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***White Politics, Black Lives, and the Cost of Being Green:
Environmental Racism in Emelle, Alabama****

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ABSTRACT

In the 1970s, Emelle, Alabama, welcomed the establishment of a new corporation and the promise of new economic opportunities. The small settlement, almost exclusively African American (94%) and in poverty (67%), had been selected by Waste Management, Inc., after lobbying by Governor George Wallace to create the largest hazardous waste landfill in the United States. When a state policy change significantly increased costs, production slowed, jobs dissipated (from 430 to 250), and destitution returned. At the same time, other problems began to surface, including water contamination and increasing rates of childhood cancers, attributable to the toxic seepage. The dump still operates, but it processes 85% fewer tons of toxic waste, and the city's population had dwindled to fewer than 60 people by 2010. The state's decision to prioritize economic health over individual and environmental health incited a temporary economic boom but left long-term environmental consequences. While the White politicians have found other revenue sources and the businesses dumping toxic waste use other sites, Emelle and its people are no better economically and are far worse in terms of their environment and health. This paper explores the toxic waste dump by analyzing the dichotomies of White power/Black lives and economic health/environmental health amid the larger conversation of environmental racism.

KEY WORDS Environment; Racism; American South; State Policy; Alabama

In the late 1970s, the struggling town of Emelle, Alabama, welcomed the establishment of a new corporation and the promise of new economic opportunities. The city, located in Sumter County, lies in the heart of Alabama's Black Belt, a band that spans the south-central part of the state (Rogers et al. 1994; Tullos 2004). Like many communities in the region, Emelle's economy was rooted in agriculture, producing cotton as its primary crop. The area became home to numerous plantations as early developers took advantage of the

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fertile, rich soil and the ubiquitous slave labor performing the painstaking process of harvesting small cotton blossoms (Flynt 2004:320).

After the Civil War and Reconstruction, the fertile soil remained but the free labor that made the agricultural production of crops such as cotton economically feasible was no longer legal. Though slavery was abolished, many of the freed slaves and their progeny remained in the area, working as tenant farmers for the former plantation owners, earning a living that was little more than they had as slaves. After the Industrial Revolution and the Great Migration, Emelle remained a small unincorporated community composed almost entirely of African American residents and having a low cumulative socioeconomic status (SES). The combination of relatively few economic opportunities and low access to higher education perpetuated in Sumter County throughout generations.

The results of these challenges—depressed economic opportunity and education resources—were revealed in the city's population, which is mostly African American (80%) with a higher-than-average poverty rate. The median household income for Emelle in 2020 was \$17,126, still far below the national average of \$67,521 (Shrider et al. 2021). An estimated 31.6% of residents in Sumter County live below the poverty line (which is well over double the national rate of 12.6%), with nearly half of the county's children living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2021).

In addition to being the second poorest county in the state and the tenth poorest in the nation, Sumter is very rural in terms of population density and location. The closest metropolitan area in the state is Tuscaloosa, an hour northwest from Emelle. Though Sumter County's population in 2020 was 12,482 (the eighth consecutive decade for population loss), only 66 of the county residents lived within the 0.2 square miles of Emelle's incorporation limit. Emelle had land, but not wealth, and both the city and larger county population had residents who had limited economic mobility. The community had long ago experienced prosperity in the Antebellum Period, but the wealth was divided on the basis of race; for African American residents, earning even a fair living wage seemed like an elusive dream. Just over a century after the abolition of slavery, the community of Emelle found itself at a crossroads.

In the late 1970s, the community was selected by Waste Management, Inc., after extensive lobbying efforts by then-governor George Wallace and the state legislature to create a toxic landfill that would become the largest hazardous waste landfill in the US. Emelle was stricken with poverty but boasted expansive and cheap land, making it a desirable candidate for development. The promise of economic growth and more opportunities seemed to invigorate residents, many of whom remained optimistic about the plant's construction despite budding concerns from external groups that the environmental impact could have permanent, negative, and long-standing repercussions for its inhabitants. Even as more citizens became aware of the potential shortcomings, the outcry was limited and relatively easily ignored by both the government and the media.

