"Not in My Town": A Community's Response to Water and Soil Pollution

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"NOT IN MY TOWN": A COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE TO WATER AND SOIL POLLUTION

by

Karolina Staros

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Sociology Western Michigan University August 2021

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"NOT IN MY TOWN": A COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE TO WATER AND SOIL POLLUTION

Karolina Staros, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2021

At the core of this dissertation is the acknowledgment that social movements are complex networks of people who face many obstacles in their efforts to achieve social change. One critique of social movements is that their goals and mission are limited to short term ideas and not long-term, systemic transformation. The lack of long term, systemic change can be observed when social movement groups mobilize for the same cause over and over again with what appears to be little progress over a period of time. The exact blueprint for a social movement’s success does not exist, but it is posited that transformative change (Faber 2008)(Taylor 1993) is suggested in order to create a lasting difference.

This dissertation is an exploratory, qualitative case study that examined a local example of environmental activism. This case study was rooted in a specific case involving community activism taking place in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Through the use of primary and secondary data, it explored the beginning of a social movement that emerged to prevent the creation of a landfill near one of Kalamazoo's largest drinking water aquifers.

Social movement literature suggests some key points for a more successful movement: the need for radical change, the need for actual coalitions instead of silos, and the need for a reframing of our traditional notion of what expertise and leadership look like to include situated knowledge from displaced and marginalized communities. Future efforts would likely benefit
from acknowledging the interconnectedness between social activist groups and the need to center marginalized voices and the needs of the most vulnerable communities. The key lies in understanding the potential for transformational restructuring of an organization. If the goal is not to restructure a system, activists and the communities for which they advocate may risk becoming a casualty of the system. KRCC demonstrated a common trap that many groups experience and the avoidance of such an event likely relies on a group’s concerted effort to mobilize with transformative change and a more holistic understanding of justice as a clear, defined goal.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

This research project explored the Allied Superfund site as a social problem mainly through the perspective of the Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition (KRCC), a local activist group that served as a pressure group to remove PCB contaminants from the former Allied Paper Mill location and one of Kalamazoo’s largest drinking water aquifers. This research project explored and described the initial motivations, formation, and mission of KRCC from the perspective of members and key stakeholders and aimed to examine some of the obstacles to effective and inclusive social activism.

One of the pressing questions in social movement research is the complicated question of “how to build a successful movement?” This debate plagues scholars and activists alike, and while there is no specific strategy that guarantees success, there are some key lessons to be gleaned with regard to this question. During a workshop held to discuss these very concerns, two leading scholars, Polletta and Ganz (2015), presented guidance about building more effective social movements. But before offering this guidance, Polletta began with a statement that captured the tension within the field; “There is debate over every single one of the points I am going to make today” (Polletta and Ganz 2015:6). Poletta and Ganz (2015) discussed several aspects of social movements in their workshop. Central to this discussion was the focus on a common thread within social movements: relationship building (p. 10). Ganz offered “Movement building is about building relationships among people that change the people involved and that
also build capacity” (2015:10). Ganz continues; “Because movements are about giving voice to underrepresented people and groups, they are inherently insurgent undertakings” (2015:11). Ganz also suggests that such movements are most successful when they move beyond mobilizing to organizing, “which enables them to create the capacity to support ongoing and sustained change” (2015:10).

Much of the literature on social movements, including environmental movements, offers some suggestions that seem to give rise to a complex conversation. The conversation usually is centered on case study examples where the actions of a group of social actors is analyzed and critiqued. This study also offers a case study analysis of a social activist group attempting to address their grievances. My analysis adds to the discussion on the obstacles faced by social actors as they attempt to effectively create lasting social change, while situating it in the literature on transformative social movements. In keeping with the theme of creating “ongoing and sustained change”, I address some of the obstacles faced by KRCC, how a transformative agenda may reconcile some of these concerns, and how transformative models may offer insights for future social activism.

Rationale for Research Questions

The first set of research questions were created by casting a wide net in order to glean as much information as possible in this exploratory study. The final discussion was later distilled down to describe a more specific narrative with a more specific set of research goals (listed below). As a starting point, research questions were drafted by drawing on social movement literature that elucidated the framing, claims-making process, and the claims-maker’s (Best 1995: 350).
According to Best, the claims makers are at the heart of a movement and are the authors of the claims that are made. They are responsible for identifying the social problem and devising a way to organize together into a group and to mobilize change by creating an effective claim that will resonate with the public. The relationship between the claims makers and the claims making process will ultimately lead to what claims can be made and whether or not they will gain traction in any given socio-political space.

Polletta and Jasper (2001) refer to this broader context as the “macrosocial context”, while Meyer (2004) draws a connection between the actors’ agency and the “rules of the game” as determined by structure. Taylor draws an even deeper connection between agency and structure by conceptualizing social location as “the position a person or group occupies in society” (2000:509). Factors such as race, class, gender, and occupation influence the way that people construct meaning and also the way that groups are able to mobilize resources (Taylor 2000:509), and therefore all of these components may factor into which tactics individual actors, or collective actors, use. Context also matters when groups consider their constituencies and try to align their message and tactics with what will prove to be most advantageous.

The claims-making process is used “to emphasize that there are many different ways in which we can try to make sense of, or make claims about, the world around us” (Walker 2012:5). Often, the ways that a social movement makes sense of the world draws on particular evidence that is made available and how this evidence links to what is considered the “normative position on what is just or unjust” (Walker 2012:5). Framing is an “active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction. It is active in the sense that something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic, evolving process” (Benford 2005:38).
Social movements use framing and claims making to carry a particular message to their intended audience. Claims typically illuminate both the manner in which social movements conceptualize a grievance and the context they use to communicate this grievance to the public. Gordon Walker explains that “framing is a notion that recognizes that the world is not just ‘out there’ waiting to be unproblematically discovered, but has to be given meaning” (Walker 2012:4). In fact, much of what claims makers do is frame a “problem” in a political and social context that is the most relevant and advantageous to the public in order to gain support. The goal of framing is to deliver a credible message of how things are and how things “ought to be” (Walker 2012:4).

The claims-making process, Walker explains, is very similar to framing and it is used “to emphasize that there are many different ways in which we can try to make sense of, or make claims about, the world around us” (Walker 2012:5). Often, the way that a social movement makes sense of the world draws on particular evidence that is made available and how this evidence links to what is considered the “normative position on what is just or unjust” (Walker 2012:5).

Literature that drew from Collective Identity Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory was also consulted in the creation of the first research questions in order to inquire about the ability and motivations behind KRCC’s mobilization. Resource Mobilization Theory ushered in a paradigm shift in social movement theory which allowed scholars to examine social movements as strategic and intentional actions that greatly depended on the set of resources that were available to a group of social actors (Buechler 1993:218). Here the analysis shifted to “how” social actors draw on resources at their reach to mobilize their efforts and address their grievances.
Collective Identity Theory offers theoretical guidance concerning the personal motivations or the actions taken “on principle” (Polletta & Jasper 2001:284) by activists. Snow describes collective identity as a shared sense of “one-ness” or “we-ness” that is rooted in perceived shared qualities and experiences among group members (2001:3). Snow asserts that collective agency is intrinsically linked to collective identity. In a sense, collective identity is a call to action and has a prominent agentic dimension (Snow 2001:3). Snow observes that collective identities may or may not be embedded in existing social or personal identities and typically build beyond such identities in a way that motivates action on behalf or in the name of the collective (2001:4). This collection of theories provided a starting point from which to begin inquiry in order to extract initial data.

The initial research questions that guided this project include:

1) Who are the founding members of KRCC?
2) Who are the key claims makers of KRCC? Who are additional claims makers who might not be directly a part of KRCC?
3) What are the claims made by KRCC?
4) What were the initial motivations for forming KRCC from the perspective of members and key stakeholders?
5) How do members of KRCC create meaning and frame the social problem(s) they aim to address within their current socio-political environment?
6) What definitions and concepts do the members have for the social problem(s) they view as salient? How do such definitions and concepts align with the entire group or is there tension or disagreement among members of the group?
7) How have the ways that KRCC framed the social problem changed or evolved since the groups’ formation? Has this process been impacted by any counter-frames presented by outside groups (i.e. EPA)?

8) What are the ways that members of KRCC communicate the salience of the social problem(s) to the public?

9) How do KRCC members define and perceive their social and political roles?

10) How do KRCC members manage their image, both personally and formally, and both individually and collectively as a group?

