

# Remediating a Sense of Place

## Memory and Environmental Justice in Anniston, Alabama

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*Anniston, Alabama is home to an ongoing struggle for Environmental Justice (EJ) as residents remain embroiled in a remediation process to clean up PCB pollution left by The Monsanto Company. This paper engages with literature in Black Geographies, public memory, and environmental justice to argue that remedial processes neglect senses of place that are valued by impacted communities. In West Anniston, the predominantly black neighborhood that bore the brunt of the pollution, the remediation's failure to restore a sense of place contributes to an ongoing erasure of black life from the landscape. As a result, the remediation transforms from a relatively benign project to one that facilitates a violence of forgetting. This paper examines how black life is remembered, commemorated, and valued by residents who participate in the remedial process.*

*Anniston, Alabama es el hogar de una lucha constante por la justicia ambiental (EJ) como residentes siguen inmersos en un proceso de remediación para limpiar la contaminación de PCB dada por la empresa Monsanto. En este trabajo se relaciona con la literatura en geografía del Negro, la memoria pública y la justicia ambiental para argumentar que los procesos de recuperación desatienden el sentido de lugar que son valorados por las comunidades afectadas. En el oeste de Anniston, el barrio predominantemente negro que llevó la peor parte de la contaminación, el fracaso de la remediación para*

*restaurar un sentido de lugar contribuye a un borrado de la vida del negro en el paisaje. Como resultado, la remediación se transforma de un proyecto relativamente benigno a uno que facilita una violencia de olvido. Este artículo examina cómo la vida negro se recuerda, conmemora, y valorada por los residentes que participan en el proceso de recuperación.*

KEY WORDS: Black Geographies, Cultural Geography, Social Justice, Race

PALABRAS CLAVE: Geografía del Negro, geografía cultural, la justicia social, la raza

### INTRODUCTION

*"The material landscape itself, as it is produced by the black subject and mapped as unimaginably black, must be rewritten into black, and arguably human, existence on different terms . . . invisible geographies, marginality, indicate a struggle, and ways of knowing the world, which can also illustrate wider conceptual and material spaces for consideration: real, lived dispossessions and reclamations, for example. The margins and invisibility, then, are also lived and right in the middle of our historically present landscape." Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* – pp. 5–7*

*Anniston, Alabama:**Background and Context*

From 1935 to 1997, Monsanto operated an industrial chemical factory in Anniston, Alabama, a small city nestled in a picturesque area in the southernmost tip of the Appalachian Mountains. Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs), manufactured at the facility from 1929 (before Monsanto by the Swann Chemical Company) to 1971, were a key component of its best-selling product, Aroclors, an industrial-grade insulant that was commonly used in electrical transformer boxes (Spears 2014). Throughout their manufacture, Monsanto routinely dumped PCBs into a landfill or directly into the nearest streams. Today, although the chemical was banned by the U.S. government in 1979 due to concerns over its toxicity, many parts of the town and surrounding area remain contaminated, earning the city the unfortunate designation as the “Toxic City” (Tutor 2016).

Anniston residents are routinely cited in EPA documentation as having the highest levels of PCBs in their blood of any known population (Health Consultation 1999). PCBs are widely known to cause health problems, and are included on the EPA’s “probable carcinogens” list (Cogliano 1998). The dangers of PCBs have been documented almost since the very start of their manufacture, when workers reported developing a skin condition called chloracne: a reaction where large, painful open sores would emerge and linger after direct contact with the substance. Monsanto workers in Anniston would also complain of headaches, nosebleeds, and would fall ill with strange cancers and illnesses of the liver and major organs. Before long, residents were

complaining of the same kinds of conditions, and records kept by local residents indicate that people living near the factory in the predominantly black West Anniston neighborhood were routinely exposed to PCBs and frequently died from strange illnesses that no one could medically explain (Grunwald 2002, Spears 2014).

The issue takes on greater significance considering most pollution occurred during the state’s enforcement of Jim Crow segregation laws that kept black people in neighborhoods with poisoned soil, water, and air. This segregation, which persists in contemporary settlement patterns, ensured that vulnerable and marginal populations were routinely exposed to the most dangerous environmental conditions in the city.

While there is evidence that the state of Alabama was aware of the pollution and its dangers for many decades (Shelby 2002), it was not until Monsanto began quietly buying up and razing properties as part of a buyout program in Anniston in the 1990s that the pollution became more widely known to the general public. Community leaders and residents from areas most affected by the pollution—particularly in the West Anniston neighborhood—formed a group called Community Against Pollution (CAP) to organize against Monsanto’s negligence and fight for the neighborhood, which was being rapidly decimated by the property buyouts (Spears 2014). Eventually, this group joined with others in the region to sue Monsanto, which eventually resulted in a \$700 million settlement divided among tens of thousands of plaintiffs, and the implementation of a consent decree, which included the founding of the Community Advisory Group for the Consent Decree (CAG). This research



picks up Anniston's story roughly at this point in time, examining the implementation and impacts of these remediation efforts in the city.