The landfill was constructed and began employing local residents by the early 1980s, leading to an increase in employment and household income for the area. The economic growth was welcomed but came at a substantial cost. While the landfill temporarily stimulated the economy, it caused other major issues, including some with

environmental impact. A geologist confirmed that the contaminated water underground was spreading, which could contribute to toxic seepage (Smith 1991).

Evaluating the events at Emelle thirty years later reveals the problematic privilege inherent in White politics. Those with power, overwhelmingly White men in both the state legislature and executive branch as well as in the private firms, determined the value of Black lives and boldly misrepresented economic opportunity while disregarding environmental and health impacts. It was a messy entanglement, fueled largely by a prioritization of economic health over individual or environmental health. Many of the financial advantages benefited those miles away from the dump site while the seeping sewage spoiled the water for nearby residents otherwise unrelated to the venture. This paper explores the problems of Emelle by analyzing environmental racism and the dichotomies of White power/Black lives and economic health/environmental health.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issues at Emelle involve environmental justice, racism and classism, economic opportunity, and the dynamics of federalism. The first two subjects can be combined as environmental racism, which addresses both the environmental placement of toxic waste facilities and the racial and class-based biases that can be involved in the decisions of the placement of such plants. The areas of environmental impact and economic opportunity are also interrelated, as political discourse pits the two social goals in irrevocable conflict, requiring one to be prioritized over the other. Finally, the dynamics of federalism can be important in toxic waste disposal and are especially relevant to the situation at Emelle, particularly when the private corporation charged that the state was intervening in a federal domain of interstate commerce when the state levied different charges for dumping based on the origins of the waste. The literature in each of these subfields is thus critical for review.

Though the literature on environmental racism spans a few decades, much of the research was conducted in the 1980s and 1990s. *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*, a study conducted by the United Church of Christ, first explicitly identified the relationship between environmental hazards and race/ethnicity (United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice 1987; Bullard et al. 2007). In particular, the study found that a community's racial composition was the single best determining factor in where hazardous facilities were located, "exposing the gross disregard for people of color as toxic waste landfills were sited in their communities throughout the nation" (Bullard et al. 2007:7). Subsequent research elaborated on this connection, yielding findings that were consistent and systemic. Lee (1992) revisited the results of *Toxic Wastes and Race* five years after its publication and confirmed that race and income/SES were still important attributes in communities with these types of facilities. Though no community warmly welcomes the development of toxic waste dumps in its area without discussion, environmental racism is rooted in the disproportionate burden experienced by minorities from environmental hazards.

Environmental racism, as defined by former NAACP leader Benjamin Chavis, is "the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic waste facilities and the

official sanctioning of life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in people of color communities” (Fisher 1995:289). As a response, environmental justice is the concept that “embraces the principle that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations” (Bullard 1996:493). What previous studies have determined, however, is that the equal protection of laws and regulations and from environmental hazards is hardly equal. Dumping facilities for hazardous materials are consistently located in areas where the communities are less affluent, less traditionally politically organized, and non-White.

Studies analyzing the placement of toxic waste sites have uncovered a prejudicial pattern: Communities where hazardous waste disposal facilities are located also share demographic characteristics such as social class and racial/ethnic similarities (Bryant and Mohai 1992; Bullard and Wright 1990). Maher (1989, 1998) notes a strong relationship between a community’s proportion of racial/ethnic minorities and the construction of toxic waste sites, noting that communities with hazardous waste sites are more likely to be Hispanic American or African American. Social class is also influential in the placement of environmental hazards, as the affluence of the community and the proximity to the dumping ground are directly related (Mennis 2002; Pulido 2000). Additionally, qualities of the larger community itself are related to the placement of hazardous waste sites, including less costly land (Beckenbach 1989; Kapp 1970), tax structures dependent on commercial and industrial production (Krieg 1998), and view of the construction as an opportunity for growth while minimizing ecological destruction (Logan and Molotch 1987; Schnaiberg and Gould 2000).

The promise of economic prosperity through job opportunities can serve as a justification for placement and as an enticing incentive for the community. The difference between the two is rooted in the decision-making process, whether a few elites or a larger outside force (i.e., the state) decides the placement (in which jobs are justification) or whether the community members through popular vote agree to the decision (in which it becomes an incentive). Better-organized communities are more likely to garner public attention of hazardous waste sites (Daley 2007) and more likely to receive EPA Superfund compensation (Hird 1993). This would be relevant to the size of the community as well as its density, for the value that those qualities contribute in organizing.