11) What are the challenges, if any, that members of KRCC face or have faced while trying to achieve established goals?

12) How does KRCC perceive their own success or effectiveness?

13) How do members use tangible resources and which resources are available to them? How do members use their access to power and information that may be unique to the experts, local government members, researchers, and academics who comprise KRCC?

14) Does KRCC pull from any other frames or environmental justice movements in order to inform their own movement?

15) What are the lived experiences of local community members, either those who are a part of KRCC and those who are not, who feel they have been impacted by the contamination in the Kalamazoo River?

16) What are the tensions between KRCC and the community, KRCC and the EPA, and within KRCC between its members?
As the project progressed, new interview questions evolved from interviews held with KRCC members. These questions focused on the composition of the group, diversity and inclusion within the group, and contention regarding how well the group represented the rest of the community. More interview questions were developed from an interview held with a key leader in the LatinX Community who suggested there were many challenges specifically facing LatinX residents of Kalamazoo that prevented community members from becoming involved in community advocacy or from being invited to join predominantly white spaces and meaningfully engage with advocacy work. At that point, the research agenda refocused on the idea of inclusion and the important role of voices at the margins within advocacy work. The value of recognizing this pattern was situated within broader literature that demonstrated just how common and problematic this pattern of exclusion is and how this may limit the potential of a social movement. From this process, the research goals evolved into those listed below:

**Refined Research Goals**

1) What were the challenges faced by paper mill communities during the period of substantial industrial growth and expansion of the paper industry in West Michigan? What historical context is inherited by activist groups mobilizing for environmental change within West Michigan?

2) Through the lens of KRCC; what factors pull some social actors into a similar orbit while tilting away from other potential actors and strategies? What allows for some voices to be heard in protest actions while potentially silencing others? What problems arise with activism and representation?
3) Why is the distinction between diversity and inclusion important to social activism? What is the importance of situated knowledge to social activism? What were some examples of missed opportunities and points of growth for KRCC with regard to building an inclusive activist group?

4) What is transformative change and why is it an important focus in environmental activism? What can be gleaned from the way many activists of color organize environmental movements with regard to transformative change? How did KRCC’s actions differ from a transformative activist agenda?

Data Collection, Analysis, and Conclusions

This dissertation includes primary and secondary qualitative data that was analyzed as a qualitative case study. Any available archival data and documents were collected for the purpose of contextualizing the case study and preparing for interviews with respondents. A convenience sample of 19 audio recorded, transcribed, in-depth interviews were included in the qualitative analysis. This study was grounded in the example of KRCC from which an understanding of social movements could be contextualized with the intention that observations could be transferred to similar contexts. While the observations in this case study are unique to KRCC and the activism done in the Kalamazoo area, there are some broader connections to be made from this case and the literature on activism.

Social movement literature offers the following guidance for a more successful movement: the formation of coalitions, the need for “recognition”, or a reframing of our traditional notion of what expertise and leadership look like to include situated knowledge from displaced and marginalized communities, and an overarching intention of radical, systemic
restructuring. Future activism would likely benefit from fostering coalition building between social activist groups and the need to re-center voices at the margins. In order to build the most meaningful alliances, the groundwork for this would likely need to begin long before a crisis occurred. There is no way to promise success, however, literature offers some lessons from activists of color who have practiced transformative change and have intentionally implemented transformative agendas. KRCC’s experience marks a common experience and the ability to disrupt this pattern likely relies on a group’s intentional effort to create an agenda with transformative change as a clearly defined goal.
CHAPTER II
A PLACE WHERE PAPER IS KING

Kalamazoo’s relationship to pollution is a sordid tale that dates back to the beginning of the industrial era in the United States. Piecing together this story was an effort that involved a patchwork of old clips from newspapers in the local public library dating back to the early 1900’s, some torn and damaged, many incomplete, that relayed a complicated story of economic growth and the ravages of laissez-faire business practices. Amidst the destruction to human health and the ecosystem, a story about public resistance began to emerge, highlighting the consistent efforts on behalf of citizens to oppose a system that fostered exploitation and destruction.

Despite the popular assumption that concern about the environment did not become a salient social problem until the 1970s, historical documents suggest that local residents in Kalamazoo were troubled by the quality of the water decades before then. In response to these efforts, corporations established a set of practices that ensured the growth of their businesses while rendering any efforts to disrupt these practices ineffective, despite their clear harm to human health and the environment. Citizens, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, and their local governments were caught between their economic needs and their well-being. Paper companies protected their interests by threatening to leave and take business with them while local governments attempted in vain to put limitations on the destructive business practices of paper companies. As paper companies expanded into larger corporations in the post WWII
era, they became stronger and so did their hold over the communities that helped make them possible.

This chapter explores the local history of paper production in Kalamazoo and its connection to the building blocks of a system that limited and confined the possibility for change, despite a great need for that change. The chapter also examines the way communities negotiate for change within an unyielding system and asks the question; what were some of the challenges faced by paper mill communities during the period of substantial industrial growth and expansion of the paper industry in West Michigan? And what salience does that story have for citizens who later faced the similar challenges with the Allied Paper Mill?

Founding of a Paper City

The beginning of the paper mill industry in West Michigan can be traced back to the first mill to open in Marshall, Michigan, by H.J. Perrin. It was reported that he converted an old distillery into the Perrin Paper Mill in 1862. Mr. Perrin’s connection to paper appeared to start not with paper, but with the Kalamazoo River which spanned over 80 miles across much of the West Michigan area. Listed, in a document about the development of the paper industry, are his numerous other business interests. Before his paper mill aspirations, Perrin had many other “water power interests” including a “saw mill, a flouring mill, a foundry, and a machine shop” (Hosler 1935:11). The founding of the first paper mill in the area seemed to be a very natural progression for Mr. Perrin. In fact, much of the success of the paper mills can be attributed to the existence of the Kalamazoo River.

In Kalamazoo the site that once housed Allied Paper Company is currently not much more than an untended field with the contaminated creek running through it. Although it once
was home to an impressive industrial building, booming with the daily commotion of mill workers, the site now looks desolate and neglected. The impressive infrastructure of the building, which was once made of sturdy concrete blocks, can no longer be found. Instead, all that can be found is a tall barbed wire fence with a couple of “No Trespassing” signs peppered along the length of it. The fence spans a few hundred feet and is located near the edge of Alcott street and South Burdick in Kalamazoo, Michigan. An empty and unkempt parking lot sits directly in front of the fence, suggesting that something besides this forgotten land once existed here. There seems to be no other indication of the rich paper mill history of Kalamazoo that spanned more than one hundred years (Forist, 2006: 2). Nor is it obvious by looking at the expanse of this unremarkable piece of land that it was and continues to be a place of much controversy in Kalamazoo.

The first paper mill in the city of Kalamazoo was established by Benjamin Lyon in 1867, but talks about building a paper mill in Kalamazoo began twenty years earlier. An 1847 news story in the Kalamazoo Gazette read, “Capitalists who would embark upon a profitable enterprise, would do well to establish a paper mill here in this village. It has the best of water and other facilities” (Kalamazoo Gazette, cited in Hosler 1935:11). This brief statement highlighted one of the most important features of the river to the growth and sustainment of the paper industry. The Kalamazoo River not only supplied water power to operate mills, but it was also meant to serve as the most effective form of paper waste disposal for the mills. The prospect of building paper mill facilities near the Kalamazoo River was incredibly promising and it very quickly became the site of a burgeoning industry that would leave its impact in West Michigan forever.
Even though the paper industry would be an economic giant for over a hundred years, the beginnings of this illustrious industry were rather humble. The first paper companies that did emerge were usually owned and established by a single person or a small group of owners who saw an opportunity and took a leap of faith at a time when paper had a lot of promise but was still in its infancy as an economic investment. Once the Perrin Paper Mill was established and word spread about the endless opportunities for growth, others would come to stake their claims on yet another section of land near the Kalamazoo River.

These hopeful entrepreneurs would include men by the names of Benjamin Lyon and Samuel Gibson, two important names in the Kalamazoo paper industry. After Benjamin Lyon came from Massachusetts to begin the planning of the Kalamazoo Paper Company, he was followed by Samuel Gibson who also traveled from Fitchburg, Massachusetts in the hopes of joining the emerging industry. Both men would be focal characters in the growth of the West Michigan paper industry, however, their stories would juxtapose each other in many ways.