On September 23, 2013, people in Anniston gathered at the Carver Community Center in the West Anniston neighborhood. The CAG gathered around several folding tables positioned in a U-shape in front of a small audience. One at a time, a representative from the EPA, a corporate representative, and a technical advisor gave presentations about the progress of the PCB cleanup, now over a decade in progress. These meetings were often very tense as residents and experts would openly spar over the details of the cleanup. Over the next three years of attending these meetings and reconstructing Anniston's cleanup process in the archives, the author observed that community participants would use a "Band-Aid" analogy frequently to describe a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with the outcomes of a long-term struggle for justice in the wake of environmental violence. While many residents of Anniston share pieces of \$700 million in restitution awarded from litigation—including cleanup costs, a health clinic, and individual payouts determined by property damage and amounts of PCBs detected in residents' bloodstreams—many people remain concerned about the state of the city over the long term and call into question the adequacy of the EPA's remediation procedures.

The buildings that remain intact in Anniston, particularly West Anniston, which was most acutely impacted by the pollution, are surrounded by vacant lots, dilapidated homes, closed schools, and abandoned industrial sites. While the remedial process has been largely completed

for residential areas in Anniston, save for several places where the EPA has not been granted access by the owners, people who attend meetings about the cleanup frequently invoke the state of the West Anniston neighborhood as a persistent source of pain because of the memory of what this neighborhood once was—a black neighborhood with a strong sense of community.

Scientific environmental remediation is not designed to reconcile this memory with the present state of the city; it has a very specific mandate to achieve acceptable levels of pollution risk for the soil, water, and air. However, residents' use of memories of this neighborhood invokes a vision of West Anniston with which the remediation is not designed to engage. This is a missed opportunity to engage with a deeper notion of environmental justice that people express through place. The state's failure to take seriously the memories and sense of place expressed throughout the cleanup process in Anniston becomes another layer of injustice in a long history of violence toward black life.

While environmental remediation may be able to repair the soil, water, and air, could it also be possible to remediate another piece of what's lost in what Nixon (2011) would call the slow violence of environmental disasters: a "sense of place"<sup>1</sup>? This paper argues that environmental remediation conducted by the EPA in its current form, even while well-intentioned, contributes to an ongoing systematic devaluation and erasure of black life in the landscape because it does not take seriously the qualitative connections people have to place. The pollution itself is invisible in the city's contemporary landscape; one cannot readily see PCBs

or lead, another widespread contaminant throughout the neighborhood. But, viewed through the lens of what West Anniston once was, the pollution scarred more than the physical geography of the city: it ruptured the city's sense of place. While residents express a desire for Anniston to be made "whole" again, this cannot happen without communities having a valued place for memory in the remediation.

This paper highlights ways in which residents expressed qualitative characteristics of West Anniston's sense of place throughout various stages of the remedial process. In particular, residents' use of memory to critique the impacts of remediation accomplishes two things: 1) it challenges the boundaries of what remediation is designed to accomplish, and 2) invokes a little-recognized memorial geography of black life. The remediation's failure (by accident or design) to value the ongoing "memory-work" (Houston 2012, Till 2012) happening in the process to clean up the city implicates it as a participant in an ongoing erasure of black life, one layered among the already devastating erasures wrought by the pollution, and the devastation wrought by the impacts of deindustrialization in this working class city. It represents an active neglect of what people value about *place*, at the very moment that one could reasonably hope some sense of place to be restored.

This paper brings scholarship about black life, memory, and the environment into conversation with one another *and* with the mundane reality of environmental remediation in practice. Not intended to be read as a wholesale indictment of state-driven remediation, this work instead makes a case for encouraging a greater synthesis between

physical environmental remediation and the human values that are also impacted by environmental injustice. By integrating the ways in which impacted communities express what is valued about place, in this case through memory, remedial projects could make much greater progress in making places feel "whole" again after traumatic incidents of environmental and racial violence.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental Justice scholars are increasingly taking up the role of memory in communities' struggles against environmental violence. Geographers have long shown interest in memorial landscapes and formalized memorial projects, and have contributed to understanding the relationship between memory, geography, and power. Memorial projects often reflect the power structures and regimes that created them (Foote and Azaryahu 2007), communicating selectively about historical events, figures, and valued identity characteristics (Till 2005). This has resulted in significant, powerful biases in the public memory of events and people throughout the world that influence the lens through which the public is able to interpret modern social issues.

In part, this description reveals why Black Geographies are absent or marginalized, as a lack of formal recognition and power contributes to a lack of formal memorial geography of marginalized populations and events (Nieves 2007, p 85). As a result, decisions regarding which events should be remembered publicly through concrete acts such as commemoration and memorialization often remain in the hands of those with enough resources, influence,



and institutional connections to ensure the survival of those memories (Dwyer 2000). This can result in “historical amnesia” (Foote and Azaryahu 2007, p 129), where events unimportant to the narratives espoused by the powerful are omitted and forgotten. As Dwyer and Alderman (2008, p 168) note, “. . .the social process of remembering is accompanied, simultaneously, by a process of forgetting—an excluding of other historical narratives from public consideration and recognition.” In Anniston, changes wrought in the landscape by pollution and remediation have begun this process of forgetting—without a formal recognition of the lives and communities that made up that landscape, the knowledge and memory of an entire community stands to be lost.