O’Brien, Clarke, and Kamieniecki (1984) argue that open-system decision-making is imperative in maintaining democratic values. This method is not as prevalent in practice, however. Local government control has decreased as the federal government has become more active in environmental regulation, working either in conjunction with the state (Welborn 1988) or in opposition (Rabe 1988), depending on the state’s interests. Analyzing a series of Supreme Court cases involving environmental regulation and interstate responsibility, O’Leary determines that “it would make sense to give state and local governments greater power and discretion concerning what to do with waste both generated within their jurisdictions and brought in from other jurisdictions” (O’Leary 1997). In addition, the power of local government to make such decisions needs to be considered. Not all jurisdictions have local governments, particularly depending on their size, and not all states allow for autonomous “home rule,” in which local authorities have the right to make policy decisions such as these for their communities. Alabama, rather infamously,

offers little home rule, as expressly outlined in its 1901 state constitution; the result yielded to many of the 977 amendments made to the document. The constitution was expressly constructed that way to remove power from the African American majorities (as well as poor Whites) in communities and place it in the hands of the wealthier White legislators in Montgomery (Stewart 2001:296–97).

Recently, Spears (2014) published *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American Town*, an account similar to that of Emelle, chronicling environmental racism, government involvement, and economic opportunity. Anniston, like Emelle, is a community located in Alabama with a large African American population. The Monsanto corporation, which produced toxic chemicals in the city for almost a century, also polluted the water reserves for nearly as long. The overwhelmingly African American and more economically disadvantaged community suffered from innumerable health issues, many fatal, as a result. Spears's study meticulously assesses the complicated dynamics of race, politics, economic growth, and environmental risk and serves as an inspiration for further research in the field.

This account of Emelle diverges in a few key ways, however. First, the issues in Anniston with the Monsanto plant have transpired since the 1920s, and thus the long-term health impacts are available for witness. Construction for the Emelle plant did not begin until 1978, and the plant is thus much newer, with only the shorter-term effects presently visible. Second, the Anniston Monsanto plant worked in cooperation with the federal government, providing products used by the military. The Emelle dump was controlled by state and federal government in terms of regulations but served private industry, which hauled its toxic waste, often across state lines, to the site for disposal. Finally, the locations of both sites, while generally less affluent and predominantly African American, diverge in terms of population density; Anniston is a larger suburban area adjacent to Birmingham (with 33,689 in 1960 during the height of production), whereas Emelle is much smaller (with only 66 residents in the 2020 census and in a county half that size during the development of the dump) and is located in the rural Black Belt of the state (U.S. Census Bureau 1960:13, 1980:17). It is worth noting, however, that the state government's failed response loomed over the community in the decade before the Emelle dump was constructed, "miserably and repeatedly" in Spears's assessment (2014:12).

WHITE POLITICS

To understand the impact that the facility had on the community, it is imperative to understand the limited role that the community played in its construction. In 1977, a Tennessee-based group called Resource Industries of Alabama, Inc., purchased a number of tracts of land in Emelle, then an unincorporated community in Sumter County, and granted a state permit for dumping hazardous materials ("Wallace's Son-in-Law Sold Dump" 1983). Within that group were Mark Gregory and James Parsons. Gregory was an engineer from Memphis, Tennessee, employed by Chemical Waste. Parsons was from Alabama, the husband of Governor George Wallace's eldest daughter, Bobbi Jo. The governor, best known for his ardent stand at the schoolhouse door in opposition to integration, served four terms as governor, completing his third during the development of

the Emelle dump (Carter 2000). Because the meetings required to obtain a permit with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management involved only two individuals, there was no public hearing. Likewise, the state issued the permit under its own waste disposal laws, making the process easy if not transparent.

