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Contaminated community : identity and activism in Libby, Montana

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CONTAMINATED COMMUNITY:
IDENTITY AND ACTIVISM IN LIBBY, MONTANA

by

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Introduction

Libby, Montana is the “Town Left to Die” (Schneider 1999). In an isolated, rural county in the northwest corner of the state an entire community was quietly poisoned with tremolite asbestos. W.R. Grace & Company (Grace) operated a vermiculite mine in Libby for nearly four decades and knew of the adverse health effects of its production of tremolite, one of the most dangerous forms of asbestos. Grace failed to notify workers or residents of this hazard despite the widespread use of vermiculite and asbestos throughout the community and as a result exposure continued for nearly 60 years. Currently, about 400 individuals have died of Libby-area asbestos contamination, thousands more live with incurable asbestos-related diseases, and more are being diagnosed daily (Associated Press 2011). This thorough pollution of human bodies and the natural environment formed the foundation for a unique environmental justice movement.

Since acquiring the company from Zonolite in 1963, W.R. Grace has held extensive economic and symbolic power over the community of Libby. Jobs at the mine conferred elite status. They provided the best wages and the work appeared safer than comparable work at the sawmill. As longtime resident and activist Gayla Benefield noted, “it really was like a big family here. We all knew each other of course, and we all felt privileged to be part of the mine” (Bowker 2003:27). Grace was a generous sponsor of the local community, notably providing funding for the town’s favorite pastime: Little League baseball. Yet all of its seemingly charitable actions were an attempt to hide the monumental secret that Grace kept from residents; as a result, not only were workers exposed to asbestos, but their families and nearly all community members were

exposed as well. This secrecy resulted in the largest and most expensive superfund site designation in the United States in 2002 and a public health emergency in 2009 (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2012a). It took many years of dedicated activism to gain recognition for this human health catastrophe.

Widespread asbestos contamination and subsequent activism in Libby highlights the ways in which social narratives are shaped by dominant institutions within a community, and the consequences that arise when these narratives, which serve as guidelines for appropriate action, are questioned. The intensive activism that took place in Libby is characteristic of the larger environmental justice movement and offers important lessons about the nature of power and inequality in these types of campaigns. My interviews with prominent Libby activists expose the foundational role that story plays in identity construction and power contestations. Stories shape individual understandings of the world and it is the saliency of stories that motivate individuals into action. To contextualize these stories, I begin with a review of existing environmental justice literature and an analysis of narratives and the role of stories in identity construction, followed by a discussion of Libby's history and the results of my research.

Literature Review

Environmental Justice

The fight for human health and citizen knowledge in Libby is a powerful example of the environmental justice movement. Environmental justice is broadly defined as a movement that seeks to protect the right of all people to a healthy environment, including the places people live, work, worship and recreate (Shrader-Frechette 2002). Other definitions assert that no one should be “forced to shoulder a disproportionate share of the negative environmental impacts of pollution or environmental hazards due to lack of political or economic strength” (Rhodes 2003:19). Environmental justice activists broaden the limits of the term “environment,” enlarging the scope of activism. Robert Verchick (2004) explains that:

Harm to that environment includes not only the contamination of natural resources (toxic soil, poisoned water, dirty air), but anything in the environment that threatens human health and safety. Thus lead poisoning among children, traditionally seen as a health or housing issue, is now described by many activists as an environmental problem. (P. 66)

The widespread contamination of social spaces (schools, public parks), homes and bodies in Libby falls solidly under this definition of environmental injustice. As Libby activist Gayla Benefield explained in an interview, “we are part of the environment too. Not just the spotted owl.”

The environmental justice movement draws attention to intersections between social and ecological health. One central tenet is an understanding that it is often marginalized communities of color, or of lower economic status, who are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation (Adamson, Evans, and Stein

2002). This foundational component of environmental justice theory is similar to Patricia Hill Collins' ([1990] 2010) concept of the interlocking systems of oppression. Collins notes that race, class and gender all serve as bases of oppression through which dominant power structures are reinforced at the expense of the less powerful. Environmental justice advocates argue that environmental degradation constitutes yet another form of oppression that is inflicted upon those who are already marginalized and who are lacking in social or political power.

In contaminated communities, individuals must fight powerful entities for the health of their bodies and their environment. Eddie Girdner and Jack Smith (2002) explain that, "the weakest sections of the society confront some of the most powerful forces, such as huge corporations and governments and their flocks of highly paid, high-flying lawyers. These struggles tend to have a David and Goliath character about them" (57). The unequal distribution of legal and political resources further reinforces the premise behind environmental justice: in America, justice is not always a given. When analyzed from this standpoint, it becomes clear why company towns and communities formed around extractive industries become hotspots for this particular brand of activism. When those in power (namely industries) prioritize profits above human health, and are able to get away with it due to the powerlessness of the affected groups, environmental justice concerns arise.

In recognizing the interplay between social and environmental inequalities, the environmental justice movement mobilizes a different demographic of activists than does the mainstream environmental movement. Many of these activists feel they are dismissed or not adequately represented in social movements and the larger realm of

political action. For this reason, women, people of color and those of lower socio-economic status often hold leadership positions in environmental justice campaigns.

Women in particular play an enormous role in these campaigns throughout the country (Girdner and Smith 2002). Women—especially those of lower socio-economic status—are often the first to recognize harmful changes in their homes, bodies, families and communities. Female activists:

Often describe their motivations in terms of family roles and social connections. Many activists, as the primary caretakers of young children in the home, attribute their work to a special concern for family health and safety. They see their work as the natural extension of the nurturing and parenting role. (Verchick 2004:64)

The environmental justice movement allows individuals to capitalize on multiple identity positions and leverage accompanying forms of social capital to accomplish their objectives. Speaking out against toxics as a mother, for example, colors activism and lends certain credibility to one's actions. Participation in environmental justice movements is a form of activism that revolves heavily around individual lives. As a result, such participation is often not conceptualized as environmental activism, but simply as a fight to protect one's home, health or family. This was certainly the case in Libby, where Grace inflicted harm upon the bodies of humans while ravaging the earth it exploited through mining and yet many environmentalists were unsympathetic to the cause (Ring 2005). Many environmental justice activists would never self-define as activists, just as many mainstream environmentalists overlook environmental justice as an important component of the larger environmental movement.

Uneasy Alchemy – An Exploration of Environmental Justice

In an effort to bridge the gap between environmental justice activists and members of the mainstream environmental movement and to shed light on environmental justice work, Barbara L. Allen (2003) undertook an extensive project in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor mapping the plethora of grassroots environmental justice campaigns in the area. In this exploration she highlights the complex relationships between citizens, industry and the government, and discovers the critical role that story plays in grassroots activism.

The Chemical Corridor is an 85-mile segment of the mighty Mississippi River that gains its name from the 130 chemical and petroleum processing plants located along its banks (Allen 2003). Extreme forms of pollution threaten small communities such as Alsen and Norco, leading to almost unthinkable levels of disease and environmental degradation. Pressurized pipes full of highly dangerous gases criss-cross the streets and loudspeakers are mounted on telephone poles to notify residents of chemical leaks or imminent explosions and warn them to run (Allen 2003). Stories of husbands, aunts and children dying from one-in-a-million cancers are all too common and tales of egregious pollution discharges are frequent. Amos Favorite, an outspoken activist in the Corridor relates a horrific story of a neighborhood child who playfully chased his dog into an uncovered drainage ditch. The dog immediately began crying in pain and died within hours. The young boy died nine days later (Allen 2003).

It is shocking incidents such as these that drive local citizens into activism. When communities and family members are dramatically and personally impacted by toxic pollutants, individuals feel compelled to take action. Their toxic experiences are

part of the stories they repeat to themselves and to each other. Through this repetition stories play an important role in identity construction by forming the foundation of how individuals think of themselves, and their places in a polluted world. Allen (2003) notes that, “through stories people understand their lives, establish themselves as part of some community, and give shape to the world around them ... stories enable residents to map their histories onto their current situations” (19-20). She believes that it is through the creation and sharing of stories that individuals construct their identities and recognize their place within an ever-changing community. Their experiences are grounded in the environments in which they live, and thus identity, through story, is intricately connected to place.

Place-situated identities ... are not simple encyclopedic definitions of ethnicity, gender or residency. Rather, they are part of a politics of enunciation — voices constructed intersubjectively by different experiences within communities ... identities come together by sharing experiences, creating new networks of stories and constructing an alternate vision of an unjust present and a promising future in toxic communities. (Allen 2003:21)

Stories connect people to each other and to place. They ground individuals in their own lives and serve as signposts for meaningful events. Through retelling and recreating stories, individuals sort through their experiences and flag critical moments or encounters as important, then reinforce this evaluation through subsequent retellings. When places are polluted, individual identities intimately connected with those places are impacted, and toxicity of body and environment are linked in story. This was apparent in Allen’s (2003) research as well as my own. Activists tell stories that simultaneously recognize contamination, assert the actions they have taken against this contamination, and reflect upon the impact these actions have upon their identity.

As individuals come together and communicate their experiences in a given place, shared stories become a foundation for strength and affirmation in marginalized communities struggling against a ‘goliath’ opponent. Allen (2003) relates a story in which Willie Fontenot, an activist serving as the environmental community liaison for the attorney general of Louisiana, called a gathering of citizens in a neighborhood adjacent to a hazardous waste disposal site. Fontenot asked questions about their community and the environmental conditions they experienced. Residents told personal stories to connect with their neighbors and began constructing a cohesive community identity based on shared experiences. They were able to recognize similarities between their personal stories of toxicity and their neighbors. Residents used this overlap to strengthen their newfound commitment to each other and create a sense of a collective identity through a network of stories. The presence of a collective identity is foundational for action on behalf of that community.

As patterns emerge within neighborhoods in close proximity to certain chemical facilities, citizen awareness increases and their communal stories become the evidence used against chemical and petroleum corporations. Florence Robinson was one of the first grassroots activists to develop a system of documenting these patterns. She created a map of her community by recording where specific diseases were prevalent, allowing relationships between particular plants or chemicals and health implications to be recognized (Allen 2003). Even though personal stories of toxicity are deeply embedded in place, these forms of local or citizen knowledge are often devalued in comparison to more ‘rational’ or ‘objective’ manifestations of knowledge. In environmental justice

struggles, scientific, objective forms of claims-making come in direct conflict with subjective, storied forms.

While it is assumed that scientific studies are inherently objective, the studies used to prove the innocence of chemical factories are frequently paid for by the corporations themselves, and produce biased information (Allen 2003). Individual experiences of contamination and illness are pitted against scientific studies proclaiming the harmlessness of the products in question. Additionally, when scientific studies do exist, most citizens do not have access to the scientific information regarding their situation, and most are unable to interpret the implications of available science for themselves and their families (Allen 2003). This serves to widen the power differential between environmental justice advocates and their industry opponents as legal and political discourse relies heavily on the scientific language that is inaccessible to those experiencing contamination. The hierarchy of knowledge privileges the information coming from industry and government at the expense of those citizens actually affected. This has large implications for environmental justice movements. Activists must prove that they are experiencing adverse health impacts and are forced to provide scientific justification for their claims to be considered. This requires education and funding that activists often do not have and becomes yet another obstacle they must overcome to gain legitimacy for their claims of contamination.

