

INTRODUCTION

“...there’s an awfully lot of zinc waste concentrated in the four inches of the soil...root growth is stunted and grass dies....At the root of the problem is soil contamination by [zinc and other heavy metal] emissions....”

*(Machalaba, “The Grass is greener on the other side of the fence? Nope!”
The Wall Street Journal, Monday, 1977, April 18, front page)*

This study of a heavy metal contaminated community, Palmerton, Pennsylvania is more than about growing grass. It is about a citizen’s group, founded by six women, helping to grow a grassroots movement in an industry-controlled town in Appalachia. “Growing Grassroots” is the story of the struggle of an emergent citizen’s group (voluntary community organization), the Palmerton Citizen’s for a Clean Environment (PCCE) to breach the borders of what was sayable--and thus knowable--in a community dominated by a normative industrial discourse. It explores PCCE’s contest to introduce new ways of seeing “otherwise” into the community, of searching for new avenues of expression and voice, and alternative patterns of “sense-making.” In the context of the federal Environmental Protection Agency’s (USEPA) newly emerging “community-based” environmental protection paradigm, the stakes were high for achieving a community leadership position as a cultural authority. The emergence of PCCE centered on the contest to modify the political and social rules that governed the lives in Palmerton. It was, and remains, a struggle for access to decision makers, especially but not exclusively related to processes that will affect clean up. This has enormous economic ramifications since the federal Superfund legislation allows USEPA to collect remuneration for expenses incurred from potentially responsible parties (PRPs) after decontamination; the zinc industries that are at the hegemonic center of an industrial discourse in the town, are two of the several PRPs. The material in this study is organized into the major sections described below.

Chapter 1, “Locating Self: The Researcher As A Border Crosser” is my journey to Palmerton, positioning myself in the contest. It looks at the researcher as a border-crosser, an activist, and environmental educator. It recounts my relationship to the (mostly) women who are resistant intellectuals, going against the community grain.

Chapter 2, “Zinc: Evoking Contested Notions” sets the stage for understanding the environmental problems in Palmerton, Pennsylvania. In Chapter 2, I look at residents’ struggles to “make-sense” of the contamination they experience daily, and the endeavor of six women in 1990 to construct meaning in a way different than the dominant group in the community--a community embedded in an industrial history and culture. It is about mapping environmental fatigue and exploring sense-making in ways “otherwise,” from nearly a century of industry control.

“Literature Review and Some Theoretical and Methodological Reflections” is Chapter 3. It explores the relevant literature on neighborhoods in environmental crises from contamination, adult education for liberation and social transformation, and the appropriateness of using ethnographic methodology for excavating environmental dynamics in communities-at-environmental-risk.

Chapters 4, “Life In The Industrial Culture: The Willful Refusal To Know,” consists of three key parts focusing on the dominant cultural producers in the community. The first section answers the question, “*What* are the characteristics of the central (public) constructed reality in the industrial culture of Palmerton?” This section subtitled “Constructing the ‘Central Reality’ and Learning to Comply,” is about the discourse and practices of the hegemonic center.

The next section, “Surrogates on the Landscape: Industrial Presence by Proxy” poses the question, “*Who* are the builders of the community script to which so many of the resisting cultural workers in the study referred?” It investigates the various cultural players, briefly introduced in Chapter 2, in considerably greater detail. Historically the zinc industry has been--

and remains--at the hegemonic center. There is a powerful attempt by them to construct meaning and a narrative space in a complex relationship with an alliance comprised of functional surrogates, including the school district, local government, community hospital, an industry-operated (educational) organization called the Zinc Environmental Information Center (ZEIC), the industry-funded Palmerton Environmental Task Force (PETF), and other social institutions and organizations. This cabal (and its orb of influence) speaks from a privileged narrative sphere within the community. Association with the hegemonic center confers respect, esteem, admiration, and both cultural- and material-capital. The industrial alliance attempts to direct life in the community, engages in social control, and generally makes efforts to (re)inscribe community signifiers with industrial meaning(s). Residents take up the industrial curriculum in a process of learning to comply with the industrial narrative; they willfully refuse to know otherwise. The alliance is a sphere of authorization (prescribing what is real, true, natural, and legitimate) that is itself authorized in a tautological process of control and power.

The final section that makes up the trilogy of Chapter 4, “The Derivation of Authority,” looks at the question “*How* is power generated, maintained, and re-established by the makers of the dominant narrative, or central reality?” Some of the mechanisms involved economic black mail, gift giving (here I explore benevolence as a political act and gifts as social exchange), assembling dangerous memory, scapegoating, cultural representation (othering), corrosive speech acts, exploiting fear, the architecture of silence, quiescence, fostering neutrality, states of helplessness and dependency, and loyalty (the ties that bind).

Chapter 5, “The Palmerton Citizens for a Clean Environment: Negotiating Power from the Margins” is an inceptive analysis of the data. It is presented in two sections; the first, “Resistant Grassroots ‘Girls’ Uncover the Possibility of Public Articulation,” centers on resistance--and barriers to resistance--to the hegemonic center. In this section, I focus on factors related to the emergence and growth of the grassroots movement in the community. I explore the roles of motherhood and domestic life as a source of political action for the women-founders and current members, the place of home, hearth, lawns, and gardens, positioning them

as sites of struggle and resistance to the dominant discourse. They are fluid and overlapping sites of learning and of contest. Additionally, I excavate the significance(s) of the self-organized, action-oriented collective's gaining a voice, speaking out, empowering speech acts, inhabiting and mediating the space of stereotypes, the role of fugitive and official knowledges, understanding and forgiveness, the meanings of experience, and "staying playful" as an approach to hope and possibility.

The last section of Chapter 5, "Education Born in Political Struggle: Unlearning and Relearning," probes the role of "asking menacing questions," networking, chaining (a term used by grassroots members to describe an educational process), resistance, transgression, and other acts against the dominant community script. PCCE's educational strategy was to construct a narrative dais from which to give voice to their hopes; to provide another way of seeing the world; to allow citizens to chose among alternative knowledges, with the prospect of mobilizing common folks for social change; and to add to the pool of knowledges open for earnest consideration by environmental decision makers.

Chapter 6, "Being More About Spiritual Things Than Environmental Ones," is a further analysis of the consequences of struggling to grow grassroots. It is divided into two parts. The first, "A Community-at-Risk; A Community-at-Promise," explores PCCE's pedagogy of promise within a community-at-risk. I develop the argument that the women of PCCE have replaced government--federal, state, and local--as a new civil authority in the community in light of the traditional civil authority's inability or unwillingness to protect the environment. This chapter explores decision making, based on ethical, moral and spiritual values, as a social and political act; it delineates the modest triumphs from growing grassroots in Palmerton. It describes a pedagogy of caring, as well as the politics of caring. The chapter reports PCCE's self-description as a new branch on the evolving tree of environmental activism.

The second section, titled "PCCE's Legacy to Environmental Reform and Environmental Democracy," unpacks the group's quest for environmental justice and equity. It

outlines the making of environmental citizens and explores the significance of critical ecoliteracy.

The remaining Chapters constitute structural components of the dissertation, including the “Conclusions” that I draw from this study, “References” cited and the “Appendices” to ancillary material.