Additional tracts were added before the now-300-acre lot was sold a year later for over \$1 million to Chemical Waste Management (CWM), a subsidiary of Waste Management, Inc. (“Hazardous Waste Dump Haunts Wallace, Son-in-Law” 1985). Chemical Waste Management deals exclusively with the disposal of toxic chemicals, which are far more hazardous and require more safety precautions and procedures than does regular garbage removal. During the sale, Resource Industries of Alabama filed for and was granted a federal permit under the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) that was necessary for Chemical Waste Management’s operation. The TSCA had been passed just one year prior to the original sale and provided the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with proper oversight to “regulate and screen all chemicals produced or imported into the United States to prevent unreasonable risks to the health and the environment” (“Summary of the Toxic Substances Control Act” 2016).

After the sale, two of the main founding partners received 24% interest each on their shares and Parsons earned 28% on his. It was a remarkable investment that paid off richly for the men. Gregory went on to be promoted to vice president of the Southeast region of Chemical Waste Management, and Parsons continued to receive payments from the company despite ending his involvement (“Waste Company Exec Can’t Avoid Harsh Spotlight” 1984). The television show *60 Minutes* ran a segment on a pending investigation into ethics violations in December 1985, highlighting concerns on a national stage through its platform. Governor George Wallace refused to comment on either his son-in-law’s involvement or the role of his third wife, who owned \$15,000 in stock in Waste Management, Inc. (“Hazardous Waste Dump Haunts Wallace, Son-in-Law” 1985).

BLACK BODIES

Local community leaders were conflicted in their response to the site. Some voiced their support. The mayor of Livingston (the county seat of Sumter, just 15 miles south of Emelle), Thomas Tartt III, acknowledged the risk but compared it to the same prospective danger as trucks driving on the adjacent highway with gasoline (Williams 1989). James Shubert, a recruiter on the Sumter County Industry Development Board, praised the landfill’s economic contributions, lauding that “from an economic standpoint, this county would be in a terrible position without the economic contributions made by Chemical Waste Management.” Indeed, Sumter County has consistently trailed behind the national average in most metrics of economic health and individual affluence, but the development of the dump did not suddenly reverse the fate of history. Joe Stegall, the mayor of York, a town 15 miles southeast of Emelle, rebuffed environmental protests, remarking that “most people in Sumter County have a ‘live and let live’ attitude. We’re not environmentally astute people” (Williams 1989). Stegall’s words were hardly an endorsement but revealed an honest illustration of what the community knew and understood.

Others were more reluctant. "I don't know what Chem Waste is all about," State Representative Lucious Black admitted candidly (Williams 1989). "They tell me it's to help the environment. Seems to me Emelle is part of the environment. I don't know if those chemicals might not blow up in the next 10 years. I don't know if the ground water might not be poisoned to the point a person couldn't dig a well in a few years. These are the kinds of things you have to think about." In response to the limited growth experienced solely from the Emelle plant, Linda Campbell, a resident of Livingston, poignantly remarked that "the only thing that attracts hazardous waste is hazardous waste" (Williams 1989).

Protests over the dump began shortly after the construction was announced, but it was not until major environmental infractions occurred that Greenpeace and the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice became involved with larger demonstrations ("Church Unit Plans to Protest Toxic Waste" 1984). A majority of the protestors were not residents of the area but members of larger organizations opposed to the environmental, racial, or class-based biases of the plant. One of the few citizens in the community to actively protest the site, Kaye Kiker, founded Alabamians for a Clean Environment, though the organization's greatest success was in a joint demonstration with Greenpeace during which protestors chained themselves to fences before eventually being removed and arrested by the sheriff ("Dump Protestors Claim 'Moral Victory' " 1987).

As the community was so small (with fewer than 70 people in the incorporation of Emelle and fewer than 16,000 in the county), few organized and recognized protests from within the community occurred. The mayor of Emelle, James Dailey, claimed, "The only problem I've heard from people is the odor problem and the traffic from large trucks going to the plant" (Pace 1983). Conversations about environmental impact or health repercussions seemed to be more peripheral in one-off remarks compared to the larger promises of wealth in economic prosperity and opportunity for the area. The development was met with mixed reactions, but the decision was not directly democratic, either. Residents had no direct vote on the decision to develop the land, even after Amendment 250 of the Alabama Constitution was ratified in 1965 to provide Sumter County with the ability "to purchase, construct, lease, or otherwise acquire real property" ("Amendment 250" 1965; "State of Alabama: A Proclamation by the Governor" 1965).

