1993, 7) traces how Southern white elites, who sought to recapture their political dominance following defeat in the Civil War, “drew upon the imagery of past golden ages to shape public memory in ways that supported their own authority.” Architecture and monuments placed in public spaces “codified a lasting version of the state’s history that tied Old South to New, interweaving old family heritage, Anglo-Saxon supremacy, and military and political heroism” (19). As Bishir suggests, this public archive has endured, and to this day, cultural preservation in Warren County glorifies a time of economic prosperity with no evidence of the racist economy it was predicated upon.

In this context, the creation of the PCB marker is a significant achievement, even as it highlights the contradictions of incorporating marginalized histories into formal archives. Highway markers are created based on the statewide significance of the history as determined by the Advisory Committee. In response to criticism that the markers primarily legitimized a white-centric history, the program has diversified its Committee and especially in the 1990s, began to install more markers that spoke to the African-American experience in the state.³⁰ Alderman’s (2012, 365) analysis of the text inscribed on markers suggests that even those markers that speak of slavery or African-American disenfranchisement “prefer to present heroic accounts of African Americans making contributions to the state and the nation in spite of having once been enslaved.” The text on the PCB marker, for instance, avoids any reference to the culpability of the state or the EPA in the struggle over

³⁰ See Alderman 2012 for a review of relevant literature.

the landfill. Instead, the inscription highlights the importance of the protests to environmental justice more broadly. The public acknowledgement of a history of popular resistance is remarkable in that most markers speak to powerful individuals or events of importance to the state; yet this history is made palatable and neutral by avoiding any mention of the racialized character of both the toxicity and the struggle against it.

If archives are premised upon separation from the ‘sources’ of knowledge, how might that distance be bridged? The unveiling and dedication of the PCB Protests marker at the commemoration event created one such opportunity for Warren County residents to engage the archive. As I shared earlier, residents were eager to see the marker up-close, posing with friends and family for photographs, asking for their presence and participation in making history to be documented. However, the significance of the marker is not clearly fixed. The excitement about the marker could be interpreted as pride in being included in a formal state archive that has historically devalued the black community of Afton; in that sense, the marker may stand in for the formal apology to Warren County residents that the state never delivered. The marker may also serve as a physical manifestation of the community’s struggle for self-determination, and reflect the pride that I saw in residents’ faces as they watched the slideshow of themselves, their friends and family marching in the PCB protests. The collaborative film “Remembering Kearneytown” can be understood as another attempt to both expand the archive by including stories traditionally excluded from within it, and to create archival materials that can circulate and be accessible to its ‘sources’.

The marker, the slideshow, and the film are all material objects whose meaning depends on the interaction between the 'archive' and the 'repertoire'. They reflect how "populations develop ways of viewing, living with, and retelling or recycling the materials" (Taylor 2003, 21) to allow for a re-invention of meaning. As I have illustrated, material archives are products, but also agents, of history as a meaning-making enterprise, raising questions about knowledge and power (*whose knowledge? what history?*). In the next section, I explore Warren County's commemoration process and event as performances of collective memory that negotiate these politics of historical narratives and place-making.

Making/marking place: performances of collective memory

The annual church walk occurs during Family and Friends Day at Coley Springs. For years, the day had been about celebrating community; in 2001, Bill Kearney introduced a health walk and wellness fair, including the local health department and other organizations. Rather than thinking of health only in terms of the individual, Bill's work at Coley Springs has been about reframing health as a community concern. For Bill, the annual walk from the church to the landfill site is not only an embodiment in remembrance of their struggle against the PCBs, but a re-orientation of that legacy towards an expansive vision of community health. Bill articulates this vision towards the end of "Remembering Kearneytown":

I'd like to see our young people more involved in the environment, in a healthy environment. Getting back to that Garden of Eden experience. I believe that's what life is all about, being in tune with your environment and being responsible for your environment. Not just yourself, but the environment you live in as well. I feel that's part of my greater ministry, to empower communities to be a part of bringing resalm to what they might consider as

issues, whether it be health, or environmental, or just leadership (William Kearney, 11.30.13).