Lyon’s story begins in the way that many stories about early capitalists do at the beginning of the industrialization era. Lyon’s story almost evokes a sense of early colonial nostalgia with depictions of him traveling from the northeast with little else than a vision and pure grit. Upon arrival in Kalamazoo, it is reported that Lyon was able to convince some “local men” to become interested in the project. After he and some “leading citizens” met on October 1, 1866, the plans for starting the first Kalamazoo Paper Mill were officially underway (Hosler 1935:11). Little is known about these “local leading men” of the first Kalamazoo paper mill because the records were owned and kept by the paper company and have since been lost to history, but the myth of this great American entrepreneurial spirit led by visionaries who would become wealthy, influential leaders in their communities brings to mind a nostalgic view of the
early beginnings of industrial development in the United States. It is a narrative of American
history and culture that suggests a sense of awe for not just these early capitalists, but for the
expansion and growth of industry in general, including the West Michigan paper industry.

Samuel Gibson may have had a very different beginning in the paper industry than
Benjamin Lyon, but his story is still firmly situated in various renditions of the American Dream
narrative. Gibson was first hired to be a bookkeeper and mechanic for the Kalamazoo Paper
company. After years of work, he was later promoted to production manager and superintendent.
His experience of working his way from the bottom of the company became an incredible asset
to the paper mill after the first building was lost to a fire. The mill was re-built in 1872 using
more sturdy materials and it was Gibson’s intimate knowledge of the daily tasks and
responsibilities that offered him insight into being an effective production manager during a very
vulnerable time for the company. His promotion was recorded as “one of the firm's most
important acts” (Hosler 1935:11) because his management allowed the company to flourish into
the impressive economic giant it eventually became. Gibson was promoted to President of the
Kalamazoo Paper company and remained in that position until his death in 1899 (Hosler
1935:11).

The portrayal of Gibson and Lyon fits into a broader narrative about economic growth
and industrial expansion in the United States. As the genesis of the paper mills in Kalamazoo
were recorded in local history, one can see the pride with which that story was told. But almost
buried within the early accounts of the paper mill history is a more complicated story that marks
the beginnings of a struggle between expansion and conservation. Many of the mills were built
near the river on land described as “open country” and one such site was described as “little
better than a swamp” (Hosler 1935:17). But what is lost in this over simplified description is
what the land was used for before it became industrialized. The switch from agricultural economy to industrialized economy is often steeped in a retelling that favors manufacturing and expansion as an organic process during a time when industrialization equaled progress. Very little attention was brought to the human and environmental costs of expansion. Among the early accounts of a flourishing industry, is a sentence that reads, “neighboring farmers were hostile” (Hosler 1935:17). Little else is mentioned about the tension between farmers or residents and the emerging industry until a few decades later when the local newspaper began to include stories that would uncover the aftermath of an industry that both nurtured and destroyed the communities that helped build it.

The Promise of Paper

West Michigan observed a substantial expansion of paper mills from 1867 through 1935. During this time, approximately thirty mills operated across several West Michigan towns and villages, and about half of those paper mills were located directly in Kalamazoo. The spike of the largest industrial growth was in the late 1800s through the 1950s. Prior to the mid 1940s, paper mills were still owned and operated by single owners or a small group of partners (Houghton 2013). During the 1930s, the industry had grown to such proportions that one in four people in Kalamazoo worked in the paper industry (Fast Facts 1996, Reference Department Kalamazoo Public Library). By 1954, the paper industry dominated the local economy, reporting a total of $174.8 million in sales (Smith 1958) and contributing an additional $40 million in sales to other industries “related to the paper industry, such as machinery, chemicals, electrical, building, foods, printing and service industries” (Smith 1958). The industry’s success was unparalleled
and due to this awe inspiring growth, Kalamazoo was aptly nicknamed, “The Paper City” (Forist 2006:1).

The paper industry housed and fed much of Kalamazoo County and it was responsible for single-handedly growing towns and villages. By the 1930s, the aptly named village of Parchment had been developed with the sole purpose of housing and supporting the families of paper mill workers. A paper plant by the peculiar name of The Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment plant was responsible for the establishment of this village. However, it was described as more than just an industry. It was chronicled as “the nucleus of a modern community of modern homes with all the facilities for happy living. A community house, church, school, beautiful park and recreational center, in fact everything that is needed in a model community” could be found there (Hosler 1935:16). The Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment plant also had assets estimated at eight million dollars and employed about 13,000 workers at its peak. The monumental success of this paper plant was attributed to the hard work of the man who founded it, Jacob Kindleberger.

Kindleberger was a German immigrant who came to the United States when he was a young boy at the age of five. He arrived with his parents to a small paper mill town in Ohio where he began learning the trade despite his severely impaired eyesight. His story sounds similar to that of the earlier tellings of the founding fathers of the Kalamazoo paper industry. His journey to becoming an owner of one of the most influential Kalamazoo area paper mills was described in terms of perseverance and a pioneering desire for building something remarkable out of humble beginnings. The local Gazette praised his success as the perfect illustration of the proverb “adversity is the test of a strong man” (Sellers 1950, Kalamazoo Gazette). As Kindleberger’s realization of the American Dream was catalogued in these local history recordings, it seemed to
omit the collective effort required to achieve such success that went beyond the aspirations and adversity of one man.

The industry did not grow only due to the entrepreneurial spirit of a few brave capitalists, it also grew because of the availability of natural resources and cheap immigrant labor that West Michigan had to offer at the time (Forist 2006:5). With the Kalamazoo River and surrounding creeks providing easy waste disposal, the lush forests and under-industrialized land provided the rest of the natural resources needed to make paper in a cost-effective way. Before wood pulp was used, it was common to use cloth textiles to make paper. However, not only was this extremely expensive, the women’s garment industry had already staked its claim to textiles and fabrics (Pagenstecher 1928). As fabrics like silk became more and more fashionable, it caused tension between the garment and paper making industry in a way that begged for innovative technologies for creating paper using more cost effective and lucrative methods (Pagenstecher 1928). The technological developments that made it possible to turn wood pulp into paper opened the opportunity for incredible growth in the early 1900s at a time when possibilities seemed endless. Many capitalists seized this opportunity to expand the paper making business, and indeed, in Michigan there was a rise in paper company expansion starting at the turn of the century and into the 1920s (Houghton 2013: 1-5).

Aside from the river, creeks, and forests that offered an abundance of natural resources, the cheap immigrant labor found in emerging cities in an era of the Great Immigration served as the backbone of many lucrative industrial businesses, including the paper industry. These immigrants, coming primarily from eastern and southern Europe, did not experience the American Dream. Not much is known about these first immigrant groups, but some news coverage could be found scattered throughout clippings in the history room of the Kalamazoo
Public Library. Many of the stories spoke of these early immigrants finding refuge, relief, and an opportunity for a better life in the United States. They were often described as low skilled and desperate for aid, but also as hard working and in search of an honest living. Some news stories had a nostalgic quality to them as children of immigrants reflected on the difficulties their parents or grandparents faced when they made the decision to leave home to come to America. Stories like these commonly highlighted how immigrants defied odds by coming to the United States with almost nothing to their names. Many could not read or write in English, but some managed to bring a marketable skill with them. This might have been a musician or shoemaker from Italy, a barber from Greece, or a teacher from Latvia. These various accounts were intertwined with notes of perseverance in the face of trying times. Though some accounts romanticized the experiences of these early immigrants, others reported on the difficulties and regrets many faced when first arriving in the United States. The gruesome reality that America was a land of opportunity for some but not all became all too evident for some immigrant families.

The disparate life experiences felt by the citizens who helped build the paper industry were observed by the housing segregation and living conditions experienced by low income immigrants and people of color. The 1937 Bridge Report displays the “undesirable red lined” neighborhoods as areas that housed “undesirable citizens”, who mostly consisted of immigrants and people of color. A section in northern Kalamazoo was redlined as low value due to the constant exposure to factory and railroad soot and smoke. It housed primarily “negro” families. Another section to the east housed the laboring class and foreign-born relief families. It was redlined because it was low sloping towards the river and because it lacked city facilities. Another redlined section not too far from the east was named the “Hungarian district” and
housed foreign born, laboring class families near undeveloped industrial sites. Another area nearby also housed the laboring class and was labelled as “undesirable” due to the creek that ran through the neighborhood that would often cause flooding in the homes of residents (Michigan Bridge https://www.bridgemi.com/public-sector/kalamazoo-then-and-now). While some residents of Kalamazoo were enjoying the economic boom of the paper industry, others were absorbing the repercussions of industrialization. Their experiences were not just the result of their societal marginalization, they were also the result of the harsh reality that industrialization came at a high price that would soon be felt even by those who were least vulnerable.