Since its construction, the Emelle plant has been plagued with problems. The politics involving the expedited route through which it was approved may have been the harbinger of what was to come. Within years of the plant beginning operations, environmental issues began to spring up as well. Several charges of environmental hazards were revealed: 800,000 gallons of carcinogenic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) were stored at Emelle past the disposal date specified in the EPA permit. PCBs were utilized in electrical equipment before being banned in manufacture by the EPA in 1979 and phased out in application, in large part because of their toxicity in exposure (EPA 1979). Exposure to PCBs can lead to increased likelihood of various health ailments, including cancer (DHHS NIOS 1986). The plant also received a shipment of acrylic fiber that was received after the federal permit's expiration, and the plant accrued multiple citations for improper safety procedures in handling and disposal ("National Justice Pilgrimage" 1984; "Waste Company Exec" 1984; Williams 1989).

In addition to various investigations following the allegations of improper disposal and of violations of employee safety, concern grew in 1990 after geologists discovered cracks in the subterranean chalk formation below the landfill. The Selma chalk mass had previously been declared impenetrable and waste had been allowed to be dumped upon it with the possibility of environmental contamination (Horne and Bryant 1984). More recent studies, however, note a “low probability that any contaminants escaping a disposal trench through fault conduits could enter the Eutaw formation because the aquifer’s potentiometric surface lies above its upper surface. It is possible, however, that faults in the Selma Group formations could serve as lateral conduits for leachate migration to surface drainage” (Donahoe 1990).

Its size, spanning from Mississippi into Northwest Alabama, was credited for Emelle’s nickname as the “Cadillac of landfills” but also meant the damage could be widespread (Peterson 1983). The cracks revealed seepage into the Eutaw aquifer, the water source below the chalk. Despite previous claims that the formation was so dense that “it would take a drop of water 10,000 years to travel the 700 feet from the surface to the Eutaw Aquifer,” less than a decade later, such an event had already occurred (“New Wells Said Need in Emelle” 1984; “Toxic Materials Leaking into Chalk under Emelle” 1990).

A 2010 permit given to the plant from the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) includes a provision that Chemical Waste Management, Inc. “take all reasonable steps to minimize releases to the environment and . . . carry out such measures as are reasonable to prevent significant adverse impacts on human health or the environment” (ADEM 2010). Although this clause elucidates the company’s responsibility to prevent harm, it is less clear what repercussions exist if the clause is violated. Even more opaque is an approach or solution to undo the damage already incurred.

CASE STUDY

Emelle shares many characteristics of other toxic waste sites in the United States; its community is overwhelmingly less affluent, and its residents are a racial minority. Of the 21 facilities nationwide authorized as Resource and Conservation Recovery Act (RCRA) Subtitle C Hazardous Waste Landfills, Emelle is only one of three located in the Southeast (Environment, Health, and Safety Online 2023). Many sites are located in states with low population and low population density (such as Idaho and Utah), but a few are situated more closely to urban areas (such as Peoria, Illinois, and Fort Wayne, Indiana).

Emelle is also rural and with a very small population—the smallest of any toxic waste facility in the country (Table 1). Though fewer lives are being directly affected by its location, they are still lives, and the larger impact from the pollution spanning miles through soil, air, and water means the externalities are greater than the census population count. The population is not only small but rural and widely dispersed in way that makes communication and organization of large protests or strong political stances difficult. Fewer people means subsequent studies of health impacts are also challenging.

Building on previous studies that found finding that toxic waste disposal sites tend to be located in communities that are poor (Mennis 2002) and predominantly minority (Bullard 1994, 1996; Maher 1998), it is further critical to note that these sites are

primarily in rural areas, isolated from larger populations. From a waste-disposal perspective, these locations are not only intentional but ideal, as the dangers from hazardous wastes lend to its removal to places where there are fewer chances of exposure. Toxic wastes are generated irrevocably as a byproduct in a postindustrial age, and they ultimately must go somewhere.