In order to combat this imbalance, citizen activists learn to manipulate their stories to align with the context in which they are presenting. They tailor their stories and word choice to particular institutions or settings. They adapt their rhetoric to better fit the corporate and institutional discourses they encounter. Some like Florence

Robinson pursue further education to become citizen scientists and learn the scientific language necessary to effectively navigate this terrain and serve as a resource for grassroots movements. Learning how and when to tell particular stories is an important part of environmental justice activism. “This story-making process is a unifying strategy that offers new situated understandings; finding the appropriate story lines becomes an important form of agency for community groups” (Allen 2003:22). Storytelling is a critical tactic in environmental justice campaigns. Stories hold the truth of personal experience and it is this lived reality that contests scientific data produced by industry.

In spite of the considerable challenges they face, environmental justice activists in the Chemical Corridor have experienced successes, especially when contesting proposed sites for new chemical facilities. Armed with local knowledge and citizen science, activists effectively use stories to mobilize communities and stop permits for new industrial plants that would further endanger their health. The fight against Supplemental Fuels Incorporated (SFI) in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in the denial of permits for SFI’s facility to import and mix hazardous wastes to fuel a large proposed incinerator (Allen 2003). This coalition victory demonstrates the power of the environmental movement to create productive and lasting ties with other social groups (such as religious, charitable or ethnic minority groups) and rally around a particular goal. As long as environmental justice fights continue in the Chemical Corridor, precedents are being set to protect human and environmental health. Activists are effectively challenging and overcoming environmental injustices in their communities. These precedents, and the lessons learned in these campaigns can be applied in many

other diverse and widespread environmental justice challenges, including those in Libby.

Blue Vinyl

Allen (2003) is not the only activist interested in the larger connections of environmental justice work to increasingly globalized processes. Activist Judith Helfand investigates the lifecycle of the toxic products created in the Chemical Corridor. She explores this question and finds that while environmental justice campaigns are deeply rooted in place, it is critical to recognize the extensions of injustice that simultaneously affect homes and families elsewhere. In her documentary *Blue Vinyl*, Helfand reacts to her parents' decision to re-side their "rotting" Merrick, New York home with durable, non-recyclable blue vinyl. Helfand, herself a victim of toxic contamination (in utero exposure to Diethylstilbestrol resulted in a radical hysterectomy), questions the apparent wonders of vinyl (Plevin 2004). She sets off on a quest to understand the lifecycle of vinyl and its byproducts and finds herself deep within the Chemical Corridor in Lake Charles, Louisiana. There, workers and neighbors of the Conoco Refinery tell stories of mysterious illness and toxic discharge, eerily similar to those documented by Allen (2003). While plant managers emphasize safety records and employment opportunities, pressing health concerns surround the refinery and its products. An exploration of dioxin and vinyl chloride (vinyl byproducts) produced in Lake Charles sends Helfand to interview ailing workers in Venice, Italy. These workers sued the upper management of their company EniChem for manslaughter, due to their prior knowledge of the health risks facing their employees.

The health concerns facing residents of Lake Charles, Louisiana are mirrored in the lives of Venetian workers handling the exact same substances (Plevin 2004). Toxicity follows the product and in this example, previously local concerns are played out on a global stage.

Blue Vinyl takes a holistic approach to environmental justice in that it connects multiple environmental justice conflicts and illustrates the overarching inequities in the social systems that allow these injustices to exist. This connection between seemingly disparate communities from New York to Louisiana to Italy affirms and reinforces the environmental justice work taking place in each community. It is an important reminder that environmental justice concerns extend far beyond the community where activism is taking place.

The globality of environmental justice is often forgotten, but even in the case of Libby, effects of asbestos exposure are not limited to the local community. Contaminated vermiculite from the Libby mine was shipped across the country and overseas to be processed and made into many everyday products, such as automobile brakes (Schneider and McCumber 2004). It was also a primary ingredient of the cement used for Navy submarines as a result of its fire-resistant properties (Bowker 2003). This exponentially increased the number of individuals exposed to tremolite asbestos, and serves as a poignant reminder of the wide-reaching effects of toxic materials. While the globality of environmental justice concerns is apparent however, the environmental and toxic effects are concentrated in the smaller communities thus activism generally occurs on a local level.

Small Towns and Extractive Industries

Small towns characterized by extractive industries such as mining and logging (both are present in the case of Libby) are often dominated by the companies that operate there. Industry takes advantage of willing workforces and cheap labor (Green 2010). In this era of increased mechanization, the need for physical workers' bodies has decreased, and fewer jobs are available (Green 2010). Despite this tangible decrease in employment numbers, "many rural communities are left with an identity tied to a particular extractive industry, even though that industry no longer provides many jobs or plays a dominant role in that local or regional economy" (Bell and York 2010:112). Utilizing this identity legacy, companies leverage their economic power into the social sphere of a community during the height of production and after it has diminished.

The presence of a large industry or factory in a small town seems to assume one of two relationships to community engagement and interaction. In many contemporary issues of environmental justice the polluting factory or hazardous waste dump promises to bring economic growth to an area, yet fails to follow through on this promise. Local residents are not employed, or are only employed in small numbers, thus residents are essentially unconnected to the new toxic neighbor in their community. The company is physically present but has little to no interaction with residents. This poses a particular challenge for activists who must confront a faceless enemy. These are often the types of interactions that take place in the Chemical Corridor.

The second relationship style is exemplified by the "Friends of Coal" campaign discussed by Bell and York (2010). In this West Virginian example, through an industry-funded organization, the coal industry inserted itself directly into the social

landscape of a community through an industry-funded faux-grassroots organization (Bell and York 2010). Despite, and perhaps because of, its diminished economic contribution to the area, the coal industry sought to flex and reinforce its power in the community by participating on school boards, hosting events and sponsoring sports teams. In the face of diminished economic power, cultural or ‘soft’ power becomes more important. Companies control their image through tangible and calculated actions. This directly influences the community’s perception of the industry — a perception that is completely manufactured by those seeking to benefit from it. Grace did this in Libby as it created and reproduced narratives about what it means to be a good worker and a good citizen of Libby in its efforts to maintain economic and social power. Grace effectively merged company and community loyalty and, as is discussed in the results section, leveraged this constructed assumption to maintain power and control cultural narratives in Libby.

These different ways of constructing and reproducing cultural meaning are not mutually exclusive. A nuanced synthesis between these industry approaches to community involvement can, and does, take place. For example, after moving into the community of Morrisonville, Louisiana, Dow Chemical facility installed one-way radios into the homes of nearby residents. Dow Chemical did not employ local residents and yet was exceedingly present in their lives. Dow justified the installations as safety measures — were an accident to occur, residents would be notified via the radio and told what to do; but residents resented this action as a serious invasion of personal privacy (Allen 2003). This example reinforces the power differential between large industry and marginalized communities, in which industry possesses the power to do as

it pleases, even in the face of local opposition. The Chemical Corridor is a hotbed of environmental justice activism, as dangerous and highly polluting facilities are overwhelmingly located in neighborhoods of working-class African-American citizens. These communities are often politically underrepresented (many are still unincorporated into towns) and lack access to education, health care and employment (Allen 2003). This power and wealth disparity is what makes activism difficult in these situations. When a single company dominates the economic and social components of a community, challenging its control is met with strong resistance by the company. These powerful entities are able to control discourse and deflect contestations.

Invisible Contaminants

Henry Vyner (1988) explores how power differentials allow environmental injustices and occupational contaminations occur discreetly throughout society. As shown in both Libby and the Chemical Corridor, individuals can suddenly find themselves ill due to environmental contaminants to which they did not know they were exposed. Vyner (1988) explains that environmental contaminants can be invisible in several distinct but associated ways. Invisibility exists when there is a lack of awareness that the contaminant exists, or a lack of awareness of the causality between health effects and the contaminant. In the first situation, the contaminants are undetectable to the senses; in the second, contamination is invisible both due to a latency of symptoms and an inability to attribute health impacts to physical contaminants (Vyner 1988). Asbestos contamination in Libby demonstrated both types of invisibility. First, while workers and Libby residents were extremely aware of the mine dust, they were not

aware of the small, tremolite fibers contained within it. Dr. David Egilman, a crucial advocate for asbestos victims notes that asbestos has no “onion properties. You can’t smell, see, touch or taste fibers in the air” (Bowker 2003:143). Tremolite asbestos fibers are invisible to the senses. These fibers also exhibit the second characteristic of invisibility: a long latency period. Asbestos exposure usually takes 10 to 15 years to manifest in serious symptoms. Bowker (2003) makes the excellent point that “had workers and consumers suffered symptoms immediately after exposure, concealment would not have been possible” (21). Grace never provided adequate information about the hazards of the dust, and due to the physical and symbolic invisibility of asbestos fibers, workers had no reason to question its safety.

When invisible contamination occurs, usually in an occupational setting, elaborate institutional denial typically follows the initial contestation of pollution (Vyner 1988). The polluting institution, be it the government or a private corporation, attempts to distance itself from the accusation by associating blame with the victim (Vyner 1988). Often, this is accomplished by denying culpability and placing the burden of proof upon the accusatory group. This is referred to as the practice of finding a promotable victim. In this strategy another villain is found which deflects attention away from the original object of criticism (Bowker 2003). In the case of Libby, affected individuals claimed that they were being poisoned and Grace claimed that victims’ illnesses were due to external factors such as cigarette smoking (Schneider and McCumber 2004; Peacock 2003). Tobacco smoking was chosen as the promotable victim — and it worked. As with other powerful institutions, Grace’s position was considered to be the truth until proven otherwise, and only the unrelenting pressure of

Libby activists was able expose the dishonesty. The invisibility of environmental contaminants allows pollution to continue unrecognized and unabated for decades. The power to control the flow of information regarding toxicity is usually controlled by the producing industry, leaving ordinary citizens in the dark about the health of their bodies and surrounding environment. This highlights the structural barriers and inequalities that environmental justice groups struggle to overcome when they challenge the powerful interests in their communities.

Identity Theory and Environmental Justice

Clearly, environmental justice activism reveals a complicated situation in which individuals (or small groups of individuals) stand up against larger, more powerful forces. This activism requires deeply personal investments and as a result has significant impacts on identity construction. This section addresses theories of identity formation through narrativity and discusses the ways in which stories are used in claims-making and contestations of power.

The activists involved in new social movements, such as environmental justice, often defy traditional patterns of activism and form organizations that cut across classical social boundaries, such as race, class, gender and occupation. An increase in these new breeds of social movements led to the creation of a new theoretical framework of identity: identity politics. Identity politics justifies actions not through societal norms or interests (as classical identity theory does) but in terms of identities, allegiances and values. Calhoun (1994) explains, “the pursuits labeled ‘identity politics’ are collective, not merely individual, and public, not only private. They involve seeking recognition, legitimacy (and sometimes power)” (21). Identity theorists find themselves mired in a complicated situation that often essentializes gender, race or class. Identity theory makes assumptions about the experiences of women, African-Americans, lesbians, and other social groups and makes it difficult to understand changing alliances and relational ties among people. It does not allow for changes in power relations or socio-historical conditions (Somers and Gibson 1994). Identity politics creates fixed categories and insists that individuals adhere to the expectations of these roles (Somers and Gibson 1994).

This is because the theory operates with the assumption that culture is the driver of all action, that culture defines valued objectives and obliges individuals to achieve them. A fundamental questioning of this paradigm has led to the emergence of a new conceptualization of culture – as a repertoire or “tool kit” from which individuals “select different pieces for constructing lines of action” (Swidler 1986:277). In this theory, culture is not a single overarching institution; instead it functions to limit and direct the actions of individuals by making certain methods of action acceptable and discouraging others. It does not drive them towards an ultimate end. This allows for the possibility of individual agency, and explains why other cultural theories struggle to account for actions that do not align with cultural expectations. Individual actions are given greater value in the toolkit theory, as sociologists are able to explore the multitude of variables influencing an action, rather than only attempting to explain why it does not follow a perceived pattern or cultural norm.