“The Terrible Slaughter of a River”: The Fight for Clean Water

The paper mill industry in Kalamazoo was both the city’s biggest economic asset and its greatest problem in many ways. Paper brought jobs and growth to Kalamazoo, but paper also brought destruction and outrage. The citizens and local governments of the West Michigan area seemed to be put in an impossible situation of balancing their livelihood with their health and safety. About sixty years after the first paper mill was built on Kalamazoo soil, citizens began to connect the severe degradation of water and wildlife to paper production and their outrage at what was happening to their waters was documented as early as the 1930s in the Kalamazoo Gazette. What the existing records show is that local concern and opposition grew in tandem with the growing river pollution.

“Those who saw the terrible destruction say that from two to three tons were killed” (Kalamazoo Gazette 1930) reads a news clipping from 1930, describing a massive fish kill that took place in 1894. Residents who fished and lived along the Kalamazoo River were greeted by what was described as a “terrible slaughter” of tons of carp, millions of minnows, 3,000 bass,
and many other fish that seemed to be bleached by some caustic substance. The Deputy was called to the scene to survey the damage and he could not pinpoint exactly what substance could “eat through the membrane between the gill and body” that caused the fish to bleed to death (Kalamazoo Gazette 1930). One thing was clear, however: the paper mills were to blame. According to the patchwork of historical clippings from the Kalamazoo Gazette, this was probably not the first time that fish were slaughtered by the mill operations along the Kalamazoo River, but it certainly was one of the biggest events that would unfortunately foreshadow a struggle for clean water that would never truly end.

Among other chemicals, the process of making paper required the use of some form of bleaching agent, usually chlorine based, to lighten the color of the final paper product. For more than a century, chlorine-based products were used to bleach paper products (Toren and Blanc 1997: 1316) and for many decades these bleaching products would be cast off into the nearby stream or creek to later deposit into the Kalamazoo River. What many residents would see in the form of massive fish kill would be the result of the normal daily operations of a paper mill. By 1948, it was clear that history was doomed to repeat itself when a Kalamazoo Gazette headline read “Second Mass Fish Killing in River May Bring Rigid Ruling” (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1948b). The second fish killing was not a reference to the 1894 incident, but rather it was a reference to a more recent fish slaughter that happened in 1945. Even though the paper mills were the biggest contributors of pollution and Kalamazoo was the greatest offender (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1948b), other industries were also implicated in polluting the river. The Battle Creek Plating Works company was responsible for a 1945 cyanide related fish kill of thousands of fish. The Union Steel Products Company plant in Albion was also implicated in a massive cyanide related fish kill just a few short years later in 1948 (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1948, Second Mass Fish
Killing). The casualties of industrialization were becoming a public hazard and citizens were beginning to raise their concerns. When state officials hosted a meeting at a local hotel to discuss the scope of the water pollution problem, about 125 Kalamazoo citizens attended (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1948a).

As the paper industry expanded, it grew beyond single ownership and small partnerships and connected to a larger network of corporations. After the Second World War, the paper mills were sold to larger corporations within the state, or as far away as Chicago or even New York (Houghton 2013). The 1940s marked a shift in corporate expansion in the United States and it changed the tone of the conversation between residents and businesses. Residents and protesters were no longer speaking to individual owners, they were now speaking to corporations that were part of a larger economic network. These corporations would later prove to be formidable adversaries.

By examining the stories outlined in a collection of Kalamazoo Gazette clippings, I noticed that in the early 1940s the public was not framing their concerns in terms of disparate impact or even human health concerns, but rather as an effort to conserve green spaces. Unsurprisingly, the leading groups within these grassroots efforts were those who were interested in sport fishing and conservation. By 1945, the local Kalamazoo Gazette published stories of hundreds of citizens attending meetings and thousands signing petitions to put pressure on paper mills to change their business practices. A clipping dating back to 1945 covered the actions of over fifty Kalamazoo organizations circulating thousands of petitions to change the Michigan laws and eradicate river pollution. These organizations included “sportsmen and conservations groups, women’s clubs, and schools” (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1945). One particular action was headed by a local sportsman and crusader against pollution, Guy Kistler (Kalamazoo
Gazette, 1945). Citizens by the thousands put pressure on the Michigan legislature to ban the dumping of garbage, acids and pollutants. Many petitions were placed in local businesses and shops for interested patrons to sign. Most of the interested parties were already part of conservation groups who feared for the health of the fish and bird life along the river (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1945). In the years to follow, Kalamazoo would find itself at the center of a complicated battle between conservation and industry.

By 1951, the state of Michigan ordered fifteen Kalamazoo area paper mills to start a cleanup of the river. However, after this order was postponed for more discussions, fed-up Allegan residents who lived down river of Kalamazoo, threatened to file a lawsuit against the mills if no action was taken (Coates, 1951). The threat may have worked temporarily because by 1955, the situation started to look hopeful, with the city engineer declaring that local mills were doing their part to help the Kalamazoo River become one of the finest streams for bass fishing again (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1955). The river had a long way to go however. The amount of polluted material made it a dangerous place to fish or swim. The city commission warned that it would be a while before anyone would be able to fish out of the river but that since chlorine was used to treat the water, it would most likely kill the majority of the bacteria so that if someone accidentally fell in, they would have a reduced chance of contracting diseases (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1955).

What little progress was achieved in decreasing river water pollution was short-lived because just one year later, mill paper output increased, and so did the paper waste. Although the paper mills started to implement some “pollution abatement facilities”, it wasn’t enough to comply with the orders made by state officials in 1951 (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1956). By 1958, Kalamazoo was experiencing a drought, the water level was low, and many were concerned that
a massive fish kill like that of 1953 was looming around the corner again. Over one hundred top Kalamazoo Valley paper industry executives and local government representatives met in Kalamazoo to discuss the worsening water conditions. The city manager for Allegan spoke of the frustrations his residents were experiencing down river, stating, “it will be impossible for the city of Allegan to live with the stench this summer” (Troyer, 1958). In response to this concern, and the many others echoed by Allegan residents, the commission engineer suggested that if any true improvements to water pollution would occur, the paper mills would need to reduce waste by 75%. This, of course, meant greatly reducing paper production, as the two went hand in hand. The Mayor of Kalamazoo reminded those in attendance that paper making provided about half of the factory jobs in the city and that Kalamazoo had the best economic record of any major city in Michigan (Troyer, 1958). The Mayor drew on research conducted by the UpJohn Institute which suggested that paper-making was, in fact, the best economic use of the river. In addition to the Mayor’s less than subtle reminders, the vice president for Rex Paper Co. also told the group in attendance that Rex Paper, like many other local paper companies, was recently purchased by a Chicago syndicate which was intent on expanding. The vice president of Rex then offered the following thinly veiled threat; “There will be no expansion in Kalamazoo if Rex is to be tied to the orders of 1950...You are inviting us to go somewhere else” (Troyer, 19658). The president of KVP Co., another paper mill in the Kalamazoo Valley area, took that moment to announce that KVP Co. would also be making no further expansion in Kalamazoo (Troyer, 1958). And so, it seemed, with those words, the fate of the Kalamazoo River was unofficially sealed.

Indeed, subsequent reports on the Kalamazoo River in the local Gazette depicted a constant ebb and flow of a little progress, followed by disappointments, outrage, and despair. Residents continued to organize in droves, while the local government feared that jobs would
float down river if the paper companies were not appeased. Headlines in the Kalamazoo Gazette for the next couple of years read, “Pollution Problem Remains Unsolved” (1958), “Mills Get Time Table”(1959), Mill Waste Big Problem”(1960), until finally another protest erupted in 1961 involving residents and concerned citizens from Allegan, Michigan. Many residents living downstream of Kalamazoo were witnessing some of the worst pollution for decades and they were frustrated at the lack of any real progress.