Table 1. U.S. Toxic Waste Sites

State and City	Facility	Population	Density/ mi. ²	Minority	Poverty
AL, Emelle	CWM	53	155	94.3%	61.9%
CA, Kettleman City	CWM	1,439	6,800	66.7%	43.7%
CA, Buttonwillow	Laidlaw	1,508	217	49.5% ^c	28.7%
CO, Westmorland	Laidlaw	2,225	3,769	53.3%	27.3%
CO, Deer Trail	Laidlaw	546	596	1%	5.5%
ID, Grand View	EnviroSafe	1,294	793	14.6%	28.6%
IL, Peoria	Peoria Disposal	104,409	2,543	38.7%	18.8%
IN, Fort Wayne	CWM	253,691	2,293	26.4%	18.7%
LA, Carlyss	CWM	4,670	392	10.9%	9.7%
MI, Belleville	Wayne Disposal	3,991	3,501	19.4%	6.0%
NV, Beatty	US Ecology	1,010	6.6	15.5%	13.4%
NY, Model City	CWM	5,329 ^c	N/A ^c	3% ^b	5.8% ^b
OH, Oregon	EnviroSafe	20,291	677	1%	4.8%
OK, Waynoka	Laidlaw	927	940	11.8%	16.6%
OR, Arlington	CWM	586	329	1%	10.1%
PA, Pittsburgh	MAX Environmental	305,841	5,540	34%	20.4%
SC, Pinewood	Laidlaw	538	429	61.1%	19.7%
TX, Deer Park	Laidlaw	32,010	3,100	13.8%	5.6%
TX, Robstown	Texas Ecologists	12,836	1,054	16.2%	32.1%
TX, Andrews	Waste Control Spec.	12,075	2,018	20.2%	17.7%
UT, Lake Point ^a	Laidlaw	1,166	182	5.7% ^b	8.7% ^b

Notes: CMW=Chemical Waste Management.

^a Data from ZBPF Municipal Consulting (2014). ^b Number for county because municipality data unavailable. ^c Number for U.S. Census tract because municipality not incorporated.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2010).

What the story of Emelle tells us, however, is that the placement of these sites is not always politically fair or mutually beneficial in a way that should be, given the innate

risks accompanying such sites. Emelle is rural, like 19 of the 21 other toxic waste sites in the United States, based on the U.S. Census definition of the term. It is not densely populated, and with many of its residents living below the poverty line, it faces many disadvantages in terms of political activism.

In conjunction with other communities that serve as toxic waste dumping sites, Emelle exhibits three main issues that make rural areas with smaller population more vulnerable to political passivism and that make political engagement more challenging:

1. Resources with information are not as accessible. Because of the paucity of resources available to community members, exacerbated by educational and SES disparities, information to guide decisions is difficult to access. This extends to making fair and accurate evaluations as well, as a lack of resources results in incomplete information.
2. Mobilizing is more difficult. Though the population is small, it is spread apart rather widely within the incorporated limits, making conversation and organization harder. The average education level attained is lower in these communities, and the poverty rates are higher, which can prevent residents from having the confidence and ability to challenge the status quo and also increases the time needed to mobilize a political action group.
3. The low population numbers translate to a small proportion of power that citizens in the community can have in the larger system, as they represent a small fraction of every constituency to which they belong (in terms of nation, state, state assembly, and even county-level divisions). Their political clout thus must focus on quality because they are only a small quantity, easy to ignore.

Each of these problems has beleaguered Emelle from the initial development of the toxic waste treatment facility through the facility's current operations. The most powerful opposition came from outside the state and did little but generate attention to the issue while smaller community groups (like Kaye Kiker's Alabamians for a Cleaner Environment) struggled to get recognition and change. Citizens and local leaders remained conflicted about the impact of the landfill, communicating reserved appreciation for the economic boosts but also a cautious concern for the ecological and community-based repercussions. The EPA now provides several resources for community involvement, including the *Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) Public Participation Manual*, which recognizes and serves to empower stakeholders, "regulators, public interest organizations, community members and regulated facilities" to "take steps to increase participation and improve communication" (EPA 2023). While such materials can now be a tremendous asset to communities seeking more information and involvement, they simply did not exist 40 years ago, when Emelle was debated.