The toolkit theory posits that individuals do not make decisions based solely upon values or interests; they make decisions based upon the assemblage of decisions that they have made in the past. Each action becomes part of a lifelong sequence that builds upon itself and influences the outcome of future decisions. These lines of action are an integral component of identity construction as decisions accumulate and give the individual a sense of self. Ann Swidler (1986), a strong proponent of the toolkit approach to culture explains that:

People do not build lines of action from scratch, choosing actions one at a time as efficient means to given ends. Instead, they construct chains of action beginning with at least some pre-fabricated links. Culture influences action through the shape and organization of those links, not by determining the ends to which they are put. (P. 277)

Culture is thus used as a collection of possible actions that may be taken. It shapes the strategies of action that individuals employ to accomplish specific goals at particular times.

Narrativity

Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson (1994) take this conception of culture as a conglomerate of potential strategies of action and connect it to narrative. This new framework re-appropriates the historical concept of narrative. Social scientists have long regarded narrative as a purely representational form imposed by historians upon events of the past (Somers and Gibson 1994). Instead, in Somers and Gibson's (1994) theorization, narrativity is embraced as a vibrant and active player in the creation of meaning in everyday life. It appreciates the role that stories play in guiding action and shaping identity and extends this understanding to the larger, macro-cultural level.

Narratives are the tools in Swindler's (1986) toolkit culture: they delineate appropriate (and inappropriate) action, and they serve as guides for informing individuals' decisions and morals. Individuals draw upon existing, and accessible, narratives to provide meaning and direct action. They are the overarching structures that give meaning to our social world:

Social life itself is storied and narrative is an ontological condition of social life ... Research is showing us that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narrative; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some

way integrate these happenings within one or more narratives. (Somers and Gibson 1994:38-9)

Approaching identity in this way integrates the dimensions of time, place and relationality (among events, people, discourses), giving the concept of identity a richer foundation and allowing for an escape from the confining conception of a fixed, essential identity. Somers and Gibson (1994) explain that “the narrative identity approach embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time and space” (65). Narratives are guidelines for individual conceptions of meaning and appropriate action and it is within these larger narratives that identities are formed.

Somers and Gibson (1994) argue that only by recognizing the historicity of individual lives can social action and individual identity be understood. Similar to the overarching strategies of action described by Swindler (1986), identities are a compilation of existing experiences, decisions and embraced narratives. Somers and Gibson (1994) explain that narratives are used “to define who we are; this in turn is a precondition for knowing what to do. Doing this will in turn produce new narratives and hence new actions” (1994:61). People act, or choose not to act, based upon how they recognize their position in any number of potential narratives. This approach assumes that “people act in particular ways because not to do so would fundamentally violate their sense of being at that particular time and place. In another time or place, or in the context of a different prevailing narrative, that sense of being could be entirely different” (Somers and Gibson 1994:67). The inclusion of context into an identity framework allows analysis to be more accurate in determining why individuals choose to act the way they do without reducing this choice simply to an essential component of their identity. Recognizing this implies that at different times, individuals draw upon

different narratives. This framework also acknowledges that identities are not fixed. In fact, Somers and Gibson (1994) note that “narrative identities are constituted and reconstituted in time and over time” (67).

Stories vs. Narratives

While the terms are often used synonymously, a clear and sharp distinction must be made between stories and narratives. Narratives are cultural forms; bundles of meaning that emerge from interpersonal interactions. They are the larger choices available to individuals in the cultural toolkit, providing guidance through potential roles and courses of action in which one might partake. They are overarching cultural expectations that can be manipulated by those in power and are often implicit guidelines for action. For example, the predominant masculine narrative asserts that being a ‘good’ man requires being strong, suppressing feelings and providing for one’s family. In Libby, working at Grace formed a cornerstone of this narrative. Adherence to the expectations of the masculine narrative would make someone a ‘good’ man (Peter et al. 2000).

The term “story” refers to an account of past events, real or imagined. Stories are actively created by individuals and are used to reflect upon and understand the past. Information is understood and packaged into stories. When asked to explain an opinion or talk about emotions, individuals virtually always give their responses in story form. For example, Willie Fontenot’s story about the young boy’s death after coming into contact with open industry waste reveals the extent of the contamination and evokes an emotional response (Allen 2003). Stories are an important tool in reclaiming power through truth-making claims which challenge or question dominant narratives, while

narratives provide the overarching framework within which these stories are located. Individuals use both larger narratives and personal stories in the construction and maintenance of identity. The importance of both narrative and story in the lives of environmental justice activists is explored further in the results sections.

Consciousness Raising

The importance of stories is evident when examining the environmental justice movement. The stories people tell about their personal experiences carry implications for actions they choose to take. Recall Somers and Gibson (1994) noting that all of life is “storied” in that while individuals use narratives to influence their actions and identities, they also create accounts of the events in their lives to construct meaning and a complete understanding of their circumstances (38). The stories that people tell themselves and each other impact their conception of self and society. Stories about contamination, illness, and everyday life are the foundation of environmental justice concerns.

While individuals construct their stories, it is not often that these stories are shared openly with others — even though it is the sharing of these stories that holds the most power. The sharing of stories allows individuals to draw connections between their lives and recognize similar or parallel plot lines that characterize their own lives. Verchick (2004) defines this phenomenon as consciousness raising: “the process by which individuals share personal experiences with one another in an effort to derive collective significance or meaning from those experiences” (67). This powerful event can create or solidify connections among people, and allow people to firmly locate

themselves within a community of others with similar life experiences. It is this connection to others that can result in activism.

The sharing of ideas – among activists and with outside groups or institutions – is essential to the movement’s ambitious goal of mobilizing neglected communities and transforming the meaning of environmental protection. (Verchick 2004:68)

This is a trend that is particularly present in environmental justice activism. Barbara Allen (2003) states, “through stories people understand their lives, establish themselves as part of some community and give shape to the world around them ... Stories enable residents to map their histories onto their current situations” (19-20). This expansion of personal history allows for activism to begin. For example, Allen (2003) recounts the experience of Willie Fontenot as he explored the community of Alsen, looking for residents’ experiences with the nearby Rollins hazardous waste disposal site:

Soon he found himself in Mary McCastle’s living room with her and thirty-five other neighborhood residents. He talked to them about what the workers had experienced. Then he began to ask questions such as, have you ever smelled rotten eggs outside? If so, it meant that the fumes from the nearby paper plant were drifting their way. He asked if they ever found white or black residue on their houses or cars. If so, the likely culprit was polyethylene from Allied Signal or soot from the Reynolds coke plant, respectively. This was the first time the residents had come together, compared their experiences, and were able to give a name to what they saw and smelled. The stories people in the area were now telling related to the phenomena that before they were unable to name. (P. 41)

In this situation, the story-sharing process became a catalyst for community groups to form and begin taking action against Rollins. Once it became evident that illnesses and horrific personal experiences were not limited to single individuals, coalitions were formed. It is through this sharing of stories that collective identities are formed that

extend beyond traditional class, occupational or other social boundaries. Collective identities exist in groups that share common stories. These stories speak of shared experiences in a certain community such as Libby, where people are deeply proud of their heritage; or of similar experiences of gender, injustice and contamination. Individual stories of identity coalesce into larger networks of stories of identity that encompass many individuals under similar story lines.

Environmental Melodrama

The toxic events that impact the everyday lives of individuals and their communities are the catalysts for their actions. For this reason, stories are an integral component of the environmental justice movement, more so than in other segments of the environmental movement. When stories are utilized in the public sphere to gain the attention of a wider audience, Steve Schwarze (2007) refers to them as environmental melodramas. These stories utilize rhetoric of moral and emotional appeals to express a social conflict between opposing parties in a way that is targeted those not directly involved in the conflict (Schwarze 2007). This approach provides an alternative to the science-laden stories related by industry and government. These forms of expression and language use are often pitted against each other, as science is assumed to hold more truth than story. Expanding the acceptable ways of presenting and organizing information allow for an increasingly open and democratic society (Allen 2003).

Using the environmental melodrama method, which emphasizes personal stories, anecdotes and local knowledge, can be an effective way to gain the interest and trust of the average citizen (locally, nationally or globally). Personal stories and

emotional tragedies provide an opportunity for people to connect with each other — a connection that can become lost in the dense, deeply numerical renderings of science. Environmental melodramas encourage buy-in from those not directly affected by an environmental justice case, and create a space in which they too can become activists. Allen (2003) agrees, “stories of environmental degradation are an important rhetorical tool in the larger discourse of industrial-community conflict surrounding the problem of pollution” (20). Stories are an effective and natural way to increase dialogue and contest larger power dynamics.

Power

As discussed earlier, narratives provide the available trajectories of action and identity for a community. Individuals select from presented narratives and use them to construct personal storylines and make decisions about which actions to engage in. Those who control power in any given society have an interest in manipulating the available narratives to maintain their power and control within the community. Bell and York (2010) agree:

The lifeworld [social sphere] is increasingly invaded by the overarching social system ... The efforts of extractive industries to lure the public into identifying with industry are part of this same process, where logging and mining for example, come to be seen not simply as sources of employment but rather as key features of individuals’ and communities’ identities — that is, workers often come to identify first and foremost as loggers or miners, and communities come to identify as logging or mining communities. (P. 117-8)

A closer examination of Bell and York’s research reveals this to be true. They discover that through deliberate manipulation, the coal industry controls the dominant narratives

(culture) of West Virginia, namely the narratives that assert the importance of coal and the centrality of mining to individual and community identities. This allows coal companies to retain their privileged position in the society. Bell and York (2010) explain:

Public acquiescence to the wishes of industry is in part achieved by industries' calculated efforts to reconstruct a bond with the communities they degrade, attempting to replace the employment connection between industry and community with a *constructed* ideology of dependency and economic identity. [Emphasis mine] (P. 116)

This occurs in politics, advertisements, and in individual actions. For example, individuals representing coal (or other extractive companies) may embed themselves within communities and become highly productive, active citizens there. Establishing this personal connection lends legitimacy to the narratives introduced by the overall power of the industry. As Bell and York (2010) state, "owners and managers of extractive industries actively construct, maintain, and amplify community economic identity in order to ensure that certain ideologies dominate in communities that historically depended on natural-resource extraction" (117). Grace managers adopted and effectively utilized this approach in Libby by participating on community boards and donating heavily to local charities and organizations. My research supports Bell and York's (2010) in highlighting the extent to which powerful entities control ideologies and thereby influence individual identities. By asserting a conception of what a 'good worker' or 'good citizen' looks like, the coal industry or W.R. Grace is able to maintain its power by manipulating these expectations to benefit their particular interests.

The 'Friends of Coal' campaign aligns itself with highly recognized public figures and celebrities. It re-appropriates cultural icons and by connecting these icons

with the coal industry, is able to equate these cultural values and the coal industry. For example, when a retired Air Force General appeared in an advertisement promoting the importance of coal to West Virginians, 'Friends of Coal' implied that supporting coal was the patriotic choice, and reasserted the narrative that portrays miners as the masculine providers of their families and of the nation (Bell and York 2010). The extension of this portrayal is that contesting coal is unpatriotic and non-coal miners are inherently less masculine than their mining counterparts. Moral judgments become intertwined with industry alliance so that questioning industry is equated with social depravity.