In 1961, a protest group called the “Kalamazoo River Valley Anti-Pollution League” was the focal point of a news story covering a protest that was to be held at a meeting led by the Water Resources Commission in Kalamazoo. Unfortunately, many of these passionate residents would not have their moment to share because the commission refused to relocate the meeting to a larger venue that would accommodate the size of the protest group. The Allegan city manager had called the secretary of the Water Resources Commission to warn him that about five hundred protesters would attend. The WCR responded by emphatically refusing to change venues and by threatening to hire state police to monitor attendance so that it would fall below 175 spectators, as was originally planned. In response, a resident and well-known conservationist by the name of Guy Teed led many protesters in signing petitions and demanding the issue be revisited at a subsequent meeting (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1961). This marked perhaps the first documented antagonistic exchange between local government and residents. Prior to this point, residents were passionately engaging with local officials about water pollution but were not so blatantly silenced by threat of force from the state.

The next several years proceeded in much the same pattern with water pollution persisting despite public outcry. Headlines continued to refer to new plans for cleaning the river, followed by delays in those same plans years later. A headline in 1963 read, “Words of Quarter
Century Ago Still Describe Kalamazoo River”, highlighting the most recent fish kill that was responsible for killing thousands of fish and was likely caused by sewage dumped into the river by the City of Springfield (Lewis, 1963). The river seemed to be not only suffering from abuse by the paper mills, but it was also burdened by poorly managed sewage drainage from Kalamazoo and neighboring cities and states. The Kalamazoo River, and the smaller lakes it deposited into, were of little or no value for swimming or fishing due to the unpleasant odor and condition of the polluted water (Lewis, 1963). Unfortunately, despite the overwhelming consensus that the Kalamazoo River pollution was the biggest regional problem, the Water Resources Commission continued to prioritize economy over conservation stating that “the water needs of the industry should rank higher” (Strickler, 1967), demonstrating that tension of not just corporate economic progress and environmental and human health, but also the opposition between residents and the government.

Conservation, White Elites, and Green Spaces

Kalamazoo local news coverage dating back to the early 1930s sheds light on two important observations that are congruent with a broader national context. First, the local public discussion about pollution occurred far before the environmental movement of the 1970s. Secondly, this discussion did not value the idea of human health and unequal toxic burdens until about a decade after the environmental movement began. The problem was not framed as a human health problem for a very long time, rather it was first discussed as a conservation and preservation problem for nearly a century. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the dominant discourse about the environment was steeped in ideas about conserving and preserving green spaces. These debates were led by wealthy, white elites, as most public
discourse was in the United States. The relationship elites had with the environment was one of prideful ownership and much of the discussion regarding green spaces reflected those sentiments. According to Taylor (2016), white elites, especially men, shaped their collective masculine identities around hunting, fishing, and enjoying the great outdoors. Land, both the industrialized land and preserved forests and recreational parks, was a symbol of status (Taylor 2016). Through the process of settler colonialism, white elites had carved out much of the land they took to serve their own needs and status enhancing purposes. For white elites, the outdoors and nature were synonymous with beauty, art, bravery, transcendentalism, and manifest destiny. For women and people of color, including indigenous groups who lived on land that was stolen and re-claimed, this land was off limits. Through indigenous relocation and genocidal acts, to the outright banning of people of color from parks and recreational areas, white elite men were staking their claim on land they colonized and called their own (Taylor 2016).

With the emergence and success of industrialization, elites began to form a tenuous relationship with cities. Cities became a main nucleus for entertainment, business, and social enrichment. They also brought white elites face to face with the uncomfortable reality that low status and undesirable citizens were also attracted to cities and comprised most of the low wage, unskilled work that was required to build communities and businesses. Elites viewed the existence of these groups as an unfortunate necessity and many of these groups became synonymous with the dirt, soot, and smoke in which they lived and worked. Pollution was something to be avoided because it tarnished the pristine and status-enhancing green spaces elites used as their collective playgrounds. It was not until the 1950s and 60s that the national discourse shifted from conservation to human welfare ecology (Taylor 1993:53). The burden of pollution had become too great to ignore and with rising awareness about human health and
disease, toxicity was no longer just a stain on an otherwise pristine landscape, it was a wound that was beginning to spread, and it was becoming more and more difficult to ignore. The emergence of activists of color would usher in new terminology and a much-needed paradigm shift away from just green spaces toward an examination of justice.

Samuel Hays also elucidates some key observations about the conservation movement that have been misrepresented in historical accounts. Contrary to some of the ways that discussions regarding conservation were framed, the conservation movement called for “expansion, not retrenchment” (Hays 1999:2). What this means is that conservational roots are steeped in societal and economic growth from the extraction and use of natural resources. According to Hays (1999), the conservation movement was a scientific movement in favor of placing experts in the driver’s seat of decision making regarding the best use of natural resources and “bitterly opposed those who sought to withdraw resources from commercial development” (Hays 1999:2). Less concerned with the ownership of resources (Hays 1999:262) and only vaguely concerned with the future implications of dwindling natural resources, the movement was filled with hope for an “abundant future” or expansion (Hays 1999:262), with a focus on the use of natural resources for the growth of society. Overall, the largest contribution of the conservation movement was its ability to unify a “decentralized, nontechnical, loosely organized society, where waste and inefficiency ran rampant, into a highly organized, technical, and centrally planned and directed social organization” (Hays 1999:265). Instead of understanding the conservation movement as a framework that pits big corporations against small people, the movement represented more nuance that framed everyone as an exploiter of natural resources (Hays 1999: 263). In fact, Hays argues that corporations were better equipped with the
possibility to run large operations under the basic tenets of conservation; “efficiency, stability of operations, and long-range planning” of natural resources (Hays 1999: 263).

Conservation differs from environmentalism which concerns itself with protecting “the quality of the natural environment through changes to environmentally harmful human activities” (Elliot 2020). Within environmentalism, the conversation fractures into two dueling concepts: anthropocentric and biocentric. In other words, the two dueling concepts are understood to regard either human concerns or the concerns of non-human organisms. This division would guide much of the conceptual framing for environmentalism in the late 20th century and it would vacillate between concerns regarding animal and human welfare (Elliot 2020). Some offshoots of environmentalism that followed the conceptual divide, like emancipatory environmentalism and the closely related concept of human-welfare ecology, focused on concerns relating to safe and clean environments for humans (Elliot 2020). These concerns especially focused on the role of pollution and health consequences experienced by humans. Closely connected to this conversation is the distributive justice frame provided by environmental justice movements (Elliot 2020).

Gordon Walker conceptualizes the branches of the environmental justice movement as a set of frames that have evolved or adapted to different contexts over time. Walker begins with the earliest frame of the movement as one that began with research on environmental justice that “documented the distribution of hazardous sites and racial groups” (Walker 2009: 616). The overwhelming majority of the “first-generation” research literature on environmental justice worked within this frame and conception, documenting the distribution of hazardous sites and racial groups (Walker 2009:616). Bullard (1993) and Pulido (2000), who heavily contributed to the discussion on environmental racism, build on the environmental justice frame that heavily
focused on the over representation of hazardous material in communities of color. One of the central arguments is that as the system currently functions, access to a healthy environment is a privilege and access to clean neighborhoods is usually couched in the financial terms of “voting with your feet”, or simply moving to a less polluted neighborhood.

However, Bullard argues that “poor whites and poor blacks do not have the same opportunities to ‘vote with their feet’. Racial barriers to education, employment, and housing reduce mobility options available to the black underclass and the black middle class” (Bullard 1990:7), a pattern that cannot be explained by class alone. Bullard states that millions of people of color are physically trapped working in urban manufacturing jobs and living in polluted cities due to housing discrimination, residential segregation, and a lack of effective public transportation that would allow access to a greater variety of employment(1990:31).

Not only are communities of color unable to “vote with their feet”, but they are also assaulted by unfair policies and systemic practices. Even when the environmental justice movement, started largely by communities of color, is able to bring attention to the need for regulation, the regulation offers little protection to marginalized communities. Faber explains that by the end of the 1970’s, also known as the “environmental decade”, Congress had passed “twenty nine major laws regulating consumer products, the environment, and workplace conditions” (Faber 2008:5). These federal regulations, however, did not offer adequate protection to poor communities and communities of color mostly because they are rarely enforced in any meaningful way by the federal government (Faber 2008:139). In fact, this legal precedent created a situation where environmental toxins and hazards were something that can be avoided by some, and were displaced onto others, primarily the most marginalized in society (Faber, 2008:5).
Walker points to distributive justice, procedural justice, and justice as recognition as key concepts leading the conversation on environmental justice, especially when addressing unequal burdens (Walker 2012:10). Distributive justice is mainly concerned with the equitable distribution of goods and ills. Meaning that resources and harms must be in harmony so that one group does not benefit at the expense of another. It should be mentioned that while some branches of environmental justice, like environmental racism, focused on the distribution of harms, others focused on the distribution of goods. Wolch, Byrne, and Newll (2014) frame green spaces as a public good that is beneficial for public health (p 519) and cites the contributions urban green spaces have made to communities who typically do not have access to this resource.