However, memory work is not necessarily destructive. Memory is also employed as a tool for achieving social and environmental justice and producing counter-narratives, “serve[ing] as a bulwark against the erasure, neglect, or elision of a memory as a potential source and opportunity for history” (Hanchard 2008, p 52). Recent literature in environmental justice explores how people use personal and collective expressions of memory to bring alternative environmental and social visions to public life (Houston 2012, Vasudevan 2012). These expressions demonstrate how people use memory to connect a human narrative to environmental harm:

The tasks of witnessing, storytelling, and memory work create a space through which the unimaginable of environmental pollution and unequal environmental protection can be expressed. . .storytelling provides a

framework for understanding how multiple realities of environmental injury come together in ways that are not always readily discernible through policy or scientific practice. (Houston 2012, p 419)

Yet despite the significant role of memory work within community reactions to environmental pollution, it is frequently neglected by environmental policy and enforcement initiatives. Such efforts do not necessarily attempt to reconcile what communities value about places, even while they make great efforts to remediate the physical injuries of the landscape.

Memory is a tool through which impacted communities and individuals can articulate this disconnect. In Pavithra Vasudevan’s account of making a film called “Remembering Kearneytown,” regarding a foundational case of environmental injustice in Warren County, North Carolina, she writes, “it may seem, from outsider accounts and mainstream narratives of environmental justice, that the remediation of the landfill brought closure to residents of Warren County. Yet. . . the story has not ended” (Vasudevan 2012, p 22). Vasudevan writes of how the widespread notoriety surrounding Warren County’s story created the assumption among outsiders that justice was achieved. However, locally, residents continue to face “substantive challenges that constrain citizens from having effects” (Pezzullo 2001, p 3). Vasudevan contextualizes her use of filmmaking as “an attempt at using performance as research to enable proximity where distance has failed to do justice, an effort to re-root the story of environmental justice in the

bodies and landscapes of Warren County” (Vasudevan 2012, p 22).

Karen Till’s notion of wounded cities offers another way to understand how memory is used by actors who are not creating formalized memorial projects. She argues that places which have undergone mass violence and histories of displacement are active centers for “memory work” around those issues. “When places are physically demolished, not only is the stability of the taken-for-granted rhythms destroyed, an individual’s personal and intrasubjective emotional ecosystems become damaged (root shock)” (Till 2012, p 10). As a result, people attempt to create healing places in the wake of such damage through artistic and activist work to maintain emotional connections to those places, and to articulate alternative political visions. “Materially, memory-work motivates the creation of social capital, provides a range of memorialization activities, creates new forms of public memory, and is committed to intergenerational education and social outreach” (Till 2012, p 7).

In addition, taking note of how the state uses erasure can be instructive for understanding another layer of the power relationships embedded in struggles for environmental justice. In Anniston, failing to recognize the memories of community members articulates throughout the cleanup process works to facilitate an erasure of black life. Community uses of memory can give scholars and activists fresh demands in the environmental justice movement. Integrating the ways in which black life is actively remembered and valued into a remedial schema can shape how community reparation in the wake of state-sanctioned violence is

conceptualized, as noted by McKittrick and Woods (2007, p 6):

The realization of these desires can transform a world when these visions are based in traditions that see place as the location of co-operation, stewardship, and social justice rather than sites just to be dominated, enclosed, commodified, exploited, and segregated. Black Geographies will play a central role in the reconstruction of the global community.

In Anniston’s case, environmental remediation could value the sense of place that West Anniston residents express through memory-work, potentially leading to a very different outcome for the future of the city as it is reconstructed.

This paper contributes to the literatures on memory and environmental justice in two ways. After a brief discussion of methods, “Remediation and Forgetting in Anniston,” gives an example of how state environmental remediation encourages the erasure and forgetting of qualitative concerns about the cleanup in Anniston in favor of a cleanup process that operates according to EPA-defined conventions. It demonstrates the limitations EPA imposes on what the cleanup is designed to accomplish. In the following section, *Reconstructing the Invisible Through Memory*, Black Geographies are analyzed in both memorial projects in the city and participation in the remedial process through informal “memory work.” This analysis highlights the disconnect between the process of PCB remediation in the city and how residents use memory to articulate alternative visions of Anniston’s sense of place and the potential for remediation.



## METHODS

This research is based on fieldwork conducted in Anniston from August 2013-January 2016. The author attended CAG meetings about the cleanup of PCBs in Anniston. CAGs are commonly used by the EPA to inform impacted communities about the progress of remediation processes. They are composed of a volunteer group of community members who review and comment on cleanup procedures and progress, and they are tasked with helping solicit community attendance and participation in bimonthly meetings where the EPA and corporate actors executing the cleanup provide updates. These meetings were an important venue for learning about the ongoing concerns people in Anniston had and continue to have about the cleanup and the long-term impacts of the pollution in the city. They were also helpful for understanding the often tense relationships between community members and the scientific and legal experts who were planning and executing the cleanup.