By aligning itself with cultural symbols and overtly sponsoring sports and entertainment events, the coal industry, through its faux grassroots organization, is continues to assert its dominance in controlling narratives. It is limiting the possible narratives individuals have to choose from, thereby controlling cultural understandings of appropriate actions and conceptions of identity. This cultural dominance is not unique to West Virginian industry; these tactics are utilized in other company towns and resource-based communities. The results explores the similar methods employed by W.R. Grace in Libby to accomplish the same objectives of controlling narratives and thereby impacting personal conceptions of identity.

Methods

The data collected for this thesis were qualitative in nature. While quantitative data explaining the number of asbestos-related deaths in Libby and the amount of money flooding into this community from agencies, such as the EPA, provide important contextual information, it is not this concrete data that I attempt to understand. By seeking qualitative data in the forms of personal interviews, anecdotes and letters to the editor, the research gains a fuller understanding of the life of a Libby resident. Indeed, sociologist Bruce Berg (2009) notes that “qualitative research strategies provide perspectives that can prompt recall of ... common or half-forgotten sights, sounds, and smells” (3). These details, which are often absent from quantitative data, supply valuable insights into the lives of Libby residents. Interviews allow me to explore the ways in which discourse is created and challenged in a small town, by giving participants the chance to answer questions with language that felt appropriate and truly matched their own experiences. Quantitative information-gathering lacks this richness.

The methods for collecting data for this thesis consisted of (a) an exploration of existing literature about Libby, Montana and (b) in-depth interviews. The existing literature takes many forms, from entire books, journal articles and films, to letters to the editor written in Libby and the surrounding community. When reading these sources, I kept careful notes, and I marked and consolidated recurring themes for future reference.

I conducted nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2 ½ hours and were done either in person, through email, or via the telephone. A vast majority of the personal interviews were recorded digitally, with only

a few being more informal conversations. Regardless of the style or presence of a recorder, I took detailed notes throughout the interviews. During these interviews I asked a variety of open-ended questions (a complete list is found in the Appendix) and allowed participants to respond freely and at their desired pace. These questions invariably led down unanticipated paths of conversation, thus while the questions found in the Appendix comprise the baseline for interview questions, each interview took on a unique focus and tone.

Participants for my interviews were identified using the snowball sampling method. This method is particularly useful in a small town environment where personal ties and networks connect many residents. Initially, my connections to Libby came from a national journalist who had worked extensively in Libby and from a teacher at my public high school who had grown up there. My participants expanded from there as each interviewee referred me to friends and family members who would be willing to participate as well. While this method does not provide a representative sample, it allowed me to gain access to individuals throughout the Libby community who were involved in differing occupations and had varying degrees of involvement with asbestos. I was also able to conduct several informal interviews with members of the Libby community during my time there.

I chose not to speak with representatives of W.R. Grace because my intention in this thesis project is not to retell the story of contamination in Libby, but to explore the ways in which environmental justice activism impacts the lives of its advocates. For this reason, interviews with those directly involved in activism are examined in greater depth than those who have simply lived and worked Libby. This in no way seeks to

undermine or delegitimize the stories of non-activists; their stories merely fall outside of the scope of this project.

After the interviews were completed, I meticulously transcribed the interviews and used NVivo to organize my data. It is here that I coded my data to classify them into the themes apparent throughout my interview data. From this categorization I was able to draw my results. I used the grounded theory approach to guide my coding. Instead of approaching my data with pre-determined themes to which my data needed to conform, I revisited my data countless times and allowed themes to appear which seemed to accurately and consistently convey the message of my interview participants. This methodological choice allows my results to be true to the data I have collected. Information is not manipulated to fit into rigid categories, instead it is analyzed as data that are inherently valuable and provide insights that I, as an outside researcher, would never have anticipated.

Throughout my thesis process, I maintained awareness of the ethical implications of my research. This involved ensuring that my participants felt comfortable sharing their voices and stories during the interviews. Discussing the contamination of Libby and the resulting consequences was emotional for all of my participants, thus my cultural and personal sensitivity was critical. I made verbally clear (and noted in the consent form) that participation was voluntary and the interview could be terminated at any time. Several participants took advantage of this and I conducted portions of interviews that were not recorded and are not cited directly in my written thesis. Participants were also given the choice of being given a pseudonym in my written documentation of the interview however none requested this.

Environmental activism and litigation surrounding asbestos contamination in Libby is ongoing. Thus, some individuals were still directly involved in sensitive negotiations or political situations. As a result, I worked to ensure that sensitive information was kept confidential in a password-protected computer and that, when requested, I did not associate names with particular quotations or phrases utilized in my work.

The largest limitation resulting from my methods and research question is the small population size available for interviews. My research focuses primarily upon those activists who were involved with the initial activism pushing for recognition of asbestos contamination in Libby. However, as a result of the contamination they were protesting, most of the activists who were heavily involved in this fight have since died. As a result, my pool of interview participants is small. I was able to speak with the remaining activists — Gayla Benefield, Eva Benefield and Leroy Thom — who have been active on this issue since the beginning. Chris Carver provides the perspective of activists who are currently involved, but were not directly engaged in the emergence of the movement. Despite my small sample size, I feel the silence left behind by deceased activists is illustrative of contemporary narratives in Libby and will be analyzed further in my results section. I was able to find quotations from these activists from other examinations of this case study and I have integrated them into my results when appropriate. I was also able to speak with current and former residents of Libby to further my understanding of the community and the ways in which W. R. Grace operated within it. I also spoke with national reporters who have written various stories about contamination and activism in Libby.

Finally, the time constraint of an undergraduate thesis prevented me from digging further into the issues contained in this thesis, and continued exploration is necessary to fully understand the current situation in Libby, Montana. This project revisits the situation in Libby many years after activism began, yet conflict is ever present. A long-term, longitudinal study to explore the continuing aftershocks of environmental justice concerns and the enduring effect of activism on individual identity would be make a positive contribution to both environmental and sociological literature.

Background

Libby, Montana is located in the northwest corner of the state. It is found in Lincoln County and is home to less than 3,000 people with 12,000 county residents living within a ten-mile radius (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2012b). Libby is a small rural town that has long been reliant on extractive industries — both mining and logging. The vermiculite mine operated by Grace has a long foundational history in Libby. Edgar Alley began selling Zonolite (his chosen name for the mineral vermiculite) in 1919. His company, also called Zonolite, continued to grow and with it came the Libby community. It was during the Zonolite days that occupational health concerns were first raised by the state of Montana, as early as 1940 (Schneider and McCumber 2004). In 1962, Montana stated that the dust produced at the Zonolite mine contained extremely high levels of tremolite asbestos, and that this asbestos was hazardous to human health (Bowker 2003). Thus, when W.R. Grace purchased the business and holdings in 1963, it took ownership of a mining operation that was known to be toxic for humans. Throughout its operating years, until the mine's closing in 1990, managers and top safety officials exchanged numerous memos revealing their knowledge of the health implications of Libby vermiculite and explicitly expressing orders to keep this information confidential (Schneider and McCumber 2004; Bowker 2003; Peacock 2003). Workers were not informed, nor were the many processing plants and companies that purchased Libby Zonolite. It is estimated that during its operation, the Libby mine produced 80% of the world's vermiculite — and all of it was contaminated (Schneider and McCumber 2004).

Vermiculite is a mica-like mineral composed of thin, shiny flakes. When heated, vermiculite ‘pops’ and expands up to 30 times its original size (Potter 2002).

Vermiculite is a dynamic fire-resistant mineral and has been used in countless products including home insulation, fire-retardants, automobile brakes and soil fertilizers (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2012b). Pure or ‘clean’ vermiculite is not hazardous to human health; however, as in the case of Libby, vermiculite frequently occurs alongside asbestos. Asbestos is a group of fibrous minerals that are further delineated into several categories. Tremolite asbestos is the most hazardous of these types (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2012a). When airborne fibers are inhaled they become embedded in lung tissues. Once there, these fibers irritate tissues and cause scarring. This condition, referred to as asbestosis, is defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2012a) as a “serious, progressive, long-term non-cancer disease of the lungs.” Asbestos exposure leads to dramatically increased levels of many cancers, particularly in the lungs and stomach. It is the sole cause of mesothelioma, an abdominal cancer, which is considered to be “more physically painful and psychologically devastating than AIDS” (Bowker 2003:5). Asbestos-related diseases result in painful and prolonged deaths. In Libby, over 400 people have died as a result of asbestos-related diseases, and thousands more live with a diagnosis (Associated Press 2011). Neighbors, wives and grandchildren are forced to watch their loved ones die of the same disease that will eventually claim them as well.

Dust containing tremolite asbestos was everywhere in Libby, from home gardens to the high school track. Workers, especially sweepers in the dry mill, were coated in the heavy white substance referred to as ‘nuisance dust’ by Grace managers.

Newcomers to the mill worked as sweepers in the dry mill and were quickly introduced to the pervasive nature of the dust. Sweepers worked to clean knee-high piles of asbestos-laden dust, creating billowing clouds with every movement. Men left the mine covered in dust and returned home to their families, unaware of the toxins they were transporting. Les Skramstad, a former Grace miner who became an outspoken advocate for asbestos victims, expressed his sadness and profound sense of betrayal: “Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that I was doing anything to hurt my family. That’s what makes me the maddest. They gave me a job that had fatal consequences and knowingly let me take that death home to my wife and kids. You tell me, what kind of people could do that?” (Bowker 2003:9). Les’ comment underscores the devastation felt by Libby miners and residents upon realizing that their employers did not have workers best interests at heart.

Asbestos contamination in Libby marks a unique chapter in asbestos history. Typically it was thought that exposure occurred only in occupational settings, leaving workers as the sole contaminated bodies. In Libby, however, not only was the dust transported home but according to Grace’s records when the mill was operating at 1969 levels, it was expelling two and a half tons of tremolite asbestos into the community *each day* (Schneider and McCumber 2004:251). Simply living in Libby, regardless of your association with the mine, posed a significant risk of contamination via airborne particulates. Contaminated vermiculite was widely circulated throughout Libby for use as home insulation and garden fertilizer. Vermiculite was used in the high school track and community skating rink and was poured into the concrete lanes at the bowling alley. The most commonly recounted story of asbestos exposure took place just outside

the fences of the baseball fields. It was here that large, uncovered piles of contaminated vermiculite were stored. Playing in these mountains of vermiculite was a rite of passage, one that is remembered fondly and often by residents. “Oh yeah! We used to play in it!” said Ellen Johnston, long-time resident of Libby during an interview, “It was fun! It was slick and it was pretty. We’d dig piles of it and slide down it and play in it.” Despite knowledge of the impacts to human health, W.R. Grace freely provided contaminated vermiculite to residents, who were entirely unaware of its impacts on human health.

Business continued as usual in Libby with little to no activism. Only a few voices, including Gayla’s, contested the safety of the dust. Most people were largely unaware of the astronomical impacts of asbestos contamination. Gayla had been attempting to share the information she had uncovered about Grace’s culpability for years, but received little interest until Andrew Schneider of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer newspaper came to town in 1999. He was traveling the West investigating the impact of 1872 mining laws and heard whispers about asbestos in Libby. Schneider took a detour through Libby and was shocked by what he found. Despite pressure from lawyers, Gayla decided to share what she knew with Schneider. In an interview she remembered:

I’d been warned by the courts not to talk to the press not to publicize, because W.R. Grace would move the trials on Libby ... So I was really under the gun because I felt allegiance to the law firms that were defending all these people, but by the same token I felt like this story needed to get out.

After this initial visit, Schneider spent approximately two months investigating before he published the groundbreaking article, “A Town Left to Die” on November 18, 1999.