The health walk is a performance among a larger 'repertoire' of memory that intersects with the church practices of Coley Springs, the cultural traditions of southern African-American communities, and the commemoration practices of environmental justice communities to re-create a sense of place. Taylor (2003, 20) describes the repertoire as "all those acts usually thought of ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge" where the physical participation and presence of people creates meaning of events. The notion of the repertoire is built on the idea that memory is not only that which is recorded in material artifacts, but that which is created through oral narrations, community/participatory events, and embodied actions. I understand memory-making practices to be 'performances' in two ways. First, as discrete events, they are set apart as unique moments, yet serve to intensify, communicate and shape cultural meanings that may be unconsciously enacted in everyday life. Second, as a "heuristic tool" to understand how meaning is created and transmitted through the medium of the body and through the interactions of bodies, the "inherent 'eventness' ('in motion') [of performance] makes it especially effective for engaging and describing the embodied processes that produce and consume culture" (Hamera 2006, 5).

Performances gain resonance from their interpretations of existing practices and past performances. The church health walk from Coley Springs to the landfill site refers most directly to the marches of protestors in 1982 who were

opposing the PCB landfill. The anti-PCB activism re-interpreted the protest tradition of the Civil Rights movement:

Meetings at the local black Baptist church, the high visibility of well-known African American activists, the incorporation of prayer into all the protests, and a long-distance march --- from Warrenton to Raleigh, all were part of an established repertoire of civil rights activism (McGurty 2007, 108).

In particular, the merging of the black church with civil rights was evident in the events of the PCB protest commemoration day. The formal program was built into the structure of a church service, such that the event began with a dedication by the church pastor, and incorporated songs of praise by the church choir. The walk along the historic route of the PCB protests culminated with a prayer by the pastor at a designated intersection.

The commemoration day can also be understood as a performance of oral history, where official speakers and participating residents testified to how their lives were transformed by the 1982 PCB protests. These performances are not simply repetitions of past events. Rather, as a space for encountering past events through a lens of retrospection, oral history performance “translates subjectively remembered events into embodied memory acts, moving memory into remembering” (Pollock 2005, 2). The testimonials of the various speakers reiterated a collective memory of the 1982 protests as a harmonious multiracial effort led by the black residents who were most directly impacted. As we have seen in multiple examples, that narrative highlights an exceptional moment in Warren County’s history, disregarding the complex web of people’s experiences. How can we understand this paradox of the commemoration?

Let us revisit the committee conversations from the opening vignette of the chapter, composed of oral history performances as key actors describe what is at stake in the contested understandings of past. On the one hand, we hear white residents and leaders who were clearly invested in fighting the landfill speak about the early organizing against the toxins as a phenomenon that impacted everyone, and the county as a whole. In that context, they speak of the courthouse as a space of multiracial unity, and the armory as a neutral space. The language of neutrality communicates a *spatial imaginary of evenness and equality*, framing the struggle against the PCBs as a shared heritage of the county, which should therefore be commemorated in the official centers of the county where access is assumed to be equal for all. On the other hand, from black residents of Warren County and particularly of Coley Springs, we hear a specificity of history, indicating that while the history is one of the whole county, Afton in particular is both the site of the story and the root of resistance, and therefore the birthplace of environmental justice. The language of ownership here communicates an *uneven spatial imaginary*, in which the PCB struggle, generally communicated as a story of “Warren County” broadly, is re-centered in Afton.

These narratives are not necessarily at odds with each other, and a more widespread survey of resident opinions would complexify my binary demarcation. However, I suggest that the contradictions emerge repeatedly because these narratives draw on diverging historical understandings. For Deborah and Carol, the early organizing against PCBs is exemplary of a grassroots movement that challenges government institutions on behalf of a common public. In this narrative,

hope lies in the potential of science as an independent force to verify reality and confirm the presence or absence of toxins; racism is relegated either to the state's decision in choosing the landfill site, or does not matter at all. For Rev. Jones and Bill, the concept of 'environmental racism', formulated in reference to the siting of the PCB landfill, is not merely an explanation of a discrete event. Rather, it reflects how this singular event resonates with a longer history of racial exclusion and discrimination. Thus, the commemoration walk and church service are performances of memory framed by existing community and cultural traditions grounded in resistance to oppression and racism.