A piece published in the *Washington Post* (Peterson 1983) noted that the dump provided an estimated 200 jobs, prompting the county treasurer to joke that "only the social security payroll is higher." The same piece chronicled the litany of charges in health and environmental malfeasance against the dump, and the bitterly divisive conflict. Politically, all of the policy decisions in the development, construction, and operation of the site were

made at the state level through the ADEM, which is occupied by bureaucrats not elected by citizens of the state. Though the legislature did pass a law, at the governor's request, raising the tax on out-of-state waste, the law was eventually overturned in an 8-1 vote by the Supreme Court (*Chemical Waste Management, Inc., Petitioner v. Guy Hunt, Governor of Alabama* 1992).

The economic advantage seems to have been mixed. Limited data are available for assessing salaries, employment, and benefits, but the consistent data points in the U.S. Census reveal the failure of economic prosperity that developers once claimed. An article published in 1990 characterized the community as a lonely place with “two stores with gas pumps, a park, and a town hall, but no police or fire department” (Olinger 1990). Jobs started at \$6 per hour, well above the national minimum wage of \$3.80 in 1990, the 2023 equivalent of \$14.22 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023).

Residents cited spoke promisingly of the change, however small. Then mayor of Emelle, James Dailey said that because of the landfill, people “managed to build houses, buy cars. Had it not been for the landfill, they would be living off the state. This is the poorest county in the state of Alabama” (Olinger 1990). Thirty years later, Sumter ranked second poorest of Alabama's 67 counties based on income earned (Stacker 2022).

The long-term economic benefits to residents of Emelle seem marginal; poverty remains high, and business growth remains stagnant. The creation of the toxic waste facility did provide some economic opportunity with modestly paying positions but has made little impact otherwise in terms of improving the economy. Poverty is still significantly higher in Emelle than both the state and national averages, and no new major economic developments have begun since the dump was built. Although this is neither solely nor exclusively the result of the toxic waste facility, it is still the reality for a community that continues to lag behind in opportunities available elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

The toxic waste landfill at Emelle, Alabama, is not especially unique compared to many other disposal sites across the country. It is the fact that they are so similar, and that Emelle embodies the traits now regularly associated with undesirable public waste, that the city and its population, however small and remote, merit this type of discourse. Like other toxic waste dumps across the country, the one at Emelle is located in a poor, rural, largely African American community with limited opportunity. The construction and operation of the facility serve as two of the few income and tax generators, but even 40 years after the facility's establishment, its economic impact has been limited. Many in the community still experience poverty, and with a toxic waste dump situated within town, any interested parties who may have considered developing other ventures (perhaps less risky and even maybe more advantageous) there would have been deterred.

The environmental justice movement has evolved significantly since the 1980s when the dump in Emelle was being established. In 1999, the EPA expanded the definition for environmental justice with a declaration of “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people . . . mean[ing] no population, due to policy or economic disempowerment, is forced to bear a disproportionate share” of consequences (EPA n.d.).

Contemporary scholarship continues to grapple with many of the issues illustrated in Emelle, particularly the challenges in quantitatively measuring and documenting injustices related to the environment and proposing effective solutions to address the injustices after the fact (Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009). The effects of race and income, either separately or together as interactive variables, have consistently been determined to be significant factors in the location of environmental hazards (Banzhaf, Ma, and Timmins 2019; Brown 1995; Szasz and Meuser 1997; Tessum et al. 2021). The impact of environmental hazards, coupled with structural racism, can manifest in other areas, such as racial health inequities (Bailey et al. 2017).

Though the narrative of environmental racism may be uncomfortably familiar to followers of state politics, the name of Emelle may not. Because of Emelle's exceptionally small size and rural location, traditional political practices are more challenging to pursue, thus discouraging and diminishing effective community discourse. Large-scale rallies require large numbers, as do massive campaigns for writing to or petitioning elected leaders. Low population density means the community may resemble more of a collection of widespread houses, trailers, and farms set far apart from each other as property lines allow, but residents are a community regardless of size—and one that has not received attention in the same way as others that have become synonymous with the environmental crisis they face.

