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Toxic Disavowal

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By Chloe Ahmann

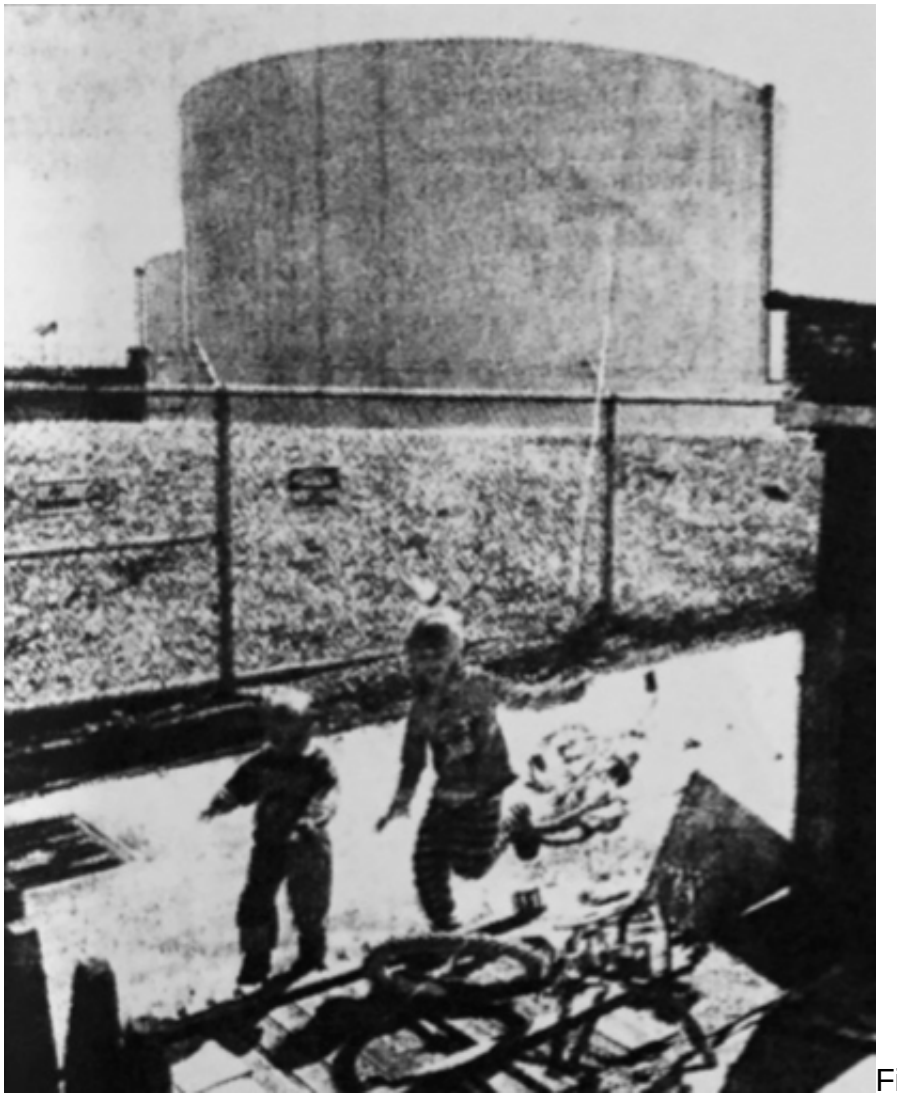

Figure 1. “Residents want out of industrial ghetto.” Photo by Lloyd Fox for the Baltimore Sun, 1998.

In April 1998, Jeanette succumbed to terminal cancer. She was only 56. Her obituary described her as a “high-energy grandmother with short, spiky hair” and a committed “environmental activist.”[1] Jeanette died fighting for a buyout of her home on Wagner’s Point, a waterfront neighborhood in industrial south Baltimore—and she was just one of three deaths on her sparsely populated block that year. A neighbor, John, told

his wife: “Put this in my obituary. I should be the last person to die [here].”[2]

Jeanette, like John, was fairly sure of what was killing her. She blamed the petrochemical industry (Figure 1). Her home was next to Texaco which was next to Amoco, Shell Oil, British Petroleum, and the Food Machinery and Chemical Corporation (FMC). Jeanette had seen chemical clouds float across the local sky. She’d watched workers dump waste into the water, surreptitiously. She’d even gone door to door, tallying up the cancer cases near her home. So there was an uneasy irony to the legacy she left behind. Jeanette died waging a buyout campaign that tactically ignored toxicity.