The siting of the landfill in Afton is interpreted by many black residents as a violence that echoes other histories of violence. Here, Angelena describes the threat of toxicity that motivated people to get involved in the protests:

[It threatened] people's health, their choice. Everyone had wells. Groundwater was being threatened and with that, their health and safety is being threatened. And then the fact that you're being used, because this is happening to you without your consent, without your knowledge... It's like being raped, you know. You're being raped mentally, and people react - you're being forced to endure something that you haven't chosen.

She then elaborates on how this violence is racialized, revealing how places like Warren County become 'wounded' in terms of both physical environmental harms and the mental imaginaries that accompany them:

The county was rich but it was rich on slave labor. As a slave, you were not considered human. Black men were considered one half human, one half animal or whatever that law was. I guess it's ingrained in people. I guess because there's minority residents and you're not supposed to be educated, you're not supposed to know what's going on, and possibly this happened before and wasn't discovered, and it could have been something that could have easily taken place if people hadn't been notified (Angelena Kearney-Dunlap, 6.20.12).

Arguments about ownership of history in Warren County are not about truth. Rather, they are re-narrations of history that serve different political ends. The performance of oral history is powerful precisely because it lies in the gap between what is 'real' and what is 'represented'; that is, the re-narration of the past in Warren County through the commemoration process and event offers a possibility for creating lessons to be learned from the past that opens the possibility that the future can be different. As Pollock (2005, 7) suggests, "the performance of reality is paradoxically a performance of possibility." The commemoration day, as a performance to celebrate the 'birth of environmental justice' served as both a remembrance of the *promise* of environmental justice 30 years ago, as well as a *practice* to embody a longer history of resistance to racism.

What work is done by situating the performance of memory in Afton? For one, it is an active acknowledgement of this wounding history that links toxicity and racism in place. Rooting collective memory in Afton marks the uneven geography that made environmental racism possible, and simultaneously draws on the specificity of the black historical legacy to articulate alternate visions for the future. By unveiling the marker in the church and locating the commemoration in Afton, the organizers of the event clearly articulated that a *shared* Warren County, state-wide or national heritage of environmental justice must be *rooted* in the black community's legacy of resistance to racism. In other words, the commemoration rejected understandings of environmental justice that painted racism in neutral terms. This performance of commemoration contradicts the neutral text on the marker which contains no explicit language around race. Thus re-rooting

environmental justice in Afton is an attempt to envision and embody the possibility of self-determination, challenging histories that claim race neutrality, even as the black experience is marginalized and erased.

Conclusions

At first, commemoration may seem like an uncomplicated celebration of past events. However, as Warren County's example illustrates, the shaping of collective memory is a complicated and dynamic process of negotiating what the past means in the present. Both the historical marker and the event itself suggest that making sense of the past is a matter of political concern, in that relations of power are reiterated or challenged through re-narration. For Warren County residents, developing a collective memory requires that they negotiate not only ongoing concerns with chemical toxicity, but also their legacy as a symbol of both racial discrimination and political resistance. This reclamation of their political significance by Warren County's black community resonates with the importance of studying African-American 'sites of memory' (O'Meally and Fabre 1994). In particular, the reiteration of the black church and the African-American community of Afton as the birthplace of environmental justice challenges the mythology of Warren County's single shared heritage. The creation of a positive racialized collective memory by Warren County residents counters the violence of racial marginalization by performing an alternative vision, premised on health and justice.