In addition, the author conducted archival research of local publications such as the *Anniston Star* newspaper, documentation from the EPA describing and governing the cleanup, and documentation kept by local organizations regarding the history of Anniston and the cleanup process. This archival work was both a necessity for understanding the context of the discussions happening in CAG meetings, as well as for building a deeper understanding the complex institutional arrangements and decisions that everyday people must navigate in the wake of an environmental disaster like Anniston's.

The cleanup documentation includes evidence of how residents' and remediators'

perspectives on priorities for the cleanup differed. One of the most used documents in this study is a public comment period held by the EPA. There are thousands of pages of documentation about the cleanup of PCBs in Anniston, and most of this is scientific documentation of every step of the cleanup. Public comment periods lend understanding to the way the EPA views its responsibilities to public concerns about the remediation and are sources for understanding what those concerns are throughout the cleanup process. Public comment periods work as follows: the EPA publishes a document outlining a plan, the public has an opportunity to comment, and the EPA issues responses to the comments. The comment periods in Anniston were a widely used opportunity to participate in the discussion about remediation. A wide range of participants, including community groups, law firms, individuals, and corporate entities, are represented.

Additional sources, such as the *Anniston Star* newspaper, help piece together the way residents have used memory throughout the remediation to express both a sense of pain about the changes wrought in the city, but also to articulate a vision for what could be restored. While aspects of the pollution and remediation have left large swaths of city in disrepair, there is an underlying geography of black life in this landscape that is not valued explicitly by the remediation. This is important because Anniston's geography is more than a horrible incident of racialized environmental violence; it is more than a poisoned landscape. It is also a home, and for many, a place worth struggling for and defending. Residents' memories are a way to "recount the archive differently" (McKittrick 2014) and tell Anniston's story

from a vantage point that values the life that was and remains there.

#### REMEDIATION AND FORGETTING IN ANNISTON

The EPA held a public comment period in response to “Section 122 Administrative Agreement and Order on Consent for Removal Action,” the results of which were published on January 17, 2006. This agreement clarified the responsibilities for the cleanup of lead and PCBs in the Anniston area. While PCBs clearly had one major polluter, The Monsanto Company, responsibility for the cleanup of widespread lead pollution that was discovered during the PCB cleanup had to be divvied among several additional parties. According to the EPA, most of the lead pollution came from foundry sand that was used as filler dirt in residential properties.

The ways in which the EPA responds or does not respond to certain types of criticism is significant. For example, in the following comment, residents question which properties are being focused upon for the cleanup, with particular concern about where children play:

**Comment:** *The area covered by the Agreement is too small; Agreement should require cleanup of commercial properties. How many properties must be sampled? Are all lots that are undeveloped excluded from the definition of Residential Properties or only those not zoned residential? The definition of Residential Properties should include vacant lots since they could be developed in the future and children sometimes play on them.*

These comments were submitted in various forms by several parties,

including a law firm, a church, individuals, community groups, and a petition signed by 237 people.

EPA’s response explains the logic guiding the cleanup, stating that over 2,000 residential properties have been sampled. It does not directly address the concern about where children play. Rather, they attempt to assuage concern:

*...Only “Undeveloped Vacant Lots” are excluded from the definition of “Residential Properties.” These are intended to be properties that, although zoned residential, have no indication that they have ever been subject to development or re-grading. As such, they are unlikely to have had Foundry Sand placed on them and there is little risk of lead exposure from Respondents’ past activities.*

The inattention to concern about children’s play is significant because the issue of where children play continued to be raised frequently in CAG meetings attended by the author years after this comment period in Anniston. In spite of the city’s toxic history, there are no signs that indicate where pollutants may be or have been in the city, even though attendees at CAG meetings have requested them. EPA officials have given two responses to such requests: one, it is up to the city to place such signs. Two, EPA has conducted a thorough cleanup and no one is in danger.

An example of this second type of response is also evident in the comment period. When comments requested continued oversight, the EPA plainly cited a handbook:

**Comment:** *The agreement should provide for long term monitoring and institutional controls, including procedures for enforcing the controls.*



This comment was submitted by several parties, including three community groups.

**Response:** *After completion of the cleanup called for in the Agreement, all residential soils addressed by the Agreement will contain less than 400ppm in the top 2 feet of soil. Consistent with EPA Region 4's practices and EPA's Superfund Lead Contaminated Residential Sites Handbook, OSWER 9285.7-50, EPA believes this provides adequate protection without the need to implement additional institutional controls.*

Another very brief exchange is almost comical:

**Comment:** *The people of Anniston should be treated fairly and with respect.*

This comment was submitted by seven individuals.

**Response:** *EPA agrees with this comment and will continue to treat the residents of Anniston fairly and with respect.*

Rather than respond with concern for where children play, or whether the neighborhood has access to continued monitoring, the EPA's response is consistent: thank you for participating, we are currently doing everything correctly. This shows a limitation to the EPA's willingness or ability to engage with public concerns that do not fully align with its mandates; based on observations of CAG meetings, this unwillingness can read as a willful lack of concern for community input.