Procedural justice concerns itself with the way that decisions are made and creating a more democratic decision-making process (Walker 2012:10), one where people at the margins are invested and included. Justice as recognition is a closely related concept that is concerned with what knowledge is considered important and respected during the decision making process (Walker 2012:10; Gibson-Wood & Wakefield 2013:5). Parsons, Fisher, and Crease (2021) mention that Hurricane Katrina may serve as an example of the potential outcomes of a lack of recognition, or misrecognition. Parsons et al., draw from Rydin’s (2006) essay on Hurricane Katrina to warn that if marginalized groups are not recognized as most at risk, resources and aid will unlikely be directed in times of disaster and need (Rydn 2006; Parsons et al. 2021: 46). Parsons et al. also warn of additional cultural dimensions of race and class behind misrecognition that account for the labeling of spaces occupied by marginalized groups as undesirable and unwanted (2021:47). Additionally asserted by Parson and colleagues is the notion that justice as recognition should acknowledge that marginalized groups have a right to self-determination (2021:47).
One critical voice in opposition to the possibility of recognition as justice is Glen Coulthard. Coulthard’s critique is one that questions the possibilities of justice within a system that is designed to exclude it. Coulthard (2014) troubles the idea of recognition and states that;

Instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of reciprocity or mutual recognition, the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialisit, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend. (Coulthard 2014:3).

Coulthard raises an important question about the difficulties and limitations of practicing justice as recognition without restructuring or transforming a system. In fact, Coulthard offers one proposition at the end of his critique which re-centers the voices of indigenous peoples; “I feel that it is important to conclude my study in this way because Indigenous contributions to anti-colonial thought and practice have been generally under appreciated for their transformative value and insights” (Coulthard 2014:153).

From Green Spaces to Justice: Activism and Communities of Color

While the Conservation Movement prior to the 1950s and 60s was characterized by efforts on behalf of wealthy whites to consume natural recreation areas and parks, the Environmental Movement began to apply a critical lens to what was once considered only a nuisance for white wealthy families who were largely protected against polluted areas. The Environmental Movement emerged during a time of rapid social and political change on the heels of the civil rights movement. The 1960s and 70s ushered in cultural and policy level changes that shifted the focus from enjoying “green spaces” to a critical discussion of environmental hazards. Two observations can be made about these cultural and political changes. First, the discourse about the environment shifted from one of status and access to green spaces
to one that troubled the intersections of identity and health. Secondly, this cultural shift influenced governmental policy and demonstrated a need for a more concerted effort to address environmental burdens.

Though still a largely white led social movement, the environmental movement opened the door to a new political landscape that included discourses on justice and identity. The late 1980s dramatically reshaped the conversation about the environment and the voices included in the discussion. With the emergence of the multiracial environmental justice movement, people of color spanning different racial and ethnic groups were forming new groups and coalitions at faster and faster rates (Taylor 1993:54). As more awareness about environmental hazards became available, communities of color were drawing attention to unequal health burdens. People of color were outraged at the level of toxins and pollutants in the environment that were disproportionately found in low income communities of color. Communities of color were activist minded and outraged at the injustices found ubiquitously, but unlike white activists, they were more likely to draw attention and mobilize around social problems like unequal health burdens and systems of oppression (Taylor 1993: 54).

Environmental Justice advocates of color critiqued the then prominent idea of relocating toxic waste in a manner that changed the conversation about environmental justice. The criticism was one that called for systemic transformation and a politics that moved away from conventional “Not in my backyard” (NIMBY) arguments (Taylor 1993:54). Conventional environmental politics of the 70s drew first on the earlier conceptual frame of its conservationist roots. Many campaigns and single-issue groups fought to remove toxins and pollutants from their neighborhoods and communities. The troubling pattern that emerged following these campaigns was the tendency for white led groups to focus on distributing harm away from their
neighborhoods, while communities of color drew on their experiential knowledge to interrogate systems of inequality (Taylor 1993: 54).

Most groups were white led groups with the resources to mobilize people but often did so while relying on a NIMBY framework that arguably reproduced patterns of disparity. Often, if communities were successful in relocating toxic waste, it would be relocated in or near neighborhoods and communities that did not have the resources to form campaigns. These communities would disproportionately house low-income people of color and would further compound the problem of unequal health burdens while maintaining green spaces for white elites. NIMBYism was effectively the same “conservationist wolf” in sheep’s clothing. From this criticism emerged a tension between distributive justice (NIMBYism) and productive or transformative justice. Distributive Justice argued for equal burdens with regard to pollutants, and productive/transformative justice attempted to transform the system so that it would not produce harmful pollutants in the first place (Taylor 1993: 54; Faber 2008:270).

Productive justice aims to address the root cause of pollution and to restructure the system that produces it. Faber’s attempt to dismantle what he calls the “polluter industrial complex” (2008), a set of political and economic institutions which work together to exploit the environment and labor force for profits, is firmly seated in a productive justice approach. According to Faber, the environmental justice movement has become so distracted by distributive justice that it has lost sight of the root cause of pollution. A productive justice approach will only work if it unites with other movements that seek to restructure the political and economic apparatus that drives systemic inequality and exploitation. Faber explicitly argues for the coalescing of multiple advocacy groups that fight for workers’ rights, human rights, immigrant rights, anti-racism efforts, and so on. Without the inclusion of such groups, the
environmental justice movement will likely keep reproducing the very system it is fighting against by moving pollutants from one neighborhood to another, Faber argues. The productive justice paradigm aims to create a transformative social movement that unites like-minded advocates to address “democracy, ecological sustainability, labor unions, and human rights” (Faber 2008:253) that build from local to national and global scales. Other names for such efforts might use terms like “intersectionality” to explain the tactics involved in creating transformative change.

Taylor reflects on the environmental justice movement’s ability to unite situated knowledge and scientific research to build coalitions across many groups whose goal it was to empower communities to do productive justice. Departing from the work of many environmental groups who lacked diversity, were single-issue, and failed to observe the lived experiences of those most affected, the environmental justice movement, led by activists of color, accomplished exactly the opposite. Activists of color had the experiential knowledge to understand oppression and successfully reframe activism agendas from “saving green spaces” to protecting human health. Taylor also draws on the work of minority researchers who developed new terminology like “environmental blackmail” and began discussing terms like “environmental equity” to eventually highlight a term that resonated with scholars and grassroots activists alike; “environmental racism” (Taylor 1993: 54-55). Taylor also points to the tenacity from average members of communities of color who had no experience with activism who were willing to take bigger risks like protesting by physically blocking trucks dumping PCB-ladened material into toxic waste sites in their communities (Taylor 1993: 55). Interestingly, Taylor notes that white activists who were more aligned with established sectors of environmental activism were less willing to take such big risks and were “more content to fight professional battles in
quiet courtrooms and the lobbies of Congress” (1993:55). Above all, environmental activists of color were more willing to consider environmental harms within the backdrop of a larger broken system of poverty, disenfranchisement, gender inequality, and oppression (Taylor 1993: 57).

In tandem with the broader political discourse about environmental pollution, the federal government also appeared to offer new guidance. The establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970 signaled a systemic and structural shift. Prior to the establishment of a centralized agency, cities and states made their own laws and policies regarding pollution. Many Environmental Acts were implemented without much success because pollution was not restricted to city and state boundaries, especially when toxins ran into the adjoining rivers and streams of neighboring states. Policing the harmful business practices also became incredibly difficult because cities and states often found themselves at the mercy of big corporations and the jobs they brought to local economies. Because of this, many states conceded to the need for a mutual pact that would be regulated under federal law (Vigil & Fort 2014: 123).

