

CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION

The natural environment is in a perilous condition. Pollution, among a number of perturbations, wreaks havoc with our world. Palmerton--a company town in northeastern Pennsylvania--is one of numerous sites where we see the tangible effects of a despoiled earth. Decades of historic zinc smelting, and contemporary industrial operations, have discharged toxic metals into all environmental media: air, water and land. The surrounding mountain was killed, sediment in the adjoining creek is poisoned, domestic livestock are plagued with disease, and some children have metal burdens in their bodies. In 1982, the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) listed the Zinc Pile (Palmerton) on the roster of priority sites for decontamination. The community responded with outrage, claiming “stigmatization” and excessive meddling by the federal government.

Concepts of hegemony permeate this work. The research describes the power of an industrial discourse over the civil sphere through institutions of society such as the school administration, hospital, local government, and cultural organizations. It was seen that empowerment, through knowledge, of people who are positioned away from the center opened up the possibility that reflection and action could democratize the public sphere and lead to the transformation of unjust social situations. The study builds on transformative learning theory and liberation models of new awareness of self-hood, and the critical examination of the social contexts in which the learners are embedded, resulting in social transformation.

It was seen that the discourse of industrial culture saturated the terrain of Palmerton, including both the surfacescape of individuals’ thought and the landscape of their lives. It was a territory where association with the dominant industrial culture garners respect, admiration and cultural and material dividends. The axis of the culture revolved around the current zinc industry which acts as the hegemonic center with institutional proxies in the community, including the hospital, school administration, municipal government, and social institutions. The discourse is identified by its willful refusal to know “otherwise.”

In 1990, six women emerged to raise the first voices against what they described as a “community script” of social control. When the zinc company applied to the state government for a permit to store hazardous waste, the women expressed concern that the industry was amplify toxics already present from historical contamination. Their objectives were to encourage USEPA clean up and to ensure that current operations were abiding by environmental laws. Living in the milieu of an industrial *ethos*, they readily identified the privileged narrative space occupied by the zinc corporation which constructed a narrow range of options for environmental remediation.

Their struggle was: to generate, distribute and aid community consumption of new knowledges about environmental health and safety; to pry open a new interrogative- and narrative-space where they could ask questions and articulate fresh understandings of what was happening in the town. They wrestled with the means to expand the range of knowledges that would be open to serious consideration for making environmental decisions on clean up. Such goals lead to social conflict and contest for cultural authority. Taking up a position different than the industrial culture was an invitation into outlaw status. Making sense in ways not authorized by the community’s dominant discourse was a passage into power asymmetries with their attended consequences. An industrial alliance used numerous tools to marginalize the resistant community, including, threats of plant relocation (economic blackmail), gift given, corrosive speech acts, fear, silence, “othering” and pejorative representations, and other means.

For the women, who eventually organized into the emergent citizens group called the Palmerton Citizens for a Clean Environment (PCCE), the struggle for cultural action was a process of learning to transgress the industrial narrative. At the center of the process was domesticity. Mobilized by a desire to have a salubrious place in which to raise their families, they moved from independent, detached individuals to a collective of resistant public civil leaders working for social transformation. They negotiated power from the margins by numerous mechanisms such as asking menacing questions and engaging in radical pedagogy.

The process of gaining currency in the community moved through several non-linear stages: awareness that there were others who trafficked in ideas banned by the industrial culture;

making the acquaintance of like-minded resistant intellectuals; resolving to raise unsheltered questions as a means to excavate specific knowledges anathema to the dominant discourse; bonding in “sisterhood” and solidarity for support, information, education and resistant behavior to the hegemonic center; and resolving to redouble the breadth and depth of knowledges for public consumption. They moved from outreach to potential allies to solicitation of antagonists. They tested the validity of what they knew to be true, and analyzed and created new knowledges. Critical here was the moment that emerged as they banded together, resulting in a change in a sense of agency. The initial processes were carried out in borrowed public spaces such as the swimming pool; in private locations like the women’s kitchens, and at public meetings which they sponsored or that were convened by others--all shifting and overlapping sites of learning.

In an effort to ensure an interrogative and narrative location where they could ask questions, have a voice and be heard, the women abandoned their stories--fugitive knowledge (local wisdom constructed outside of the control and supervision of elite knowledge makers)--as a persuasive device. In its stead, they effectively appropriated official knowledge of privileged scientists and used it as oppositional knowledge in the context of the industrial culture. They evoked one type of authority (codified scientific knowledge) as an act of resistance against industrial forms of authority. The grassroots group illustrated that power politics of the elite group is not necessarily immutably bound to official knowledge. It is insufficient to say that dominant knowledge inherently transports specified politics and power arrangements.

Learning was carried out in personal learning projects, organizational learning (emphasizing the social practice of learning and collaborative learning), community development (exercised as a commitment to responsible civic life), and as outreach to decision makers at the federal local and municipal levels). Members reported developing multiple skills as a result of their environmental activism: leadership, writing, reading, speaking, critical thinking, analyzing, and problem solving. For most, the journey was from experiences, to questions and on to cultural action. Instrumental and textual knowledges were gained. Change was an affective, ethical, educational, cognitive and experiential phenomenon. PCCE was a learning network that

utilized multiple educational resources, and merged the competencies and gifts of local non-professionals with those of largely outside scientific (government) specialists.

In the absence of government fulfilling their responsibilities, PCCE became the new civil authority--as othered outsiders to the dominant narrative, they functioned like a government in cultural exile. They built a community of hope in a community at risk based on ethical considerations. The women of PCCE chose to enter the formal decision-making process that would determine how the “natural landscape” (e.g. the desolate mountain) and the “constructed landscape” (e.g. public parks and private lawns and gardens) would be reconstructed, both on the surfacescape of the community’s imagination and the actual topography of the earth. They placed faith in ordinary people together with a sense of personal and community pride to evoke transformation of their neighborhoods. Ethics saturated their rationale for assigning responsibility to the industry; taking up a pedagogy of hope; feelings of courage; and mobilizing a desire for an environmentally sound future. The women of Palmerton positioned hope in the forward march of those who hold history in their hands with a sense of the overwhelming capabilities inherent in the still-open future.

Radical environmental democracy and the making of environmental citizenship meant freedom of choices from an impressive panoply of options, based on the ability of folks to make decisions about the events that impacted their daily lives. For most of the PCCE core members, education for freedom was only valuable when it accompanied action for freedom.

Asking for a fuller examination of the environmental situation, they created a sphere where understandings that competed with those of the industrial alliance could be voiced and examined, pushing the borders of what counted as authentic and true. Where once people were afraid to defy the industrial culture’s narrative, seven years after the emergence of the group of resistant intellectual women, 351 homes were tested for metal toxics; one-hundred forty nine homes and yards were decontaminated, and there was fuller community involvement for the search for local pollution problems. Sometime in the future, USEPA will issue its final clean up plan. It will then be seen whether the efforts of the grassroots group to expand the ranges of knowledge open to serious consideration were consequential.

In the end, PCCE is about critical eco-literacy “in progress” at the frontier of participatory democracy. For the women of PCCE, weaving together past history, science, ethics, and personal experience produced a blueprint for social transformation and a future of promise. Nothing else would suffice.