This lack of concern (perceived or real) contributes to an erasure of residents' concerns because residents are expected to forgive and forget long-term, well-founded

feelings of mistrust toward state agencies for the sake of the expediency of the cleanup. Concerns like those above about technical aspects of the cleanup are regularly dismissed under the banner of scientific and regulatory authority, both in this document and in CAG meetings. When the EPA says, *trust us*, the community is being asked to forget that some community-driven concerns are not being attended to, all while the city continues to suffer. This is reminiscent of Hanchard's use of Nietzsche to explain forgetting: "...forgetting is necessary in order for people to live beyond the burdens and impasses of past traumas" (2008, p 50). In remediation, it serves the state and the process well to encourage people to forget.

This forgetting, however, does not serve the people of Anniston equally. In addition to The Monsanto Company, state authorities also hold responsibility for allowing the city to become polluted. The following exchange regards an agency called the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM), which repeatedly allowed The Monsanto Company to continue dumping PCBs in Anniston, and they did almost nothing to tell the public about the pollution after testing revealed its persistence throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (Shelby 2002).

**Comment:** *Explain what oversight issues are charged to ADEM. Why is ADEM given any oversight authority when the community does not trust them?*

This comment was submitted by several parties, including two individuals and two community groups.

**Response:** *EPA strives to create and promote strong partnerships with its*

*State counterparts. Although EPA and ADEM have not yet finalized any specific division of labor for oversight responsibilities of the work required under the Agreement, EPA believes ADEM's involvement will provide valuable assistance to EPA and the Anniston community. EPA anticipates that in addition to reviewing and providing comments on work plans and reports, ADEM will assist EPA by directly providing on-site field oversight of Respondents' sampling and cleanup activities under the agreement.*

In its response, EPA says nothing to acknowledge the statement that the community does not trust ADEM. It only says that ADEM will be highly involved in this process, and they are actively investigating how ADEM could be *more* involved as per usual in EPA policy. While the EPA, and the remediation, may very well benefit from a partnership with ADEM, by not acknowledging the issues residents have with the agency, people are being asked to forget and put aside a long history of environmental neglect and this agency's role in it.

These exchanges demonstrate the human limitations in the remediation. The process is only designed to achieve a prescribed physical condition – 400 ppm of lead in the top two feet of soil, for example. Remediation is a highly impactful and invasive experience for a residential community to undergo. Federal authorities come onto private land and determine, with very little choice or input from the people living there, whether or not a dwelling and its surrounding area is safe. This has the potential to determine whether the property remains valuable, whether the

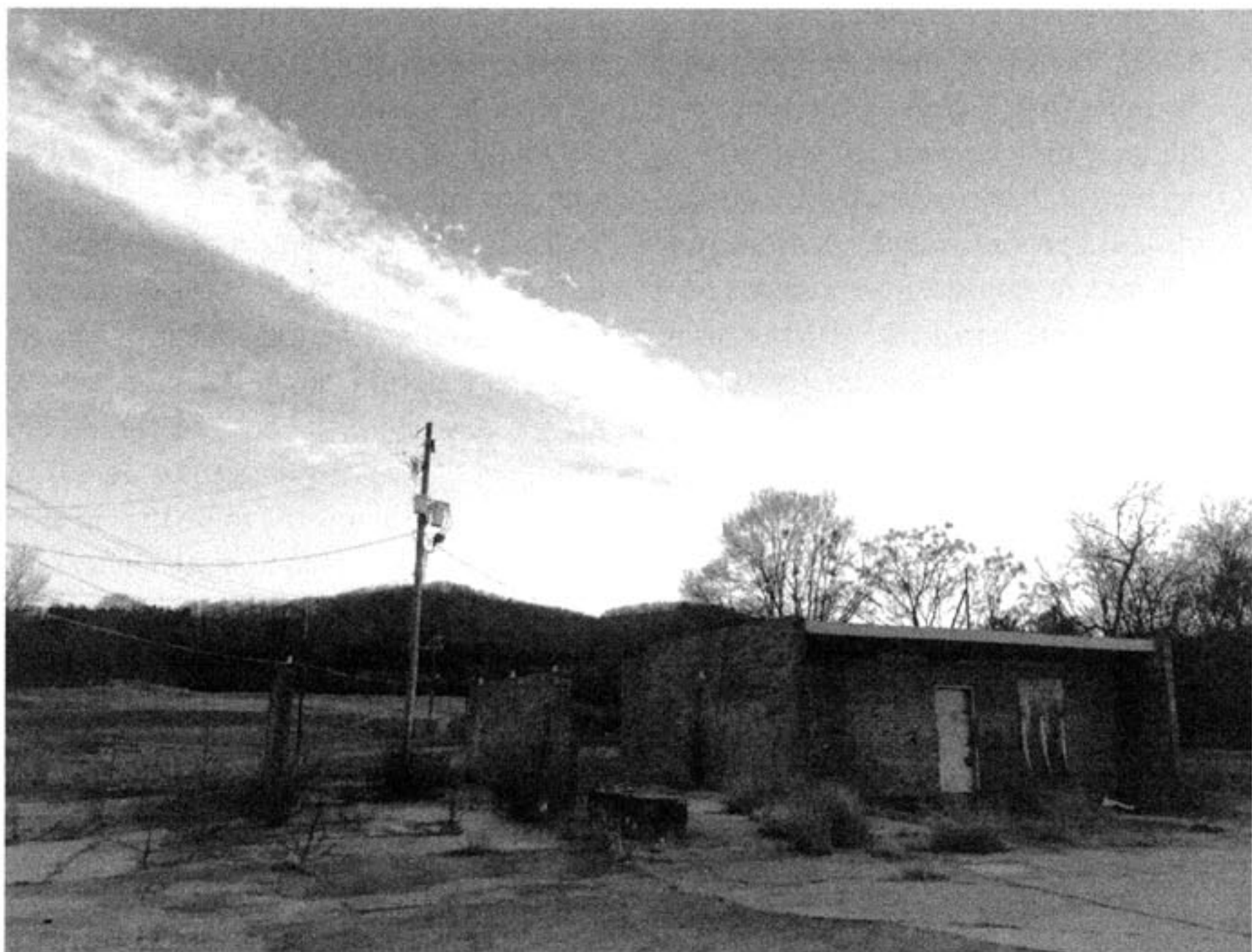
neighborhood is desirable, whether residents are even able to keep their homes, or whether residents are able to reasonably maintain the belief that they will be safe from illness.