The federal government, through the Environmental Protection Agency, was intent on not only preventing future environmental harm, but also addressing the harms that had already occurred. With the creation of a centralized agency, the federal government no longer needed to have consent from individual states involved when an environmental threat needed to be addressed (Collin 2006:21). The EPA is an independent, hierarchical organization that is “in charge of research, setting standards, monitoring, and enforcing with regard to air and water pollution, solid waste disposal, radiation, and pesticides” (Collin 2006 :2). It was established by President Richard Nixon in 1970 through an executive order with the intention of creating a coordinated effort for addressing environmental harms across the nation. In the first decade of its existence, the EPA had improved air, land, and water quality (Collin 2006:1), and demonstrated
that a federally centralized institution was more effective at controlling environmental harms than state-initiated acts.

Running in sharp contrast to current political discourse regarding climate change, the first Earth Day in April of 1970 presented unprecedented support from conservatives and liberals alike (Flippen 2012:1) despite being divided on so many other political issues, citizens from across the political table united over the environment. In the 1970s, environmentalism was a less divisive issue than the Vietnam war, racial equality, and the U.S. economy (Flippen 2012:1), which presented a unique opportunity for any shrewd politician. Richard Nixon, in his first term at the time, had won by a narrow margin against his democratic opponent. Interestingly, neither Democrat nor Republican had ever mentioned the environment in their campaigns, nor had Nixon ever considered himself a conservationist or outdoor enthusiast (Flippen 2012:18).

While environmental conservation appeared to be important to the American people, the EPA was criticized for being a middle of the road concession that courted young voters, but also did not completely alienate his conservative allies like Dow Chemical and various pollution-causing companies that feared regulation (Flippen 2012:10,12). Flippen (2012) argues that Nixon continued to use the creation of the EPA as a political bargaining chip that would allow him to gain enough public support to hopefully grant him a second term while surreptitiously avoiding publicly discussing polarizing topics like the Vietnam War (p.53). The beginning of the EPA was likely not an earnest attempt at addressing environmental harms, but rather an attempt at re-electing a president. Rathlesberger echoes a similar observation when reflecting on the fervor with which Nixon first ushered in the EPA, “But the militancy of the rhetoric was short-lived. Just seven months after the State of the Union Address, the President attached a message to the
Council on Environmental Quality’s (CEQ) 1971 report warning the country “not to expect environmental miracles” (Rathlesberger & League of Conservation Voters 1972: preface).

Despite Nixon’s sobering message, the Clean Water Act of 1972 was passed a short while later, which stated that the EPA would regulate “discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States” and would monitor “quality standards for surface waters” (EPA.gov/laws-regulations). In order to accomplish this, the EPA generated a list of chemicals that would be monitored. This list would be updated in 1979 to include PCBs but unfortunately PCBs would have already been in production and in the environment for decades (http://www.epa.gov, EPA Basic Information 2014), perhaps pointing to one of the limitations of addressing pollution after the fact.

A federal program called the Comprehensive Environmental Response and Liability Act (CERCLA), more broadly known as Superfund, was started in 1980 and was designed to clean up thousands of sites all across the United States that were deemed hazardous to human health and needed to be prioritized for cleanup. The fund replenished its financial resources through a tax placed on chemical and petroleum industries. This tax created an actual fund that was designed to clean up the most polluted sites where the pollution was caused by either an unknown party or a corporation that was bankrupt and could not finance the cleanup (Kiel 2013:222). Superfund also allowed the federal government to punish illegal dumping through the threat of lawsuits in the hope that it would deter other corporations from dumping toxins illegally (Faber 2008: 144).

Unfortunately, the superfund tax was allowed to expire in 1995 under the George H. W. Bush administration, effectively bankrupting the fund. Due to the lack of funds and an abundance of contaminated sites to clean, money for cleanups had to come from Potentially
Responsible Parties (PRPs), when possible. These are companies that are legally held liable for any pollution that occurred because of their direct actions, or the past actions of companies they may have acquired through purchase. However, many PRPs, which were usually active companies with very competent legal teams, were able to avoid paying for cleanups by filing for bankruptcy or by using other legal maneuvers to eschew any legal responsibility. Since this was usually the case, the responsibility of paying for cleanups came out of the tax dollars of the average U.S. citizen (Faber 2008: 143-144). In fact, the cost to taxpayers increased “427 percent between 2004 and 2006” (Faber 2008:144). Due to this, the rate of cleanups has been greatly delayed and cleanups have been reduced by about half since 2006 (Faber 2008:145). The shift in policy that bankrupted the Superfund had effectively rendered it incapable of addressing toxic burdens in a manner that would best serve the very communities the federal government meant to protect.

Superfund Comes to Kalamazoo

As a direct result of industrial expansion, there were many toxic substances dumped into rivers and streams across the nation. The pollutants and toxins in the air, water, and soil in any given space across the country were as numerous as the health concerns associated with them. As more research and information about toxic substances uncovered previously unknown threats to human health, the EPA became aware of “hot spots” throughout the country that were highly saturated with dangerous pollutants. In 1979, Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) were declared a carcinogen and were no longer permitted to be used. Unfortunately, prior to this 1979 decision, PCBs were used in the United States for decades in commercial manufacturing, including in paper production. Years after the last paper mill closed in West Michigan in 2001 (Houghton
2013), the Kalamazoo River and adjoining streams and banks were the locations of PCB contamination that would not biodegrade for centuries.

Von Stackelberg (2011) explains that PCBs, once released, have a tendency to stay in the environment indefinitely and are absorbed by humans through the food chain unless actively removed:

Once in the environment, PCBs are persistent and tend to accumulate in the organic fraction of the environmental media in which they are found. Although PCBs can be found in air, water, and soil, they readily accumulate in sediment and tissue, and are most often found at the highest concentrations in aquatic food webs. (von Stackelberg 2011: 346).

Due to the level of persistence in the environment and the constant threat to humans through the consumption of contaminated fish and other food sources, PCBs tend to be included very often in EPA remedial projects (von Stackelberg 2011: 346). Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) are a human made organic chemical that were produced in the United States from 1929 to 1979 and were used in many industrial and commercial applications (http://www.epa.gov/, EPA, Basic Information 2014). One use for PCBs was the production of carbonless copy paper which allowed the consumer to have identical copies of written text that was transferred from the top copy to any of the sheets directly under it. In general, PCBs were known for their non-flammability, chemical stability, high boiling point, and electrical insulating properties (http://www.epa.gov/, EPA, Basic Information, 2014). According to the Environmental Protection Agency, PCBs were toxins that were linked to multiple dangerous health effects in humans and animals. The health effects impacted the immune, reproductive, endocrine, and nervous systems. Additionally, PCBs were linked to an increase in blood pressure, serum triglycerides, and serum cholesterol (http://www.epa.gov/, EPA Health Effects 2014), making them a danger to human and animal health in both cancer causing and non-cancer causing ways.
The federal government deemed Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) as the substance presenting the highest health risk for the Kalamazoo Area. In 1990, the EPA placed the location of the former Allied Paper company site and the Kalamazoo River on the Superfund National Priority list (KRCC, 2014). This meant that the federal government, through the Environmental Protection Agency, was now legally responsible for cleaning the site.

“Allied” Superfund Site

The first story by the local press of the EPA’s interest in the Allied Paper company was in 1989 in the Associated Press. The Kalamazoo Gazette included a short clipping that discussed the EPA’s proposal to include the industrial site to their already growing Superfund list which contained 1,173 total proposed sites (Kalamazoo Gazette 1989). The Allied Paper company was described as a paper industrial site in operation since 1925, spanning an 80 acre site and a 3 mile stretch of Portage Creek, which runs directly into the Kalamazoo River. According to the EPA, the paper company had recycled and de-inked paper that contained PCBs between 1957 and 1971. PCBs were mentioned as the main concern for the EPA on the Allied site and were described as a substance that was “suspected of causing cancer” (Kalamazoo Gazette 1989). Also noted in the article were the public drinking wells located about three miles from the site that supplied drinking water to 142,000 people. In 1989, the entire Kalamazoo River was not proposed to be included, but only the three and a half miles of the river that was closest to the Allied site and polluted Portage Creek. From the start, Allied was deemed the biggest culprit when it came to pollution in Kalamazoo, and PCBs put Kalamazoo on the Superfund list (Kalamazoo Gazette 1989).
By 1990, the Kalamazoo Gazette started to dig a little deeper into the Allied superfund story. The city and residents expressed frustration at the lack of progress regarding the cleanup, prompting a response from both the EPA and the Allied Paper company reiterating their intention of cleaning the site. The sense of urgency in the community was mounting and it was reported that residents were so concerned about safety that they demanded the construction of a six-foot barbed wire fence to prevent children from playing on the contaminated site. The fence would eventually be erected, but city officials reported on practical concerns regarding its construction: including the cost and the potential risk of disturbing more contaminants during installation of the fence (Channing 1990).