Anthropology has a vibrant literature focused on how toxic violences get mobilized in law, science, and medicine – while acknowledging this work is challenging.[3] Many chemicals are sloth, cumulative, easy to ignore; people often recognize their risks belatedly. These temporal challenges exist in a complex web with other obstacles: namely, chemicals are invisible, poorly understood, and subject to highly asymmetrical evidentiary regimes. That’s why even when one is certain – as Jeanette was – that chemicals are at the root of a problem, it’s nearly impossible to prove that toxics are the cause of a specific injury.

So what do people do when exposure’s slow violences (Nixon 2011) don’t elicit state intervention? How do they perform their vulnerability? While much of my work in Baltimore focuses on the creative ways that exposed communities work to mobilize longstanding toxic harms, things were different for Jeanette. In her neighborhood, residents chose to emphasize their *potential* demise in the event of an industrial catastrophe.

This essay asks after that choice. Specifically, it reflects on the tragic constellation of forces that made that choice seem like the only way forward for a group of sick people struggling for state attention at the end of the 20th century (Figure 2). In what follows, I consider how the decision to bracket health, and spotlight devastating hypotheticals instead, was a strategy co-produced (Jasanoff 2004) alongside the limits of toxicological knowledge, Cold War affects, legal constraints, and the blind spots built into urban land-use policy.

More importantly, however, I want to think about the ambivalent politics of toxic disavowal, particularly for a person like Jeanette. I say ambivalent because this is neither a story about how vulnerable people unwittingly bought into the conditions of their own subjection nor a story about how they contested those conditions. It is about how residents maneuvered to make claims in the late Cold War’s apocalyptic political sphere – where the *idea* of meeting with a spectacular end overwhelmed more ordinary

forms of harm. And lest we think we've abandoned this dynamic, consider the persistent political power of terror (Masco 2014), natural

Figure 2. Photo from the 1950s Point, from the US National Archives in Philadelphia.

disaster (Choi 2015), and epidemic disease (Lakoff 2007). In the academy, we know about the pitfalls of appealing to the spectacle. We know that it can pilfer attention from chronic violences. We know that toxic disavowal is old hat for industry. But so did residents of Wagner's Point. That they acknowledgedthese dynamics and set toxicity aside does not necessarily mean they were naïve. It means they deployed an analysis that worked. Here, I want to challenge those who might be primed to read this choice as an anti-politics to instead appreciate it as a studied response to the chilling knowledge that Jeanette's hypothetical death might carry more weight than her real one.[4]

"You can't see toxics, but"

I never met Jeanette. I never even saw Wagner's Point when it was peopled.[5] By the time I began studying south Baltimore, the homes had long since been demolished. *What did it look like*, I'd ask, *when people actually lived here?*

“It looked as though an angry god had taken some Monopoly pieces – the houses – and thrown them in the middle of this big industrial ring” (Figure 3).

That was how Rena remembered Wagner’s Point. Never sentimental, Rena was an environmental attorney who helped locals secure a buyout in the 1990s, and she had a habit of

Figure 3. Photo of Wagner’s Point by Michelle Gienow for the Baltimore City Paper, 1999.

putting things brusquely. In fact, though, Wagner’s Point was founded as a factory town when the factory in question was benign: it was a cannery. In the early 1900s, the cannery’s owner constructed three dozen homes outside his business and rented them to Polish workers for $1.50 a week.