Therefore, the EPA's lack of response to the qualitative concerns residents raise in the comment period and in meetings about the nature of the cleanup acts to erase those concerns and, in the ADEM example, attempt to forget key details of how the pollution came to be in Anniston in the first place, such as state neglect for black life. In the following section, however, it is clear that residents do not allow those details to be so easily forgotten. The open question is if, and how, such memories could become valued by remedial processes.

#### RECONSTRUCTING THE INVISIBLE THROUGH MEMORY

On October 20, 1996, an *Anniston Star* headline reported: "Last Days for a Neighborhood," describing Eloise Mealing's decision to sell her home to Monsanto and move away from her neighborhood, Sweet Valley-Cobbtown. Her daughter, Cassandra Roberts, received land in the same neighborhood from her father when she got married, and had just sold it to The Monsanto Company. "My daddy wanted me to have that land. . . I had a real hard time signing those papers. It was so emotional I could hardly take it" (Pezzullo 1996). The article describes Mrs. Mealing's beauty salon, her friendly connections to neighbors, and the farming practiced in the neighborhood before pollution was discovered that changed their lives, and changed the city of Anniston, Alabama for years to come.





*Figure 1. The old car wash in Sweet Valley – Cobbtown. Photo by Melanie Barron.*

Just before these events, it became public that The Monsanto Company had knowingly polluted large swaths of the city. Sweet Valley-Cobbtown in West Aniston was the neighborhood closest to the factory and was the first area in the city to experience any kind of cleanup. This initial cleanup deal, struck between ADEM and Monsanto in March 1996, stipulated that Monsanto had 21 days to offer relocation to residents, and 60 days to identify all PCB contaminated areas. By October 1996, Eloise Mealing and her neighbors were the last to leave. In 6 months' time, a neighborhood built over the course of decades—complete with memories, and a sense of community—was physically erased.

Now the entire area lies vacant as an open wound to remaining residents, with

no marker of what once existed. Aside from an abandoned car wash, there is little evidence there today to suggest what had been there. Now the entire area is bordered by a chain link fence. In a couple of places, roads turn into the area and eerily stop where the fence starts.

As noted in the opening epigraph, McKittrick argues such “invisible geographies” are home to a story of struggle that deserves to be told. This struggle is important, but has been a neglected facet of Anniston's geography throughout the PCB cleanup. As properties are laid to waste or destroyed, so too go many of the physical manifestations of the memories that people so frequently describe, not uncommon in areas with histories of black life and struggle (Nieves 2007). Sweet Valley-Cobbtown

is not the only location in the city where these “invisible geographies” exist, but it is the most concentrated site of physical destruction. Other parts of the West Anniston neighborhood, such as the West 15<sup>th</sup> street district which was once known for local businesses, seem relatively more active. However, the neighborhood largely plays unfortunate host to vacant lots, abandoned homes, and closed-up businesses.

Yet, there are several ways in which residents have sought to recover a sense of place in West Anniston. One is through the struggle to have a greater recognition of values and interests beyond physical remediation through residents’ participation in the formal cleanup process. This is one reason why the CAG meetings were often contentious. As mentioned in the introduction, the cleanup is referred to as a “Band-Aid solution” by community members in attendance at CAG meetings: an impermanent solution to the city’s, and West Anniston’s, long term problems. While the cleanup may meet benchmarks for soil, water, and air quality – all of which still come up for debate in these meetings – it has not repaired the ruptured pace and quality of life in West Anniston since the extent of the pollution was discovered.