The article, quickly followed by several more, created an uproar in Libby and located Libby firmly in the national spotlight. This was the first that many Libby residents had heard about the dangers of tremolite including Chris Craver, whose father and grandfather both worked at the mine was living in Spokane, Washington when the article was published. He said:

It was something that I didn't even know about. So as soon as I read about it in the Spokesman Review, the first thing I did was I called my dad. And I said, what's this about? And he really didn't have an answer for me. He said, 'well you read what I read.' And it was just a shock.

Grace had effectively maintained its secret for decades, but after the publication of these articles that was no longer possible. The Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) responded.

The EPA's role in Libby has been contentious from the start. The community has been, and remains to this day, divided about the responsibilities of W.R. Grace and the EPA to the town of Libby. Some feel that the agencies have done enough damage to the local tourism and business industry and should now leave Libby to manage its own affairs while others feel that moving on from this intensive contamination is impossible and doubt if it ever will be possible. Despite this stark difference of opinions, residents feel pride in their Libby heritage and in interviews expressed a strong sense of community that overrode other divisions. The following section examines the results of my research and explores Libby residents' stories of identity, activism and contamination.

Results

My interviews produced many insights into the lives of environmental justice activists, but in this section I will focus upon only a few beginning with Grace's role in enforcing silence in the social and medical communities in Libby, followed by activists' reflections upon their activism. The section concludes with a discussion of residents' conceptions of Libby's future.

Grace had clearly secured its place as a dominant institution in Libby society. With this prestige came the ability, as demonstrated by Bell and York (2010), to influence culture and act as a gatekeeper for the narratives available for individuals to access. Narratives act as guides for evaluating appropriate beliefs, roles and actions within a community. By asserting its presence in the lifeworld of the town, Grace continuously reinforced its image as a reliable, responsible institution that genuinely cared for the health and happiness of its employees and Libby residents. Due to intensive maintenance, this was the prevailing narrative and, as Ann Swidler (1986) cautions, it became common sense and long remained unquestioned. "Libby is a very trusting community," said longtime activist Les Skramstad, "we trusted the company. We never considered they would do anything that would harm their own employees. We were wrong" (Schneider 1999). Residents of Libby lived within narratives constructed and preserved by W.R. Grace, and contesting these narratives was equated with questioning the Libby way of life. In this way the narrative of being a good citizen of Libby, and the narrative of being supportive of Grace were merged — those who challenged Grace were viewed as turning their backs on Libby.

Much like the “Friends of Coal” campaign that sought to embed the coal industry into the social structure of West Virginia, Grace recognized the important power that comes with occupying a prominent position within a small community and worked diligently to sustain this prestige. Grace was involved in almost every aspect of social life in Libby. Managers filled high-ranking roles on the school and hospital boards and gave generously to charities. Former resident Chris Craver stated:

They were very active in the community ... if someone wanted to come up and get something [vermiculite] for the garden, to loosen up the soil, you were more than welcome to come up and get some vermiculite. For your gardens, or to insulate your homes, stuff like that. With the church and stuff, they were very involved — in the whole town of Libby.

As Eva Benefield wryly noted, “even the radiology department was more or less owned by W.R. Grace.”

Grace plugged money into the community and in a small rural town, economic support is highly valued. These gifts served to reinforce the narrative that Grace played a pivotal role in Libby, and that the town would be seriously disadvantaged without their generosity. Bell and York (2010) explore the significance of these economic donations for reinforcing industry-friendly narratives; donations imply that “without the coal industry, West Virginians would not only be without jobs, they would also be without sporting events, soccer fields, cultural events and community centers” (136). Grace embraced this tactic and created an image of itself as a community-oriented business. Through conscious image manipulation, industry is portrayed as an integral member of the community and its absence would result in unthinkable changes to the community. When this paternalistic narrative is accepted, it is much harder to challenge

the coal industry or W.R. Grace because to do so is a direct assault on the community itself, as perceptions of industry and community are fused.

Grace's contributions to the community were highly valued and appreciated by residents. Gayla Benefield elaborated:

W.R. Grace treated the community wonderfully . . . People thought this was a private little company, but this was only a tiny piece of a big conglomerate. People in Libby didn't realize – they thought this was their own little mine. W.R. Grace provided all of the baseball uniforms for all the kids to play little league down next to the expanding plant and the railroad tracks – on contaminated fields.

The frequency and visibility of these gifts left Libby utterly indebted. For years the residents had little reason to question the authenticity of the gifts. Yet, today the motive behind the gifts seems dubious. If W.R. Grace was aware of the substantially toxic vermiculite it distributed throughout the town and was keeping this information from residents (an act indicating their apparent ambivalence towards human health) – why would they choose to spend large sums of money on the population if not to maintain passivity and industry alliance? If the company did not care enough about Libby's health to share their knowledge of asbestos or dramatically reform safety measures, why would it cultivate the impression that they cared for their workers and the larger community? The answer lies in the connectivity between narrativity and power. As the Friends of Coal campaign recognized, those who have the power to control narratives are able to subtly and effectively influence culture, thereby indoctrinating entire populations with attitudes that increase and maintain their privileged position in society. By presenting the (constructed) narrative that Grace cared about the residents of Libby, the company stopped contestations before they started. Grace hid behind its constructed

façade as a way to continue its polluting practices without public scrutiny. In this way, it was easy for Libby residents to incorporate positive perceptions of Grace into their stories and collective identity, which ultimately made it more difficult for them to believe that such a beloved company had wronged them.

Silence

In addition to remaining silent, Grace actively worked to create silence by suppressing stories that contested assumptions about the safety of nuisance dust. Steve Schwarze (2007) notes that privileged groups, like Grace, use silence to encourage “public reliance on taken-for-granted belief and assumptions ... [it] can serve to sustain privilege and normalize existing patterns of injustice” (170). W.R. Grace created and manipulated silence in Libby to secure the dominance of its narratives while simultaneously silencing narratives that questioned Grace’s identity as a compassionate, caring member of the community.

In maintaining its image, Grace strictly controlled the language it used to construct narratives and tell its stories. When Grace took control of the mining and milling operations, owners and managers were aware of the toxic asbestos fibers in the dust and their implications for human health, yet for years referred to it simply as ‘nuisance dust’. This phrase provided no indication of the poisonous nature of the ubiquitous substance — it is portrayed as an innocent, if bothersome, part of life and work in Libby. When outside pressure forced Grace to inform its workers about the dust, the rhetoric changed and supervisors began calling it by its name: tremolite. Workers were informed that Libby vermiculite contained tremolite. But without further education, this

word implied nothing more toxic than nuisance dust. The men working at the mine did not understand what tremolite was and they were not informed of its toxicity.

Grace's silence regarding asbestos education highlights the power held by those institutions that are able to control story and silence in a community. By manipulating the stories that circulate in the social sphere, powerful institutions control perceptions of truth.

W.R. Grace was willing to buy off activists to control the stories that existed in Libby. Gayla Benefield, a lifelong Libby resident, watched both her father (who had worked at the mine) and her mother (who had not) die of asbestos-related diseases. After her mother's death in 1996, Gayla and her sister Eva decided to sue W.R. Grace for the wrongful death of their mother. While others, like Les Skramstad, had successfully sued Grace regarding asbestos contamination, no one who was unaffiliated with the mine had filed a lawsuit. The Benefields refused to settle out of court, which was Grace's preferred method of ending lawsuits. Grace was extremely keen to stop the trial at any cost. Grace managers felt that if they could silence Gayla's story, all opposition would fall away. They offered larger and larger sums of money to entice an out-of-court settlement, culminating in \$605,000 and an apology for the deaths of Perley and Margaret Vatland. However, this apology came with a gag order: Gayla was never to show it to anyone outside of the family. It was not uncommon for Grace trials to settle out of court, but each settlement was accompanied by a gag order, so miners could not discuss the settlement or their case against the company. Buying this silence ensured that the issue of asbestos contamination was kept out of newspapers and out of neighborhood conversations, which were "the fastest method of mass communication in

Libby” (Bowker 2003:134). However, Gayla and her family refused the settlement and went ahead with the trial, securing a guilty verdict and paving the ways for others to follow. Grace was willing to go to great lengths to silence contestation of its narrative. As Gayla said, the mine held the town in a stranglehold, “they literally controlled the community.” Ultimately, it was the stories shared by asbestos victims and their advocates that interrupted this managed silence.

A new type of silence exists in Libby today. It is not a forced silence, but merely a lack of voices. The enormity of asbestos contamination means that many of the original activists have already passed away. Their voices, which once loudly contested this injustice, have fallen silent. This silence is actively noticed by current residents, and should not go unmentioned here. It is a different type of silence, at once both natural and unnatural. It is a powerful reminder of the consequences of Grace’s actions and an eerie mirror of their manufactured silence.

Grace and the Medical Community

When Grace acquired the Zonolite mine in 1963 they were already aware of the health implications of their product. As a result, they instituted an x-ray policy for all workers (Schneider and McCumber 2004; Bowker 2003). Each year workers would receive an x-ray free of charge. Eva remembered, “they gave them an x-ray every year for their health, for nothing.” The message imparted to workers was one of genuine concern for occupational health and safety. Workers felt privileged to work for such a caring company; they had no reason to believe otherwise. This policy contributed to strong feelings of loyalty. And yet, workers were never given access to the results of

their x-rays that showed deterioration in lung health. They were not informed about the status of their compromised lungs. In 1968 an internal memo from Grace's safety chief suggested reassigning those workers who showed developed lung impairments to positions in which they would be less exposed in order to "keep them on the job until they retire, thus precluding the high cost of total disability" (Schneider 1999). Grace safety managers knew about the dangers of asbestos contamination and were actively tracking exposed workers. However instead of minimizing risks for their employees, they simply maintained secrecy and relocated workers to minimize financial losses. While the x-rays appeared to have positive intentions, the underlying economic rationale was not visible to workers or to the Libby community. W.R. Grace worked discreetly and intentionally to maintain its desired image in the community.

In response to contestation of the health impacts of asbestos, Grace repeatedly pointed to tobacco smoking as the culprit. As Vyner (1988) noted, polluting institutions often employ promotable villains to distance themselves from culpability. They diverted blame away from themselves and asbestos contamination and located it directly upon the victim himself: *he brought his illness upon himself by making the choice to smoke*. Again, the power to manipulate language is used to control narratives about health: how and why people become ill. These narratives constructed by Grace portray individuals as active independent agents making their own decisions by downplaying the structural and cultural institutions (like Grace) that constrain their actions and wield direct influence on their health. By employing strategic language use and story construction Grace was able to reassert its own narratives and maintain its power in Libby.

This took place extensively in Libby's medical community. The hospital became the space in which Grace's economic domination melded with its symbolic power to manipulate narratives. Doctors in Libby were in a remarkable situation where they saw the health impacts of workers and their families, and yet still remained silent. Few, if any, raised concerns about the lung health of Libby residents. W. R. Grace donated extensively to St. Joseph's Hospital and continuously maintained a presence on the board. When Dr. Richard Irons moved to Libby in the 1970s, he was told to "treat the measles and the mumps and leave the guys from the mine alone" (Bowker 2003:123). Asbestosis was rarely a diagnosis while pneumonia and emphysema — supposedly from smoking — were all too common diagnoses. But Irons was a promising young doctor who repeatedly challenged Grace about the significant rates of lung abnormalities and mesothelioma, not only among workers, but among their families as well. Irons approached Grace, government agencies, the press and county commissioners, but none were interested in his case. One commissioner even said, "we're not going to let you destroy one of the largest employers in town" (Schneider and McCumber 2004:124). Internal memos released later reveal Grace's conscious decision to end Irons' career. Irons was shunned throughout town, patients were sent to other doctors as far away as Kalispell and Irons was accused of drug use and his hospital privileges were revoked (Bowker 2003).