People had lived in Wagner’s Point before it was a petrochemical zone, then, and they stayed as high-risk operations joined them through the 20th century. Many say they don’t remember when it happened. The plants had encroached at a sluggish pace—first one, then another, and another, until area homes were engulfed by the cold, white tanks of industry (compare Auyero and Swistun 2009, Beamish 2002). And even then, many of the industries’ effects remained ambiguous. Sometimes red dust would coat the whitewashed windowsills. Sometimes snow would turn rainbow, like asphalt tinged with gasoline. Sometimes women’s stockings developed mysterious holes.

And sometimes people would get sick, but they died slowly.

This sluggishness is one of the complications in claiming toxic injury: time passed makes it difficult to prove a specific exposure caused a specific disease.[6] But sluggishness was not the only problem. In the 1930s, Baltimore designated Wagner's Point as an "industrial zone"– a space unfit for human inhabitance – without evacuating local people. One effect of this designation was that it undercut potential legal claims.[7] It also made residents bureaucratically invisible to government authorities. Many of them stayed hidden there until December 1984, when a tank exploded at Essex Industrial Chemical Company.

Some claimed the explosion put up a "mushroom cloud, like the bomb at Hiroshima."[8] One resident, Minnie, told me the cloud offered visible "proof" of their endangerment. "I knew the air was bad," she said, "But that was the first time I'd actually *seen* it." Rena was a bit more crass: "You can't see toxics, but you can be very agitated about blowing up," she said to me. This time, she wasn't wrong. Unlike quotidian experiences of pollution, explosions were visceral, quick, and *clear*. And so the mushroom cloud marked an experiential distinction that would later be translated into strategy – a recognition that certain forms of harm could assert themselves as "proof" that life was unsafe here.

Making matters worse, the Essex explosion followed three other high-profile accidents in Baltimore's petrochemical ring. It also happened on the heels of Bhopal, and at a time when the general public was steeped in the existential insecurities of the Cold War period. Minnie's husband took stock of the plants around their home and called the situation "a time bomb waiting to happen." People "joked" that the "end times" were near. I've been told kids started rehearsing dark nursery rhymes. And folks teased that if another plant were to explode, then "boom, boom, boom" – the Point would get "blown off" the map of the city. Besides convincing locals that the time had come to fight for relocation, accidents had what Ulrich Beck calls an "enabling power" (1992:78). They lent the Point a hypervisibility (Kuchinskaya 2014). All of a sudden, in December 1984, the state was prepared to acknowledge that people lived in the shadow of industry.

Hazard plans

When residents suddenly appeared to state officials in 1984, they appeared within a very specific frame. They appeared as the *potential* victims of a chemical catastrophe.

While it was also true they suffered cancer rates that ranked among the highest in the nation, state agents did not step in to address existing health conditions.[9] They vowed to prepare for a hypothetical calamity. This form of intervention was not unique to Wagner's Point; hazard

planning suffused the United States throughout the Cold War period (Figure 4). The idea, to borrow from Andrew Lakoff (2007), was to prepare for the worst in order to prevent it – to enact dystopian futures as a planning strategy.

Among other things, this moment saw the development of Baltimore's Chemical Hazard Plan. Unlike other cogs in the city's bureaucracy, this initiative recognized people on the industrial periphery. Specifically, it recognized them as complicating variables in a highly regimented, cross-institutional, multi-step disaster scheme. And it stipulated they should receive instruction – in the form of drills and public service announcements (PSAs) – on responding to disasters rationally.

Brenda, another attorney on the Point, laughed as she recounted one such PSA. "It was so

Figure 4. "This is a test…" Article from the Maryland Gazette, 1990.

ludicrous," she said to me. The short film opened with a man and woman trimming hedges until an alarm sounded in the distance, then cut to a scene where they were joyfully enclosing their home in pre-cut plastic sheets. "No one had an emergency kit," Brenda protested. And, even if they had, she doubted they could cover all their windows. Most residents were elderly. The film was plagued by knowledge gaps. It proffered a vision of containment so idealized that it had no practical utility (see Clarke 1999). But it *did* reveal a sphere in which the government was prepared to sustain life in a space it once insisted was for factories, not people.

Of course, real accidents were more complex. In 1996, a tank blew up at FMC. The explosion sparked a two-alarm fire and injured six workers, but no alarm sounded. Managers had been out attending an emergency planning meeting.