One CAG member frequently emphasized the need for Anniston to “be whole” again, signaling that what needed to be replaced could not be found in scientific remediation. This resonated frequently with what the author heard in the time for community feedback at the meetings. Attendees would talk about specific properties that remained in disrepair, express anxieties about the air quality or soil quality due to properties that had not been cleaned up, relate fear over safety in schools and

churches frequented by many people from all over the city—parts remediated and not. Field notes include observations of corporate and remedial officials arguing with community members about the manner of the cleanup process, expressions of frustration over ongoing unaddressed health issues, and, most relevant to this paper, expressions of pain and frustration about Anniston today compared to what it once was. These discussions in particular are “memory work” (Houston 2012, Till 2012). While they take place outside of a conventional memorialization context, memory and connection to place emerge as important factors that remain overlooked in the remedial process.

In meetings, residents would frequently recall a different time for the city, when West Anniston was a much better place to live: when there were thriving black-owned businesses, when the population was higher, and neighborhoods felt more like communities. Many of the worries about West Anniston’s present state—crime, poverty, threats to close schools in the area, a lack of development—were tied by residents to a disconnect between the idea of what Anniston once was and what the remediation process was actually designed to accomplish.

While the settlement agreement did include provisions for an education fund and a health clinic, pollution has left a scar on the landscape that people have difficulty ignoring—in part because the pollution interfered with a sense of neighborhood-scale self-reliance in West Anniston. In meetings, people described the practice of subsistence fishing and agriculture before the pollution, and a landscape of gardens and fruit trees—but the PCB pollution made that impossible to continue. David





Figure 2. "A City Within a City." Photo by Melanie Barron.

Baker, a leader in the fight against PCBs, stated in a Senate hearing in 2002:

*"...we have had to take off our shoes when we got ready to go into the house. Our children cannot play on the grass, so they play in the streets. Our children should wash their balls if they are playing outside, wash the dogs if they wanted to play with their own pets in their yard. We cannot plant a garden in our yard anymore. Many of the times we have been told, 'Well, you can plant the garden, but you have to be careful how you plant it.' We have people planting collard greens in five-gallon buckets just to enjoy the land that they live on."*

Outside of the remediation process, residents have left a record of this ignored sense of place formally in a public mural project and informally in the archives of local historical newspapers. These sources are additional sites to understand West Anniston's sense of place; the mural inserts an alternative narrative directly into the site of erasure caused by environmental injustice. The newspaper articles are an undervalued record of life in the city

that reflects many of the testimonies about that life that have been expressed in CAG meetings.

West 15<sup>th</sup> Street in Anniston holds a legendary status among many in the community, particularly among older generations of people who have memories growing up in the area. It runs perpendicular to the main thoroughfares of the historically white side of the city – Quintard Avenue and Noble Street. Today, driving West on 15<sup>th</sup> street from Anniston's downtown, one is greeted to the neighborhood with a mural titled, "A City Within a City."

Designed by a black artist named John Davis, and assisted by white artist Joseph Giri, who completed the mural after Davis' untimely death just before the mural's completion (Hayes 2016), the piece covers the entire side of a building. In an online interview Giri stated that he and Davis, along with the Spirit of Anniston Foundation, a nonprofit organization that also created a Civil Rights trail in the city, solicited input from the West Anniston community for the contents of the mural. From left to right, he describes women singing in a church choir, and children

roller skating on West 15<sup>th</sup> and Pine street, in front of “some buildings that are now gone.” A worker, said to be local West Anniston artist John Davis, stands in front of pipe factories, an industry that Anniston was once known for but “has gone by the wayside.” Next appear Cobb Avenue High School (which no longer exists) and its mascot, the Black Panthers, a World War II soldier, and a church, said to be a Presbyterian church that has since been torn down and replaced (West Anniston Mural, Anniston, Alabama 2014).

This mural functions as a memorial counter-narrative to what is readily observable in West Anniston: a neighborhood suffering from poverty and abandonment. It reimagines what the space of West Anniston was and could be as it stands in contrast to the readily observable “material ‘lack’” in the neighborhood (McKittrick and Woods 2007, p 7). The presence and themes of the mural give visibility to a black sense of place that is rooted in a sense of community and particular sites of pride. While Giri tends to point out what has gone away—the buildings, the pipe factory—the mural demands a recognition of a different perspective on the value of this neighborhood, that “there are always many ways of producing and perceiving space” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, p 7).

The mural also connects to the concerns that people expressed in the remediation process; for example, the children in the mural could be the same children someone wrote about in their comment to the EPA. While the landscape of West Anniston may be an open wound, the mural provides a powerful visual alternative in a small town landscape. In this sense, the mural is a story: “. . . people are making

decisions all the time about the kinds of worlds they want to live in and they are imaginatively and practically striving towards them. Stories about environmental justice can carry these diverse ideas along together to produce different environmental imaginaries. . . in and of a damaged world” (Houston 2012, p 433). While the mural may not be directly about Anniston’s struggle for environmental justice, its positive presence and placement directly in a landscape so marked by environmental devastation acts as an “Angel of Alternate History,” (Solnit, as used in Houston 2012). Houston explains, “Solnit’s angel asks us to believe in the invisible and the unimaginable because it is here that alternative knowledge is sustained and where different futures might be enacted” (Houston 2012, p 419). In other words, the mural is a reminder and an encouragement to imagine something different for this place.