Long after Irons moved away, his former co-worker, Dr. Brad Black admitted that he should have stood up for Irons, but the outside pressure from Grace was simply too much. He had a family to support and graduate school loans to pay off — the risks were just too high (Bowker 2003). Today however, Dr. Black has remained in Libby and has

dedicated his career to helping those with asbestos-related disease. Dr. Black runs the CARD (Center for Asbestos Related Disease). It is his way of making up his debt to the community, to pay for his years of silence.

Activism

Activism takes many forms. Environmental justice activism encompasses a wide variety of actions and unlike mainstream environmentalism where activism is centered around the preservation of untouched nature or the protection of endangered species, in the environmental justice movement humans and environmental health are the foci. This thrusts activists into the spotlight and they become the face of a movement, rather than, for example, a polar bear. For this reason, personal stories and the experiences of individuals play an exceedingly important role. Activism is a dynamic process in which stories are shared and dominant narratives are questioned in an attempt to achieve justice or a particular change in the status quo. This takes shape in a multitude of forms and includes varying levels of commitment. Activism has an enormous impact upon individual constructions of identity, especially because it requires challenging a narrative that has been instrumental in forming one's established identity. This section focuses upon the reasons why individuals in the Libby community became advocates for asbestos victims, what this activism looked like and how it affected their identity.

Activist Gayla Benefield had been collecting official Grace documents for years before Seattle Post-Intelligencer reporter Andrew Schneider stumbled upon Libby. When he arrived, piles of paperwork covering her kitchen table revealed the extensive nature of her previously unrecognized activism. Up until the first article was published,

Gayla was raising concerns that were falling upon unreceptive ears. She had court documents from her mother's case, and had found Grace and federal safety documents, and yet no press was interested in publishing her story. When Gayla heard that Grace was set to receive the final portion of their reclamation bond she investigated and found that the old mine site had not been properly cleaned. She filed an investigation — and from then on there was no turning back. Interestingly, what was largely a fight for human health began with concern for the natural environment.

This was at approximately the same time that Schneider was readying to publish his exposé piece on the widespread contamination in Libby. He recognized the importance of this article and could foresee the ripple effects of its publication. Gayla said:

Two days before he broke the story, he called me and he said, 'Gayla, I've got it ready to go, but you know, its going to change your life. If you want me to I'll throw it in the trash.' And his wife told me he has never offered to do that before. He could see what was going to happen to this. And I said no. And it did change my life.

In this moment, Gayla made a conscious decision to step into a life of activism. Many of the activists in *Blue Vinyl* and throughout Louisiana's Chemical Corridor made similar decisions; because the concerns raised in environmental justice activism are so fundamentally personal, a deliberate choice is required to begin sharing stories publicly in an attempt to obtain justice.

In doing so, Gayla occupied a unique role in the Libby community. She was a lone voice speaking out against an overwhelming majority. She was viewed (and at times felt) separate from much of the Libby population. Yet, instead of resisting her label she embraced it and used it to her advantage. "In the old Cowboy and Indian

movies the Indians would never touch the crazy woman up on the mountain. Basically I have been safe because I have been called that crazy woman on the mountain.” Her position as a “crazy woman” allowed her to speak and act out in ways that would be unacceptable for the average Libby resident. She was granted special immunity and she seized the opportunity. From this role her voice was set apart from others. Gayla actively accepted her label and used it as a way to gain further attention and traction for her stories. She incorporated the story of the “crazy woman” into her identity to aid in her activism and now repeats the tale as affirmation of her past actions and conceptions of self.

Gayla watched the impact asbestos contamination was having on her family and friends and was outraged. “To me,” she said, “it was just a moral, W.R. Grace had a moral responsibility. The state, the federal government, they all had a moral responsibility.” Activism driven by an ethical framework, or a conception of right and wrong, is a consistent theme throughout environmental justice campaigns. This moral justification becomes substantially more pronounced when the rights and health of children are compromised. In Libby, much of the community outrage and sadness came when residents realized to what extent the children had been exposed through everyday actions such as playing and attending school. Gayla said:

That’s actually a turning point for a lot of people. Because they accepted even as residents of Libby, they accepted their own diagnoses, our generation. But then the next generation – the children – started being diagnosed and then realizing that even their grandchildren can be. I started putting it together in my head and thought oh my god. I let my children be exposed to this by going to the ball fields and stuff. And that was probably one of the worst points in my life and that just gave me more ammunition to keep going.

The perception of children as innocent and removed from larger political and social conflicts fueled this outrage. Adults accepted their health impairments because they saw them as inevitable consequences of working for the mine or being married to miners — consequences of the choices that they had made. Children, on the other hand, were uninvolved and unable to understand their situation, or to take real action to change it. As Eva Benefield stated, “when Dale [her husband] was diagnosed with it, well he worked there. And after he died the next September I was diagnosed. Well ok. But when my children were diagnosed, that’s when I got mad.” The stoic acceptance of one’s own disease mimics the attitudes of miners towards their difficult, but life-sustaining, professions. The rural mentality of Libby conditions residents to be tough and to stifle their complaints. This means it takes a high magnitude injustice for individuals to begin speaking out. In this case, it was the rampant exposure of individuals of all ages, including small children, which compelled activism.

Social Networks as Catalysts for Activism

The close personal connections and the cultural narratives emphasizing family Libby make relationships an understandable impetus for activism. Loved ones, especially children, affected by asbestos-related disease were catalysts for many people’s activism. In this way, personal identity directly influences activism. Individuals often define themselves based upon their relationships to others. This explains the ease with which mothers transition into activists. As noted earlier, because this type of activism seeks to protect human health, many see their work as “the natural extension of the nurturing and parenting role” (Verchick 2004:64). Activism in Libby

follows a similar pattern where social connections lead to participation. All of my interviews were characterized by continual references to stories about friends and family members' illnesses and accounts of life in Libby. The complex network of relationships and connections creates a collective identity within which individuals locate themselves. This social location influences individual conceptions of identity.

In small communities, networks of relationships spread outward in seemingly infinite directions. While this is often a pillar of strength for communities, in places like Libby where activism contests a (seemingly) fundamental piece of the community, social ties can either encourage or hinder participation in social movements. For some, connections to ill family members were enough to motivate action; for others, more complex social ties restrained activism. Eva Benefield was often torn between competing ties of allegiance to her sister Gayla, the original Libby activist, and to her husband, Dale, a supervisor at the mine. Her identity as a sister (and child to parents killed by asbestos-related diseases) promoted a different set of actions than did her identity as a loyal wife to her husband. After Dale passed away, his supervisor helped Eva maintain a company pension but was simultaneously representing Grace in lawsuits against local miners and residents (including Gayla).

When relationships influence conceptions of identity, and individuals are forced to choose between competing claims, stories play a determining role in decision-making.

When retelling how she navigated this tricky situation, Eva remembered (and was encouraged to by Gayla) the stories of her parents' lives and deaths, and the death of her husband. Repeating stories to herself solidifies the experiences as integral components of who Eva is. They reinforce her sense of identity as daughter and wife and activist.

These relationships were more salient than her connection to the mine supervisor, and thus she acted upon them, but always with the acknowledgement of her relationship to the supervisor to whom she owed a great debt.

Competing social ties are unavoidable in small communities like Libby. These connections complicate any decision to participate in activism that ultimately challenges the status quo of that society. Activism in Libby surrounding Grace and asbestos contamination caused a rupture in the social fabric of the community, and former friends became opponents on either side of the ideological rift. However, residents of Libby are quick to point out that pride in being from the community of Libby is consistently a uniting force. Regardless of where one stands on the issue EPA involvement or the role of W.R. Grace in the community, hometown pride forms the foundational unifier in Lincoln County. This profound collective identity highlights the interplay between collective and individual identity. Each reinforces the other and changes in the construction of one identity ripple through the other.

Although existing literature emphasizes the impact of these relationships on activist women, men in Libby were equally compelled by these social obligations. Chris Craver said that for him, “what really matters are my dad and my grandpa. And the people that it’s [asbestos contamination] affecting that I know that matter. It killed my dad; it killed my grandpa — who knows about my father-in-law. It literally killed them.” The importance of emotional justification for activism sets environmental justice apart from other environmental movements. Here, individuals – both men and women - made no attempt to sterilize or to rationalize the motivation behind their actions. Emotions like anger and despair are the impetus for meaningful action. They felt a deep

sense of injustice and sought to right it. Men like Leroy Thom and Les Skramstad were just as active as Gayla Benefield in the initial activism.

When they do begin speaking out, these activists rarely have formal campaign training. Nor do they hold large quantities of cultural or economic capital. The power of environmental justice movements comes from the politicization of stories and the contestation of larger cultural narratives. When people share their stories they are both revealing aspects of themselves to others and reinforcing the importance of those stories to their personal identity. This type of activism changes individual identities as stories of advocacy, empowerment and new perceptions of their role in the community emerge. The dynamic nature of story-sharing became apparent during my group interviews as participants would affirm and embellish each other's stories, clarify or contest them completely. When stories are shared they morph and change, and it is through this process that they become deeply embedded into identities both collective and individual.

One particularly compelling display of activism began on Memorial Day 2001 when Gayla and the other 'troublemakers' decided to visibly document the number of asbestos-related deaths in Libby. They created white crosses and stenciled on the names of those who had passed away due to asbestos-related-disease. During the first year they had just over 100 crosses filling a corner of the local cemetery. As the years progressed the number of crosses grew. This annual event became a time of renewed vigor and forceful protest of the contamination heaped upon Libby. Gayla noted, "we did it as a protest. Not so much to memorialize the people that had died, but we literally did it as a protest." Stories of this event are retold over and over and doing so solidifies them as

important markers of an activist identity. The story helps to reinforce feelings of solidarity between activists, and now it serves to remind the living of those who have been lost. Most stories told in Libby end with a pause and a sad acknowledgement that those who were present during the creation of the story are now gone. This story is no different. After Eva and Gayla finished telling the stories of stenciling names onto crosses, loading them into flatbed trucks and arranging them in the cemetery, they reminded each other that, “the people that were the head of that are dead, only one is left alive.” Stories of loss abound in Libby and demonstrate that even after they are gone, individuals strongly influence the identities of those who remain.

While Leroy Thom historically held numerous official positions in the mineworkers union (including President), he described himself as “just your average Joe taking care of personal issues.” He willingly attended meetings to stay informed — thereby participating in a kind of activism — however, once he realized the stories of former mineworkers were not being told, he quickly decided to take a formal position in the Community Advisory Group (CAG) established by the EPA. He has been a passionate victims’ advocate from the beginning. Since that time, he has been asked to participate “on several boards or committees related to the asbestos issue,” and believes his involvement has shaped him positively. His activism stemmed from a deep desire to help improve his community. When asked about his activism he said, “I guess I just haven’t been able to say no and hope that it has helped in some way to remediate the issues that our community has faced.” He feels he is simply “one of many concerned citizens that just wants the clean-up and the health issues to be addressed properly and completely.” He is grateful for the information he has learned about the ways in which

communities can effectively respond to contamination and prevent similar toxic exposure in the future.

Gayla's activism comes from what she sees as an innate character trait. "I've always been a bit of a rabble rouser" she said, "if there was a principle or something to fight for, I was there." Gayla seems to be the quintessential environmental justice activist. She saw trouble in her community and boldly stood up to fix it. After years of relentless questioning and attempts to raise awareness about the health implications of asbestos exposure, connecting with Andrew Schneider helped to advance her quest for justice. She began attending national conferences and meetings with heads of federal agencies even though she "didn't know acronyms from a hole in the ground at that time." When compared, as she often is, to the famed environmental justice advocate Erin Brockovich she just laughed and said, "no, Erin Brockovich is taller than I am," then quickly added, "and she's made money. We've never made a dime from this." Gayla is a woman who has seen injustice, and has fought against it.

