



Intimacies of global toxins: Exposure & resistance in ‘Chemical Valley’



Jen Bagelman Lecturer in Human Geography ^{a, *}, Sarah Marie Wiebe Postdoctoral Fellow ^b

^a University of Exeter, United Kingdom

^b University of British Columbia, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the geopolitics of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation's reserve, situated in a toxic petrochemical complex known as Canada's ‘Chemical Valley.’ While this reserve holds the perilous title of worst air-pollution in the country, research exploring the profound impacts that this toxic environment has on Indigenous communities remains limited and tends to resort to simplistic framings. In this paper we suggest that Michel Foucault's concept of the ‘heterotopia’ is a helpful prism through which to view Aamjiwnaang in more complex, political terms. We also suggest, however, that this prism has a limited scope when it comes to exposing *intimate* experiences of global toxins. Drawing on a feminist geopolitics, we seek to stretch Foucault's heterotopic approach in order to show how the reserve is intimately colonized and contaminated by Canada's chemical production. Vivaly, our approach gleans insight into the everyday ways that Aamjiwnaang is governed by and also disrupts colonial configurations. Moreover, our paper illuminates how a feminist heterotopic approach can re-orient research towards a deepened understanding of Indigenous-led modes of environmental justice.

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Introduction

The Aamjiwnaang First Nation's reserve is home to Canada's ‘Chemical Valley,’ a toxic petrochemical complex. With over 60 refiners and chemical plants, 40% of Canada's chemical industry can be found here (Ecojustice, 2007). Situated in Sarnia, a small border town located between the Province of Ontario and the State of Michigan, Aamjiwnaang is often framed in dualistic terms: on the one hand as a rural periphery, and on the other, a ‘noxious megalopolis’ which is the very center of chemical production (McGuire, 2012). Due to high levels of toxicity, however, this chemical megalopolis is certainly not celebrated alongside other so-called ‘aspirational’ Canadian megacities like Vancouver or Toronto (McCann, 2013). Instead, ranked as having the worst air-pollution in the country, Aamjiwnaang tends to be relegated to the status of spectacular victim (World Health Organization, 2011). Troublingly, while rendered highly spectacular, the intimate and everyday affects of toxic exposure are largely invisibilized. Moreover, the ways in which Indigenous women are creatively responding to the proliferation of toxic landscapes tends to be

overshadowed by stories of suffering. In this paper we gesture at how this limited framing is particularly evident in the oft-cited 2007 Ecojustice Report, *Exposing Canada's Chemical Valley: An Investigation of Cumulative Air Pollution Emissions in the Sarnia, Ontario Area* (See Fig. 1).

This paper asserts that such strategic visibilities that render Aamjiwnaang as periphery/center, invisible/spectacular are both misleading and dangerous. Such framings at once occlude the dynamic colonial geopolitical processes that subject Aamjiwnaang to toxicity while obscuring the agency of Indigenous peoples responding to this exposure. This reductionist approach, we argue, is symptomatic of a wider problematic whereby Indigenous communities in Canada are both over-exposed to toxicity and spectacular media attention yet invisibilized in terms of their experience of and resistance to this exposure.

In this paper we hope to cast Aamjiwnaang in a different light. We seek to challenge dangerously limited dualistic framings of this reserve in order to draw attention to layered processes through which Aamjiwnaang is actively produced as toxic, and the creative solidarity movements that resist this production. Instead of viewing the reserve through a dyadic lens we examine Aamjiwnaang through a six-sided heterotopic prism, as introduced by Michel Foucault in *Des Espaces Autres*. We suggest that this approach is particularly helpful in exposing the subterranean and temporal aspects of power that govern everyday life in

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: bagelman@uvic.ca, J.Bagelman@exeter.ac.uk (J. Bagelman), swiebe@uvic.ca (S.M. Wiebe).



Fig. 1. Vanessa Gray, a protester from Aamjiwnaang, demonstrating outside an oil industry conference: photo credit, Patrick McGuire.

Aamjiwnaang.