Building on reconstructing a black sense place in the city, the *Anniston Star* newspaper, as a relatively progressive newspaper in the region, did include some limited sections dedicated to the mundane aspects of everyday black life in the city (as opposed to nothing at all). For example, in 1901, the paper describes a celebration of Emancipation Day: “A feature of the parade, which was an unusually long one, was a trade display in which a dozen floats represented as many negro businesses housed in the city, drug stores, grocery stores, bicycle repair shops, restaurants, benevolent insurance societies, herb doctors and general stores, all being represented” (*Anniston Star* 1901). Much of the coverage in subsequent years accompanies this business theme, and several articles mention the formation of a chapter of the Negro Business



and Professional Men's Club. This club, which first started meeting in Anniston in 1943, was part of a nationwide network of such organizations which were started by Booker T. Washington. Washington's approach to achieving black equality—a focus on education, entrepreneurship, and an acceptance of incrementalism and assimilationism, was and remains controversial, particularly among more radically minded-thinkers such as W.E.B Dubois (1994). However, Anniston residents' participation—along with neighboring Hobson City, which was an all-black municipality nearby—gives perspective on the pervasiveness of Washington's ideas and the impacts of his organizing, something that has been largely under-explored due in no small part to Dubois' critique (Boston 2010).

Not only does this archival evidence provide a paper trail for residents' claims of a thriving black business district earlier in Anniston's history, it helps bring that memory to life in a more animated way. Given Anniston's currently wounded landscape, the Emancipation Day Parade, and the streets lined with businesses once again open up an alternate history for the city. Anniston was not just a place where the KKK bombed Freedom Riders, it was not just a place where pollution ruined lives. If stories produce a new world (Houston 2012, p 422), archives help recreate a once-valued, now-forgotten world. These moments in time and space add up to a "sense of place" that has been badly damaged by environmental violence. What if remediation could restore the communities one can read about here? If these qualitative aspects of place could also be valued – whether looking back through history, paying attention to art, or

simply listening to what people say in public meetings—the project of remediation might synthesize attention to both human and environmental needs.

## CONCLUSION

The Monsanto Company was responsible for some of the most dramatic and deadly destruction in Anniston – a massive pollution event, poisoning the air, water, and soil, contaminating the bloodstreams of thousands of people, setting the stage for massive divestment from West Anniston and the City of Anniston as a whole. The scale of The Monsanto Company's destruction calls for something much deeper and more transformative than a lead or PCB soil content quota. It calls for a serious, deep reckoning, with the toll that pollution takes on human life and human connections to place. Without this, remediation plays its own quiet role in the ongoing devaluation of black life because it fails to even nominally recognize pleas to restore the qualitative characteristics that make places worth living in.

In between the memory of West Anniston and the present day landscape, there is a story to be told—one about urban blight, and deindustrialization, and pollution, but also one about a vibrant community that residents value. This was a community built in segregated, white supremacist Alabama, a place people—and public art—describe as "A City Within a City." Through the lens of memory, state-driven remediation emerges as a tool in the ongoing strategic erasure of black life from the state's project to move on from Anniston's legacy of pollution. What appears to be a benign extension of environmentalist goodwill unto West Anniston

instead functions as another violent encounter from the state. Remediation thus becomes a tool to facilitate the violence of state-sponsored forgetting.

In remedial projects, particularly in cases of environmental racism, there is a need to innovate methods to not only remediate the soil, but remediate that sense of place that has been lost over time, and to take seriously the rupture created by absence. To remediate means to repair, to make right, to restore. In any case of environmental injustice, pollution isn't a discrete issue—its presence is embedded in a context that allowed it to be there, that allowed the slow painful death of friends, family, neighbors, and place. People and institutions engaged in remediation projects should be challenged to think beyond the current structures of environmental remediation and pay closer attention to grassroots demands for justice over the long term. Scholars must pay closer attention to what communities value in life—not just what has been lost through death.

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#### NOTES

1. While the author does not delve into a detailed discussion of the vast literatures on "place," she draws strongly on McKittrick's usage of a "black sense of place" (2011) to elucidate that no sense of place, or any qualitative human connection to place is valued in

the process of remediation. The author connects to this lack of attention to place to the overall devaluation of black life in the city. "A black sense of place," McKittrick argues, is made through "Diverse spatial practices—wherein the structural workings of racism kept black cultures in place and tagged them as placeless, as these communities innovatively worked within, across, and outside commonsense cartographic and topographical texts—help form a black sense of place" (2011, p 949). Therefore, while the author does not define a black sense of place, she does point to ways remedial projects could see and value such "diverse spatial practices" that compose a sense of place.

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