Chapter 6: In closing, the cultural and critical work of environmental justice

What happens to the waste we produce? Who bears these costs? Toxins make us ask difficult questions of ourselves, about the world we inhabit and the world we have created. For many of us, our lifestyles depend on the production of waste as something that we do not have to think about. For instance, in this very moment, I am working on my laptop, drinking a cup of tea. There is a 'life cycle' to each of these materials that does not often enter into my everyday consciousness – the laptop, the mug, the tea. The laptop will refuse to turn on one day. It will become waste, at best a 'geographical inconvenience'³¹, taking up space beyond my use for it, and requiring that I make some effort to move it elsewhere. As an informed consumer who lives in an area with a strong waste management program, I will take my laptop to the county recycling collection center. I trust that its parts will be taken apart and reused, including various rare metals, perhaps the frame. I will have done my best as an environmentally conscious individual, and will assume or hope that the use I made of the computer was worth the costs. Moved elsewhere, the laptop thus becomes waste, 'matter out of place'. But it also always *in place* somewhere, and this project attempts to turn our gaze towards those places where waste is

³¹ Phrase borrowed from Leonard Cohen, "The Future," *Live in London*, referring to the effort people had to make to move their bodies to be present at the concert.

deposited and contained.

When we make something waste, we assume it goes away, but as Warren County's example reminds us, waste endures. As it lingers, it also comes to be a matter of cultural and political concern for those who must endure it. However, as scholar Giovanna Di Chiro (2004, 114) proposes, these "narratives of endurance" are not merely evidence of ecological and economic failure; rather, they speak to the possibilities of re-imagining futures by accounting for and transforming the toxic legacies of the past:

It becomes an environmental justice strategy to trace the persistence of alternative worldviews and lifeways envisioned by communities that suffer the negative consequences, but receive few of the benefits, of modern industrial society. What does it mean to persevere, holding on to a sense of hope in one's actions to create a better world, while facing apparently overwhelming odds?

The 30th anniversary commemoration process may be understood as a re-invention of Warren County as a resistant 'black geography' (McKittrick and Woods 2007). 'Black geographies' such as Warren County, reveal the racial basis of uneven development and bring into focus the greater networks and relations of power that mark certain places and bodies as disposable. By attempting to use their legacies to transform the place in which they live, rather than being at the mercy of history, Warren County's residents are mapping and making visible histories that are always under threat of erasure. This work is *cultural* in that negative associations of toxicity with racism are being transformed through histories of resilience and wellness. It is also *critical* in that it exposes how the creation of waste – and places to contain waste – is not natural or inevitable, but a historical and geographical process. Going forward, questions remain as to how the history that the W.C. E.A.T. seeks to

commemorate can be articulated to a wider public sphere. For instance, we have discussed the possibility of creating a community-owned archive that is located in Warren County. How might such an archive be incorporated into the school system, for example, and how will contradictory narratives come to play in these negotiations? As indicated in the thesis, the next phase of the W.C. E.A.T. includes plans for community testing of the site and surrounding areas. How might such a participatory science process enable or disable trust, given past experiences of residents?

In my own work, it remains to be seen how I might understand and work through residents' wariness of outsiders towards making my research relevant in some way locally. Given the 'dialogic' process of research, I am interested in exploring how this thesis, the collaborative film, and my work in Warren County thus far may be received by residents and impact my future work. Theoretically, I am hoping to expand on this thesis by exploring 'black geographies' further to understand how material and discursive resistances are linked in Warren County's situation. I am also interested in exploring feminist work on 'care', especially with regards to faith and religion among Warren County's residents.

In this thesis, I have attempted to understand and convey how hope for an alternate future is created through community efforts in Warren County. Warren County's example reminds us that hope is not a naïve belief, but an active and engaged process of transforming the material and cultural residues of the past to shape imaginaries for the future. Memory practices, such as Warren County's commemoration efforts, can thus be understood as a form of creative labor, a form

of work to envision and enact more mutual human-environment relations and to rebuild community devastated by the interwoven strands of toxicity and racism. In seeking to reclaim and 'own' their history through community-based archives and repertoires of memory, Warren County residents challenge us to reconsider capitalism as a historically and geographically contingent project. That is, large-scale and abstracted economic processes are always constructed through specific sites of violence and trajectories of harm. Communities healing from harm testify to the displaced costs of modern lifestyles, and embody a form of creative labor in daily life and commemoration that offer hopeful visions and practices for a more just future. To fully contend with the costs of our choices and lives would require us all to engage in the work of making meaning of our toxic legacies. As environmental and political crises abound in our world, there may come a time that *we must* all choose to do this work of contending with what has happened, in order to continue finding and creating a sense of value even as we produce waste.

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