Lack of access to resources and limited information force residents to rely on biased sources of information (the waste development company, the state government, the national environmental organizations). Although this information is not inherently bad, it inevitably introduces the creators' own incentives and interests with their perspectives, often without a recognition of those interests. Mobilizing is difficult, despite the smaller size of the community, because the requisite components (robust knowledge of the issue, mode of organizing, utilization of discussion and negotiation techniques) are less of a privilege afforded to a poor, rural, African American community. Even for those who do question and care, action requires the luxury of resources (time, minimally) that are not equitably distributed or available. Finally, the proportion of power is minimized because the residents directly affected are few in number and form only a small fraction of nearly every constituency to which they belong. The culmination of location, social status, and demographic features results in a community seemingly without a voice. This community houses the nation's largest toxic waste site and receives limited economic help, at the potentially massive cost of ecological destruction.

Political engagement does not have to center on conflicts already decided but rather on concern. In the nearly four decades after the construction of the toxic waste site, discussions about its role in the community, what it brings in, and what it takes away are still worth having. Individual residents can discuss their concerns and interests, but the momentum of collective action inevitably works against them. With only a small central group of individuals directly affected, coupled with lower social class and thus less social capital, it is not surprising that their concerns remain unheard. And in the classic application of NIMBY in American politics, where we recognize the need for undesirable entities but would always prefer that they are not in our own backyards, it quickly becomes apparent why this city seems forgotten.

There is no firm and fixed conclusion; the environmental and economic impacts of the dump are still affecting Emelle and its residents every day, whether that is recognized or not. The division between the costs and benefits makes the effects particularly challenging to assess. Even if the economic impact is marginal, it provides opportunity. The question may not be whether opportunity exists, then, but whether the opportunity is worth the environmental effects. In addition to gauging short-term and long-term changes, one must also consider those directly and explicitly affected from those not.

What we can learn from this case and others similar to it is that the political challenges that arise in these situations are multifaceted and complex but can also be addressed effectively with proper preparation and intentionality. Community consultation should be essential, not an afterthought or public relations strategy without substance. Members of the community should be included and involved in conversations as early as possible. These members include stakeholders from various sectors in the community to ensure fair balance but also full input. The case of Emelle highlights essential tradeoffs between economic development, environmental impact, effects on health, and the larger macro dynamics that can affect each of these.

Allowing the community to be the center and focus of the discussion rather than on the periphery not only encourages engagement but also enables the consideration of other alternatives. The development of a toxic waste site is accompanied by risks and tradeoffs. Community conversations can help address and consider those, leading to a collective decision about whether the risks are worth the rewards. Certainly, toxic waste is a byproduct of our world that needs to be placed somewhere, but no community, especially one that has a more vulnerable population with fewer obvious opportunities, should feel compelled to host such a site as the sole option for its future. There are other ways a community can commit to revitalization and development that do not have to deal with serving as the nation's dump; those discussions, deliberations, and, ultimately, decisions, however, belong to the people living in the community who will be most directly affected by the outcome.

As E. E. Schattschneider ([1960] 1975) flatly remarked more than half a century ago, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (p. 35). No one assumes that these decisions are truly pluralist, but the stark division between those who benefit and those who are adversely affected cannot be denied. Even pluralism in its most cynical form provides an illusion that, although not all people may be involved in all the decisions, the competing interests and ideals cancel each other out. The promise that pluralism espouses, that interested parties can participate and will be influential, appears to fail in the relationship between environmental preservation and economic development. Bullard (1996) chronicled environmental political activism, noting, "As with other social movements, the environmental justice movement emerged as a response to industry and government practices, policies, and conditions that many people judged to be unjust, unfair, and illegal" (p. 493).

Questioning and challenging the various ecological, economic, and sociopolitical issues at play requires active engagement. On one hand, this necessitates access to unbiased resources, a mobilization of citizens both interested and willing to question, and a leverage of power that does not immediately and irreversibly favor those who already

possess it. On the other, it requires an attentive public with an audience to hear, so enamored with issues, they empower experts and privilege the data they find to influence decisions, are interested and willing to listen, and are compelled through conviction to fight or cede power depending on the circumstance. In Emelle, Alabama, the lack of knowledge, funding, and social capital makes such constructive political engagement a challenge that has yet to be surmounted.

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