Though Foucault's heterotopic approach helps to expose certain power relations, we suggest that extending this analytical tool is necessary to glean insight into the *lived* dimensions of these relations. Foucault's heterotopic theory, we argue, maintains an abstract distance from the actual people, places and contexts that are purportedly of concern. In keeping with Foucault's call to expand his theory-toolbox we propose to make his heterotopic approach do more *feeling work*. Here we draw on the scholarship by feminist geographers, particularly Rachel Pain and her notion of "everyday terror," in an effort to develop a more intimate, embodied and emotional approach (2014a). While this literature is useful to developing a more fulsome account of the lived impacts of toxic exposure, in order to understand how Aamjiwnaang is governed but also disrupt colonial configurations we suggest that we need to explicitly learn from, and with, Indigenous feminist work. As a step in this direction, we particularly engage the work of Anishinabek poet and activist-academic Leanne Simpson, and particularly her theorizations on an anticolonial "politics of love" (2013). We also seek to learn from the acts of resistance in Aamjiwnaang articulated and enacted by Indigenous activists of the Idle No More Movement – a grassroots movement for Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous rights and respect for treaties (<http://www.idlenomore.ca/>).

In this paper we first introduce and situate Aamjiwnaang and gesture at the limited ways in which toxic exposure in this region has been framed. Second, we offer a reading of Aamjiwnaang through Foucault's heterotopic prism, drawing on feminist geographic and Indigenous literature to add a more intimate, embodied and affective angle through which to understand the impacts of global toxins. Finally, we conclude by turning attention towards some of the Indigenous women in Aamjiwnaang who are taking a leadership role in politicizing toxic exposure through embodied acts of resistance. In particular we highlight three tactics

¹ When referring to 'environmental justice' we draw on Anishinabek activist-academic Leanne Simpson's understanding that implies a process of resistance and relationship building. Environmental justice resists extraction which she identifies as 'taking ... [and] stealing – it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment' (2012). Environmental justice is also an act of building 'deep reciprocity. It's respect, it's relationship, it's responsibility' (Ibid). Simpson insists that this is not a 'new' movement; rather she situates environmental justice within a 400-year long history of caretaking and reciprocity. A form of politics animated by 'sadness and trauma' associated with the impacts of extraction, yet also rooted in love.

of resistance: 1) protesting pipelines; 2) community 'body-mapping' and; 3) 'toxic-tours.' We suggest that these embodied enactments point to ongoing modes of environmental justice that are oriented towards solidarity and political change.¹

Aamjiwnaang: 'The place at the spawning stream – where the water flows spiritually like a braid'

Within the polluted heart of Canada's Chemical Valley sits an Indigenous reserve, home to the Aamjiwnaang First Nation. Aamjiwnaang is an Ojibwa word meaning "at the spawning stream – where the water flows spiritually like a braid" – an important gathering place that had been used by First Nations for millennia (Aamjiwnaang First Nation, 2016). Approximately 850 Anishinabek people call this place home. Stretching for over 30 km along the St. Clair River from the southern tip of Lake Huron to the Village of Sombra, this reserve is also home to the largest concentration of petroleum and chemical industry sites in Canada (Ford, 2000) (See Fig. 2).

Settler-industrial extraction in these territories began in the mid 19th century. In 1858, oil was first discovered in this region, and one of the oldest North American oil fields led to the establishment of a large concentration of oil wells, and later Chemical Valley. From the discovery of gum beds in the Enniskillen Township in 1851, to the birth of the Chemical Valley in the 1940s, the history of this region reveals the power of industry in the area (Ford, 2000). By 1942, the Polymer Corporation began to produce synthetic rubber in order to support the war economy. Consequently, this industrial "war born infant" grew into "a mature and vibrant adult" (Ford, 2000).

This extraction industry continues to operate, surrounding the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve. In 2005, an Indigenous mother, activist and citizen of the Band and former Council member, Ada Lockridge, teamed up with researchers and discovered that for every two female births in her community, only one male was being born (Mackenzie, Keith, & Lockridge, 2005). This study caused alarm within the community and resonated throughout municipal, provincial and federal levels of government. Though the study could not conclusively attribute the community's toxic exposure to



Fig. 2. Aamjiwnaang reservation. Google Maps.

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