Her activism in Libby was often met with resistance. Many business owners simply wished the entire contamination scandal would vanish, as it was bad for tourism. They resented those voices raising questions about the health risks of living in Libby. Initially, Gayla was a lone voice of concern in the CAG but support grew behind her as information surfaced about Grace's cover up. She was targeted and it was as though she had a "big label, or scarlet letter on [her] forehead." Gayla expressed frustration at accusations that she is ruining Libby. "All the corporations and industry are harming the town economy," she said, "and who gets blamed — me." This illustrates the level to

which Grace's narratives have been accepted and internalized in Libby, as many residents were willing to side with Grace over their neighbor.

For Gayla, activism is an important part of her recent history, and she continues to share her story with reporters, students and national media. However she no longer participates actively on boards or holds protests in Libby. One day, after years of intensive activism she stopped.

I sat down and I resigned from every board I was on that day. Literally. No, I did not look back. I said I've got a life. I had gone to 6 funerals within 6 weeks of friends and family. Only one was not related to asbestos related disease, the rest of them died as a result of these 1 in a million cancers you might say. (Gayla Benefield)

Gayla dedicated years of time and resources (emotional and financial) fighting for justice for asbestos victims and their families. It was her life, and yet she was able to consciously step back from her public position and pass the responsibility along to newer, possibly younger activists. She pointed to the lessons she's learned as the best education she's received, and spoke proudly of her ability to instill a sense of justice in her children and Libby's younger generations. She is still happy to speak with college students, like myself, across the country, but locally she is confident in the next generations of activists to continue the fight for justice.

Like many environmental justice advocates, Chris Craver does not consider himself an activist. "I don't consider myself an activist by any means, because I don't live and breathe it. I just like to call up once in a while and make sure they remember." For Chris, activism is a large defining feature of one's identity. He feels that a certain threshold must be reached before the label is fitting. As he discussed his activism he

frequently referenced Gayla Benefield, indicating his belief that she is a true activist, while his actions are too sporadic and low-key to be called activism. Much as victim's advocates reinforce their collective identity by contrasting their group with "them" or "the merchants," Chris sees Gayla as an activist, and because his actions do not match hers, he must not be an activist. Yet, under the scope of activism being considered in this paper, Chris is certainly an activist. He has a personal investment in the issue, and is dedicated to ensuring the memorability of the contamination in Libby. He is waiting for the moment that people – be it the government, Libby residents or the press – forget and silence returns to Libby. It is during this time that Chris sees his activism flourishing. When this happens he affirmed that he would "go over to my mom's yard, dig some dirt up and say no. Its not done yet, this shit is all over the yard." Activism is a component of one's identity that can be selected at will. While he does not consider himself an activist now, it is a title he could assume later.

Miner Loyalty as Narrative

Many of Chris' stories revolved around his childhood in the mining community. His father and Grandfather were proud Grace employees who could often be found socializing with their co-workers around town. Zonolite (and. Grace) miners were fiercely loyal to their company and to each other. They were grateful to have steady employment and working for the mine was a status symbol in the community. This loyalty continued after W.R. Grace stopped operating, and fueled anti-activist sentiment in Libby. Much like the coal industry in West Virginia, Grace had a long-lasting presence in the community even after 1991. For this reason, many former miners and their families were — and still are — reluctant to speak negatively about Grace, or

about the company's knowledge of asbestos toxicity. Chris Craver, whose father recently passed away as a result of asbestos related disease explained:

I think a lot of it is the miners. They were actually proud to work for Grace. The money was good, it was a steady job, it put food on the table so they weren't going to badmouth them. And, a lot of them, even my dad wouldn't badmouth Grace for a long time. Just because they were a good company to work for. That's pretty much the Montana mentality too. You've got a good job, whether its shitty or not you're going to go do it everyday, you're going to suck it up, and you are going to appreciate it. I think a lot of it is just the mentality of Libby. They are proud of what they do. They are proud of who they are.

Appreciation for possessing a job characterized many individuals' (especially men's) attitudes towards their employment. As Gayla said, "the guys who worked at the mine loved it. The company treated them wonderfully, it was a sorority." Chris thinks it's a Montanan, Libbian approach; one that is emphasized in company towns throughout America. Individual identity construction is tightly bound to occupation — especially in situations such as these. Being a miner, especially a Grace or Zonolite miner, was often the primary identity role of workers at the mine. Chris' description of the typical, hardworking male aligns closely with traditional stereotypes of masculinity. The masculine narrative exploited in the 'Friends of Coal' campaign resurfaces here as well. While Grace may not have explicitly circulated this masculine narrative, it was reinforced through hiring practices, and a hierarchy of roles that ranked office jobs lower than driving the Euclid "Euke" Trucks for example — the trucks themselves serving as overt symbols of domination and strength.

Men loved working at the mine, and formed close connections to their fellow workers. The shared bus rides up to and down from the mountain created a physical

closeness between the men. And, as Schneider and McCumber (2004) muse, pride in accomplishing hard work was ever present: “perhaps that was it, the work: the sense of shared toughness, having the collective grit and gumption to overcome the harsh physical challenges ... the pressure to produce and the dust. Always the dust” (68). In my research each interviewee emphasized the close relationships between workers and the overwhelming sense of pride they had in their work. Chris said that “When my dad died, he wanted to be buried with Zonoliters, and he is surrounded by them.”

These relationships transferred to life off the mountain as well. As Chris explained, “we know all the old Zonoliters, you know everybody. They worked together, we had picnics. I had friends whose dads were bosses up there.” These connections in a small town allowed individuals to occupy many roles within the community. Individuals could be miners, fathers, husbands and sons simultaneously. When the expectations of each of these components of an identity conflict, one must choose between them. When information about Grace’s cover-up became public, many people were caught between roles as friends and supervisors. The town was split between those supporting and those opposing Grace, and friendships were often caught in the middle.

Consciousness Raising

As discussed earlier, conscious raising “describes the process by which individuals share personal experiences [stories] with one another in an effort to derive collective significance or meaning from those experiences” (Verchick 2004:67). Story sharing was an integral component of activism for asbestos victims in Libby. For many,

even the act of verbally relating their story to others in their community constituted an act of resistance. People became reclusive after receiving Grace settlement, and the presence of an oxygen tank became an indicator of an unspoken arrangement with Grace. Thus, when people began sharing stories of their health, they were directly contesting the imposed silence. Similar to meetings in the Chemical Corridor in Louisiana, when residents of Libby communicated their experiences they found that their neighbors were suffering as well. Opening a space for this dialogue in existing discourse (or silence) creates fertile ground for bonding between individuals who find comfort and understanding in their peers. It was in these interactions that collaborative groups were formed and solidified.

Two main consciousness raising episodes are highlighted here. The first took place immediately after the publication of Andrew Schneider's article in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer in 1999. After the piece was widely dispersed throughout town (Andrew and his team actually drove to Libby and the surrounding area to deliver copies of the newspaper personally) a town meeting was called to address its claims. This meeting served to highlight the differences between those who supported Grace and dismissed the claims made in the article, and those who did not. It was the first time that residents were given the opportunity to publically defy the oppressive silence that had reigned for many years. Gayla Benefield explained:

Well the first meeting we had after this came out, the first big meeting they had, and I'll tell you what, it was really astounding because all of a sudden. Prior to that, people had not even admitted they had the disease because people were getting settlements from W.R. Grace ... People once they went on oxygen, they became reclusive. They wouldn't even come out publicly because other

people were critical of them. I mean it was horrific.
Absolutely horrific.

By manipulating its material presence in the community, Grace was able to assert its dominance over the cultural lifeworld of Libby. Grace regulated what information and which stories were circulated throughout the town, thereby defending its control over cultural narratives. In prohibiting individuals from talking about the terms and conditions of their settlement and health conditions, Grace was attempting to prevent collective identification and mobilization by the many workers and their families who were suffering from asbestos-related diseases. This silence created an invisible divide between those who were witness to at least some semblance of Grace's guilt (in the form of secret settlements) and perhaps were more willing to question the safety of the nuisance dust and those who were not.

Eva Benefield elaborated on the magnitude of this divide. While it was rarely — if ever — explicitly discussed before the meeting, the physicality of the first town meeting illuminated the rift for the first, but certainly not last, time:

You shoulda seen the first town hall meeting. We had the gym, and we had the speakers up here, this is the bride side, this is the groom side. This is the townies and the ones who are for it, and these are the sick people coughing and hacking in the middle.

In this physical gathering of residents, symbolic and ideological divides had tangible implications. Individuals tended to group with others of similar opinions and viewpoints. This corporeal division served to reify the boundary between Grace supporters and questioners. This physical separation was not unnoticed by others. Gayla Benefield told a similar story about the event:

The gym doors opened and I was inside and all of a sudden and people started pouring through the door just like an awakening. And people came pouring through and they would look at their neighbor, 'you?' 'Yeah me too.' And they just automatically went to one side of the gym. The city merchants came to the other side and there was about one-third of them, we filled up one whole side and part of the bleachers with our people who either had the disease, or had a family member who had the disease. And it was unbelievable, all of a sudden everybody was admitting that they had it, and they were shocked. I mean they were shocked to find out, 'oh, I didn't know that they were diagnosed.' There were 300 people in Libby at that point who had been diagnosed; maybe 20 or 30 percent of them had never worked at the mine. At all ... And I think that really was the big catalyst right there, when I saw that, even with the merchants screaming and hollering 'you're ruining our town' ... And I saw this group of people, and all of a sudden one woman came up to me and said, 'my husband died of mesothelioma two years ago, I didn't know what it was.' And all he had done was help build the bowling alley and help pour the stuff for insulation and she said, 'I didn't know that caused it.' I mean, all of a sudden I could see that people were supportive.

Not only does Gayla echo Eva's recognition of the tangible demarcation between ideological groups, but she also describes the assertive, occasionally aggressive nature of conflict between these groups. In contesting the claims of asbestos victims, rhetoric conflates claims about personal health with the overall health of the community. Anti-activist sentiments explicitly allege that by questioning the integrity of Grace, these activists are challenging the essence of Libby. Statements such as "you're ruining our town" demonstrate an acceptance of the dominant narrative (projected by Grace) that Grace *is* the community and that the town of Libby would fundamentally change without it.

This event served as a communal shattering of the multi-year silence that had been cultivated by Grace. A cathartic release of stories allowed residents to find

common plot lines with their neighbors and give voice to the frustration, anger and sadness that they had long kept hidden. The sharing of information allowed people to understand and make sense of what had happened to their loved ones, and gave them the answers they had sought. The woman whose husband had constructed the bowling alley had been unable to understand what had happened to him until this meeting. She was able to see that her situation was not unlike many others in her community. This example highlights the magnitude of both the health implications of asbestos contamination and the extent of Grace's deception. W.R. Grace had effectively silenced opposition and contestation of their dominant narrative for years. Their selective use of language and oppressive denial of stories successfully suppressed competing narratives about Grace's role in the community.