And then, in 1997, a fire erupted at Amoco. Four trucks rushed to the scene. According to the hazard plans, locals were supposed to be evacuated. But fire trucks blocked the only road in and out of the community.

In previous years, residents eager to escape the Point had worked with Jeanette, Brenda, and Rena to publicize the health effects of living in a toxic atmosphere. It hadn't worked. But amid disasters in emergency response, a new opportunity made itself clear. Rather than staking claims for state recognition on their sick bodies – as in Adriana Petryna's (2002) "biological citizenship" – they could assert their vulnerability in the future tense. They were *at risk* of suffering catastrophe. Rena explained: It would have been "impossible" to "prove" locals had gradually contracted cancer from any given source. "But the idea that hazard plans were faulty was simpler. You could just look at them and see." Here, as it had with Minnie's exposure to the mushroom cloud, politicizing risk would hinge on visibility.

Accidents waiting to happen

Before moving further, it's worth acknowledging the weight of this decision. Residents like Jeanette had not stopped caring about the long-term effects of toxicity. They had not stopped wanting to "nail" the companies for illegal exposures. They had not suddenly become healthy. So this decision – to *appropriate* the state's fixation on catastrophic hypotheticals – was not a choice that residents made lightly. But it did reflect a remarkable awareness of the rhythms of environmental harm. And it showed that people were willing to abandon some rhythms and take up others to attract much-needed help. One interpretation of this choice could be that residents failed to mobilize themselves as toxic subjects. Another might be that, sometimes, the right analysis is whatever analysis works to get you out.

Once the core group settled on a plan, they got to work. Jeanette rallied her neighbors while Brenda and Rena charged seven companies on the Point with violating federal policy. They also started scrutinizing hazard plans at the state level. The first thing they learned was that Maryland's planning committee had not met in two years. On top of that, the state's plans didn't make sense. They stipulated residents should flee to a shoreline likely to be aflame in the event of an emergency. The team also identified infrastructural problems: some of the plants had back-up

generators for their lights, for example, but not to stabilize tank temperatures should a fire cut off electricity. In a press release penned from her death bed, Jeanette called these lapses “accidents waiting to happen.” She passed away in April 1998. There was another accident within three weeks.

That accident happened in May, when a chemical tank exploded on the Point. No alarms went off in the community.

Then, in October, a fireball erupted at Condea Vista. The explosion shattered windows and knocked down people in the plant’s immediate vicinity. Some residents, stuck watching the flames while awaiting official notice, pulled out camcorders to capture the scene. Others made contact with reporters, who played spectacular footage on the evening news narrated by locals on live telephone feed.

For a while after Jeanette’s death, the campaign had stalled as residents began demanding to be “paid for the wrongs done to them,” Brenda recalled. But officials did not embrace their arguments. Neither did industry executives, who expressed sympathy while “denying any responsibility for…health problems that residents’ anecdotal evidence suggest[ed we]re unusually severe.”[10] It was this very ambiguity that had convinced the group to pursue an accident-oriented strategy to begin with: it would not be subject to the minutiae of formal risk assessment. The way Rena put it, focusing on preparedness “allowed us to deal in very concrete terms“ with some “very explainable” problems. “The way to go with this was not cancer,” as she explained to me,

…and I felt vindicated when the head of the chemical trade association said on public television, “What we need is a health study.” She embraced it because she knew you could fiddle around with that kind of thing, change the assumptions, and make a big stink. “Well, is it one in a million or one in 50,000? Let’s measure all the reported releases.” That path would take forever and get us absolutely nothing.

Before long, Rena said, residents agreed to stay the course and focus on accidents – which “just kept happening.”

If the health risks of long-term exposure made for a tenuous case, then explosions unambiguously revealed life on the Point to be untenable. These accidents undercut the protective role the state had tried to inhabit after Bhopal, exposing inexcusable flaws in hazard planning. To be sure, this narrative did not blame anyone for residents’ slow deaths. It did not make a politics of toxicity. And some residents found that absolution hard to stomach. But focusing on hypothetical deaths did work. And by 1999, residents had signed away their rights to sue for health damages in

exchange for a modest buyout from government and industry.

Toxic disavowal

At the ceremonial demolition of Wagner's Point, a spokesman for the city announced that officials were "happy the area is clear…we no longer have to be concerned with environmental risk [here]."[11] On some counts, he was right: everyone could breathe easier knowing no one lived in the shadow of the plants. But his relief also revealed the partiality of residents' victory. By displacing issues of contamination from the realm of political debate and forwarding a limited definition of protection-as-emergency-preparedness, their contract failed to address problems of protracted exposure. And it released both government and industry from responsibility for the slower forms of violence that would plague sick residents long after they vacated the region.

One could very reasonably read this choice as a capitulation: to the politics of the spectacle, to the city's historic neglect of Wagner's Point, and to a diagnosis of the problem that absolves industry for harm done. Toxic disavowal is, in a sense, all of these things. But it also exceeds them. It seems to me we need to think more about what it means to choose *not* to be a toxic subject.[12] I am not yet certain what to make of this choice – or even whether it makes sense to call it a choice in the first place – but for scholars of toxic subjects committed to making those subjects legible, one lesson to draw from Wagner's Point seems clear: we should not be too quick to dismiss toxic disavowal as an anti-politics. Or, at least, we should acknowledge that such a diagnosis may be easier to make the farther one stands from ground zero.

Notes

[1] Pelton, Tom and Heather Dewar. 1998. "Jeanette Skrzecz, 56, Environmental Activist Who Fought Chemical Plants." *Baltimore Sun*, April 19.

[2] She did. See Mathews, Joe. 1999. "Wagner's Point Activist John Regiac dies at 79." *Baltimore Sun*, January 30.

[3] Here I'm thinking with Fortun 2001, Petryna 2002, Murphy 2006, Hecht 2012, Jain 2013, Shapiro 2015, Masco 2015, and Graeter 2017; also see Shapiro and Kirksey 2017.

[4] I have in mind Miriam Ticktin's use of "antipolitics" to describe a politics that does nothing to disrupt the established order (2011, 19–20).

[5] In this essay, I focus on Wagner's Point – but it was one of two

adjacent neighborhoods on Baltimore's industrial periphery that fought for a buyout during the late Cold War; the other was called Fairfield.

[6] Nixon 2011, Murphy 2013, Jain 2013, Masco 2015, Ahmann 2018.

[7] Residents could not effectively charge industry with impeding their "quiet enjoyment of private property" (the legal standard for nuisance claims) when they lived in an industrial zone.

[8] Twigg, Roger. 1984. "Chemical Blast Rocks Fairfield." *Baltimore Sun*, September 25.

[9] According to reports, local air encompassed carcinogens "at levels up to 30 times higher than the EPA considers safe," precipitating cancer rates "significantly higher than the citywide average, which is higher than the state, which is the highest in the nation." Dewar, Heather and Joe Mathews. 1998. "Residents Want Out of Industrial Ghetto." *Baltimore Sun*, April 9.

[10] Quoted in Diamond 1998, 174.

[11] Klein, Allison. 2001. "Final Two Residents Close the Book on Wagner's Point." *Baltimore Sun*, December 18.

[12] For adjacent analyses of toxic disavowal – in these cases, of people refusing to equate toxicity with harm alone – see Stawkowski 2016, Roberts 2017, Langwick 2018, and Graeter 2019.

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Chloe Ahmann *is a Harper-Schmidt Fellow at the University of Chicago and will soon join Cornell as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology. Her work considers what efforts to think and enact environmental futures look like from the sedimented space of late industrialism. Her current book-in-progress,* Forgotten in Anticipation*, sketches the variety of future orientations that have shaped south Baltimore over a 200-year period – from its 19th century life as a quarantine zone through its more recent past as the proposed site for "renewable" energy projects – querying how their historical and embodied residues are (and sometimes aren't) made political in the present. She is also beginning work on Baltimore's climate adaptation planning process.*

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