Language use is important in both creating and contesting narratives. The language used in Gayla's citation to draw boundaries between groups served an important function. Language emphasizes differences between groups and created solidarity within them. The "merchants" lay claim to the town ("our town") and clearly distance themselves from those on the opposite side of the aisle ("you") who are challenging Grace. Gayla referred to herself and other asbestos victims and victim's advocates as "we." Often identity construction occurs by juxtaposing groups and creating definitions based upon this comparison. Identity formation takes place in negative, it is as much about what one is not, in addition to what one is or does. This underscores the importance of stories and storytelling. Stories are used to build collective identity and create a strong sense of solidarity through the simultaneously inclusive and exclusive use of the word "us." The word choices made in crafting stories

create layers of subtext and implicit meaning which influence the ways in which stories are used and the meanings they hold as they are retold. In Gayla's stories those identified as "merchants" are implicitly labeled as the opposition. Stories play a critical role in building coalitions that have the ability to mobilize for social change. Gayla noted that this town meeting reassured her that she had support for her claims making, and that others were willing to stand with her. Without public demonstrations of commonality and support, stories exist as singular islands within larger narratives — communication is required to connect them and see the larger forces controlling and influencing these stories.

Gayla recounted another significant moment of awakening when a group of residents gathered informally at her house to meet with Senator Max Baucus. While people initially came to the meeting because of the presence of this powerful outsider, once the meeting began, it was only their neighbors they were interested in. Making connections with others within the community was more meaningful than interacting with the out-of-town senator.

But when Max came I had this group of people, and it's the first time we had ever sat down [together]. And it's funny because we have Max over here talking, and people over here comparing oxygen tanks. After Max left they said, this is nice, we can talk to someone ... and from that we started the support group. (Gayla)

Sharing stories through talking and finding commonalities is essential for any type of collective action. These dialogues allow individuals to recognize familiar storylines in the experiences of their neighbors and connect with each other on this fundamental level. When communication is restricted, individuals only have access to their own stories to make sense of the world. However when stories are exchanged, individuals

are able to locate themselves within a larger network of others who experience the same discrimination, the same contamination. The realization that one is not alone in their understanding of the world can be empowering. In Libby, this episode of consciousness raising resulted in true collaborative activism. Residents used this meeting as a space in which to express their needs — to talk about their lives, to connect with others — and subsequently created a way to fulfill them. In this case, those who participated in this meeting took the steps to create a group dedicated specifically to story sharing and communal support.

The process of story sharing is empowering and beneficial to both those listening and those telling stories. The examples highlighted here illustrate that, when given the opportunity, people are excited and willing to share their personal stories with a compassionate and understanding audience. Chris Craver summed up this need by saying, “I could go on for hours about this.” Individuals accumulate extensive personal histories and understanding those events in a larger context and in connection with others allows for awareness and appreciation of past events. This connection is a prerequisite for collective action.

Conceptions of the Future

Much as the activism surrounding asbestos contamination has been contentious, discussions about the future of Libby are riddled with differing visions and plans for the town’s development. Merchants and retailers, who have long been concerned about the impact of the superfund designation on their businesses, are anxious to move past the stigma of asbestos and encourage new tourism to the area. Ellen Johnson noted that

repeated news stories about asbestos in Libby have “the potential to affect a lot of the businesses in Libby, the hotels, the motels and restaurants, because if the tourists aren’t coming through in the summertime...” In her opinion the contamination of Libby was terrible, and those lost should certainly be mourned but she feels the town must now turn to the future instead of dwelling in the past. “Yes, this did happen, and it was a horrible thing to have happen, but it is time to move on and get past that and do what we need to do in Libby to make it a wonderful place to live.” This standpoint conflicts with others in the community who feel that asbestos is still an active force in the community and that it is still too soon to forget. “There are people who say we’ve just got to forget about this and put it behind us and get on with our lives,” Gayla said, “but we never will. This is part of our life.” She points to those who are still being diagnosed with asbestos-related diseases each week and believes that “the bottom line is that we’ll never get rid of all the asbestos.” Chris agreed with her: “you can’t get rid of it. No matter what you do. Its there and it will always be there.”

Despite these seemingly pessimistic views of Libby as an eternally asbestos-ridden town, both Chris and Gayla emphasized opportunities for growth in Libby, especially in the medical field. With so many ill residents, all suffering from asbestos-related diseases, they see Libby as a place for the latest advancements in treatment for these one-in-a-million cancers. They feel the medical field should seize this ready pool of patients and use them for the benefit of others. In this way, the residents of Libby are finding ways to make the best of their situation, and are thinking beyond themselves to the others affected by asbestos throughout larger communities. They also see a burgeoning medical field as a way to bring economic recovery back to the region and to

jumpstart their dwindling economy. There is talk of a new mine in the area (gold or silver) and many community members, including asbestos activists, welcome it as a positive economic contribution — as long as it is done safely. Even today there is no single vision for the future of Libby, and as with most small towns complete consensus is unattainable.

Conclusions

As Libby transitions out of a tumultuous community and settles into the arduous task of moving forward, community activism must evolve as well. As issues change, so must the focus and strategy of the activists. Activism is never a static process – it is always dynamic. Activism now moves beyond gaining recognition for asbestos victims onto monitoring clean up. Yet while the goals of activism change, the importance of story within the movement remains. Stories are influenced by larger narratives that inform appropriate actions or roles within a culture or community. The interchange between narratives and stories is fluid yet must not be underemphasized.

What happened in Libby is a stark example of the ways in which industry can successfully manipulate cultural narratives and influence local stories and how their power is masked behind acts of seemingly good deeds and unsubstantial promises. It is valuable to consider the ways in which this power operates on greater societal levels as well. The powerful have the ability to dominate the marginalized and the bulk of this power is often manifested in subtle and seemingly unobtrusive ways.

Conceptualizing identity formation through narrativity reflects the importance of stories in individual lives. In this way it allows for flexibility in constructing identities. Instead of being restricted to specific roles as parent or activists, a narrative framework accepts departures from the prescriptive assumptions of other theories of identity, and does not view these choices as inherently problematic - they are simply new stories that will inform future decisions. Addressing identity in this way gives more agency to individuals and accepts decisions as valuable in and of themselves. This approach embeds individuals within timelines of their own creation and as a result is particularly

useful for examining activism within the environmental justice movement with its intensely personal dimensions.

Environmental justice activists are inherently entrenched in their activism. Unlike the mainstream environmental movement in which victimized landscapes or animals are external to the activist, activists themselves are personally affected. Fighting for ones own community imparts a different impact upon identity than fighting to preserve a mountaintop and activism dealing with issues as personal as the polluted bodies of children and families and oneself, takes on a different level of significance. Choosing to engage in activism transforms them from passive victims of contamination into empowered agents in their own lives. Understanding identity in terms of narrativity places individual decisions, including the decision to become activists, within a context of toxic experiences. Suddenly, understanding why housewives and teachers become activists is no longer difficult. Narrativity embeds individuals within their own stories.

The interplay between narratives and stories is difficult to pin down as they reciprocally inform each other. As seen in Libby, narratives are controlled by those with power in a given society or community. This power to control discourse and information can have significant consequences for justice and autonomy within a community. W.R. Grace's actions in Libby illustrate this perfectly. And yet, embracing narrativity and the storied nature of individual lives opens up empowering possibilities for combating this power. As seen in the Chemical Corridor and Libby, stories are an effective tool in contesting larger narratives and creating social change. Taking advantage of the ways in which individuals organize their lives – stories – and turning

them into points of leverage further empowers individuals and activists to harness the inherently dynamic nature of identity.

As the environmental justice movement grows, it is increasingly important to continue sharing stories in larger and increasingly globalized forums. Stories can compress physical distances and connect communities fighting similar battles for human and environmental health. Consciousness raising is not physically bound — its ability to inspire action is not limited to neighborhoods or geographical regions. Embracing the universality of story empowers individuals to think critically about the stories they tell in their lives and encourages new connections between those willing to share their stories with a larger audience.

Further Research

While the time and resource constraints of an undergraduate thesis prevented me from fully mapping the stories of Libby residents, this is a project that is well deserving of continued attention. As time passes, many of those present during the first wave of activism in Libby will no longer be able to share their stories of activism and a community divided. Now is a critical time to record those stories.

Similarly, I was unable to dedicate time to the stories of those representing W.R. Grace during the initial trials and activism in Libby. These men were often born and raised in Libby yet were clearly linked to the larger outside entity of Grace. Their stories of navigating multiple identity positions would illuminate both the ways in which individuals strike balance between competing loyalty claims and the stories they use to justify their actions.

Thesis as Activism

Many of the activists I spoke to were willing to share their personal, heart-wrenching stories with me because they saw my work as an extension of their own: a form of consciousness raising in itself. While I am not a member of the Libby community, I hope that my work will serve as its own kind of activism – and that I am able to add my voice to those of asbestos activists. I hope that these stories encourage readers to think critically about the ways in which power is manifested through narratives and controlled through stories. While some of the emotionality of these stories may be lost in the translation of spoken word onto paper, I am honored to be able to share them with a wider audience. Activists repeat their stories in the hope that the history of Libby will never be forgotten and that this type of total contamination can be avoided elsewhere. Through continued consciousness raising and growth in the environmental justice movement, future activists can prevent similar injustices from occurring.

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Appendix

1. Please introduce yourself – who are you?
2. How long have you lived in Libby or been involved in the Libby community?
3. Have you, or any of your relatives or close friends ever worked at the W.R. Grace mine?
4. Have you, or any of your relatives or close friends experienced the adverse health impacts of asbestos contamination?
5. Were you involved in any litigation regarding asbestos exposure from the W.R. Grace mine?
6. How has the W.R. Grace Company influenced the Libby community?
 - a. Have they made a positive contribution to the community?
 - b. What has their role in the community been?
 - c. How did the community react to W.R. Grace throughout their time in the community?
7. Do you believe W.R. Grace knowingly allowed its workers to be contaminated with asbestos fibers?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. Are there members of the Libby community who feel differently?
8. How has the litigation and community outcry surrounding asbestos in Libby, affected the Libby community?
 - a. In your opinion, how did the activism begin?
 - b. Do you feel it was an appropriate response?
9. What changes have you witnessed in your community?
 - a. Overall feeling?
 - b. Pride in being from Libby?
10. In your opinion was the movement regarding asbestos contamination in Libby primarily a human health issue or an environmental issue?
 - a. Has it always been this way?
 - b. Has the focus changed over time?

11. Were there individuals who were perceived as spokespeople or leading advocates for asbestos contamination victim's rights?
 - a. How did the community respond to them?
 - b. How did their actions influence you, if at all? Have you learned anything from them?
12. What does the term activism mean to you?
 - a. Would you consider yourself an activist? Why or Why not?
13. How have you personally been involved in this issue? Have you engaged in activism?
14. How have you changed since becoming involved in the asbestos contamination issue?
 - a. Have you noticed a change in how you view yourself?
15. Has your involvement with asbestos contamination activism changed the way the community views you?
 - a. Has this been mostly positive or negative change?
16. How would you have defined yourself before becoming involved in this work?
17. How would you define yourself now?
18. Can you describe whom you worked with in your work?
 - a. Did you work with mostly men or women?
 - b. Was your opposition mostly men or women?
19. What was your work attempting to accomplish?
 - a. Were you successful?
 - b. How did you measure your success?
 - c. What are your plans or goals for the future?
20. How important is the natural environment to you?
 - a. Would you call yourself an advocate of the environment?
 - b. An Environmentalist?
 - i. What does this term mean to you?
21. What do you see as the future of Libby?

- a. Can it, or should it, attempt to move past a long history of asbestos contamination?
 - b. Is this possible?
 - c. In your opinion, how could this be accomplished?
 - d. What work is being done in Libby by individuals or community groups to move past this period of contamination, or create economic recovery in Libby?
22. Do you have any stories or thoughts that you feel are relevant to this discussion that I did not ask explicit questions about, or that have arisen over the course of this interview?