Interestingly, Allied was not the only company implicated, nor were PCBs the only pollutant mentioned at this time. Nestled in the succinct article was a very brief report of some illegal and nefarious activities by another company. The article states that directly next to Allied was the location of the Panelyte building of the former A-1 Disposal Company of Plainwell, Michigan. An anonymous tip in 1987 had led state officials to uncover barrels of oil laced with PCBs dumped at the site and trenches of asbestos buried in the Panelyte building floors. The A-1 Disposal Co. was implicated in both of these actions but little else is covered about this story and it fell off the radar of any future reports about contamination at and around the Allied site (Channing 1990). Future reporting and community focus stayed very close to the “big” story of PCBs and superfund, but this short paragraph serves as a reminder that the story about pollution runs deeper and the implications are far bigger and more complicated than what was reported or discussed by the community at the time. The Allied Site and the EPA’s involvement at the site would not become “big” news again until 2007 when the EPA’s cleanup decisions would spark what would be referred to in the press as “the great uprising of 2007” (Urban 2008: 1).
This chapter highlights some of the challenges that West Michigan paper mill communities had as they balanced their need for a job against their need for health and safety. While this is not an exhaustive history, the account detailed in this chapter exposes the practices of an industry that set the stage for contestation down the road. The tensions between economy and health throughout the expansion of the paper mill industry are evident and offer a context in which future advocacy would take place. The vast pollution and environmental harm resulting from industrialization is the greater context and the advocacy that would take place did not exist divorced from this context. More specifically, the story of PCB contamination resulting from paper production is what begins the specific narrative of advocacy surrounding the Allied landfill and it would later serve as the catalyst for the creation of the Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition (KRCC). KRCC would find itself fighting a battle against the backdrop of a legacy of pollution while trying to galvanize a community with complex needs and differing lived experiences. The literature on environmental justice movements illustrates the complexity of justice and equity that is a common thread across many social movements and perhaps points to the many moving parts that are a part of building a strategy for change. All of these complexities would factor into KRCC’s experience with mobilizing activism for their vision of change.

Timeline of Events

1847 West Michigan’s potential for industry growth is mentioned for the first time in local newspaper

1862 first West Michigan paper mill opened by Perrin

1866 plans for the first paper mill begin

1867 first Kalamazoo paper mill opened by Lyon
1867-1935 mass expansion of paper mills across the Nation

1894 massive fish kill first recorded in the Kalamazoo River

1930s one in four people in Kalamazoo worked in a paper mill

1945 hundreds of Kalamazoo citizens attend meetings and thousands sign petitions to change paper mill practices

1951 Michigan state orders mills to clean-up river

1958 paper companies push back and threaten to leave Kalamazoo due to 1951 state order

1961 local protest group forms in Kalamazoo

1950s-1960s Conservationism becomes prominent

1970s Environmentalism Movement gains traction

1970 EPA is founded by President Nixon

1972 Clean Water Act is passed

1980s Environmental Justice becomes more prominent due to efforts of communities of color

1980s CERLA is established

1989 Allied mentioned in Kalamazoo Gazette to be added to Superfund list

1990 Kalamazoo River is listed as an EPA Superfund site

1995 Superfund tax expires
CHAPTER III
WHO CAN FIGHT?

The reasons why and how people mobilize to form social movement groups are numerous, complex, and combine reasons related to both agency and structure. The relationship between an actor’s intention for a desired outcome and the political, economic, and social environment in which these actions take place, is a hotly contested dynamic in social movement theory literature. The tension between how much agency, or free will, is possible within the confines of any given social structure is sometimes studied with the intention of prioritizing one concept over another. This chapter examines the interplay between those two seemingly oppositional concepts. Rather than observing these concepts in tension, I examine the way agency and structure inform each other to pull some social actors into a similar orbit while tilting away from other potential actors and strategies. The success or failure of such a dynamic offers insight into patterns in social movements that are either worth repeating or need to be disrupted.

Through the lens of the experiences of one protest group, called the Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition (KRCC), I apply a collection of theories to help explain how and why some social actors mobilize around a common concern and what critiques can be gleaned from those observations. My analysis of these actors and their mobilizing strategies is centered on a critique of the role that social status plays in mobilizing a protest group. The key question that ultimately emerges is: who can join the fight and who is left behind? The research questions guiding the discussion in this chapter are: what factors pull some social actors into a similar orbit while
tilting away from the other potential actors and strategies? What allows for some voices to be heard in protest actions while potentially silencing others? What problems arise with activism and representation?

Social Movement Theory

During the 1950s, and prior to observing social movements as rational and organized extensions of politics, many social scientists viewed political protest as “dysfunctional, irrational, and inherently undesirable” (Meyer 2004:126). The popular belief about protest groups and social movement groups was that they were filled with angry trouble-makers, intent on destabilizing society with their emotionality. Meyer draws on prior research from the 1950s that was mainly informed by observations of fascism and Nazism which painted a limited view of social movements (2004: 126). The question at that time, Meyer asserts, was why did social movements sometimes occur in healthy democracies (Meyer 2004:127)? The 1960s ushered in examples of civil rights movements that functioned unlike the assumptions made prior by theorists, but rather showcased the rational actions of marginalized people who were fighting for a specific shift in the existing political system (Meyer 2004: 127). Resource Mobilization Theory which emerged following the civil rights movements of the 60s and argued that people mobilize based on the resources available to them, critiqued very heavily the outdated perception that protesters screaming in the streets are just unreasonable troublemakers who speak from a place of rage. Instead, the theory highlights the political and intentional nature of protests and protest groups. RMT offered a framework that situated social movements as “normal, rational, institutionally rooted, political challenges by aggrieved groups” (Buechler 1993:218) and moved beyond “why” people mobilize, to “how” (Meyer 2004: 127).
Resource Mobilization Theory asserts that those who are able to mobilize resources are among those who are best able to create a movement due to their status in society and their access to resources. Such groups typically consist of people who either have material resources, a highly specialized education or professional background, hold positions of influence or have the ability to network with those who do. This may also explain why some marginalized groups are not able to form social movements, though they may be acutely aware of the need for social change (Taylor 2000:519), like in the overarching pattern of communities of color who often show interest and concern about the well-being of their communities, but were underrepresented in social movements (Taylor 1993:53).

Status that is attached to identity, both on an individual level and a group level, becomes important in analyzing existing resources used by social movement groups. Resources are not limited to just material funds or donations made to a group, resources also include the skills and “know-how” that members possess because of who they are (Gamson, Fireman, Rytina, 1982:85). Expert knowledge or previous organizational knowledge is incredibly valuable. The ability to network with other members in key positions, like local government or other powerful institutions, can sometimes be a more powerful resource than financial resources.

For example, members may not only have knowledge and access to networks of powerful people, but they may also be aware of how to use this knowledge in the political process to propel a movement forward (Gamson et al., 1982: 93). The status attached to each member of a coalition becomes a pivotal quality that not only allows the group to access information and important people, but it also gives the group more legitimacy in the eyes of the public and public officials like the EPA. Experts, professors, artists, and researchers all hold unique relationships
with the community that allow them to make claims that resonate with the public in ways that someone without status may not be able to accomplish.

While RMT illuminates the role that resources play in the collective action of social movement actors, Collective Identity Theory addresses personal motivations. The process of collective identity creation is described as a cultural process that draws from and reacts to structure which analytically connects interest, identity, strategy, and politics (Polletta & Jasper 2001). In other words, this is a multidimensional process through which actors create their identity within a structure of opportunity, shared interest, and self concept. The role of individual or group identity can be traced through the claims making process, the recruitment process, the decision making process, and the outcomes of the movement (Polletta & Jasper 2001:285), meaning that identity creation is an overarching process that spans the entire life of the social movement. Holland and colleagues describe this process as an on-going negotiation that does not necessarily have a clear start and end. This process is adaptive and changes as the group adjusts to new membership and new contexts, “That is, a movement's collective identity is continually emerging, forming and reforming between people and groups in multiple sites and places of contentious practice” (Holland, Fox, Daro 2008:99).

Analyzing collective identity within social movements answers questions that address why individuals organize in the first place, and what might motivate individuals to act even when there are very few material incentives to do so. There are three processes that Taylor and Whittier (1992) observe in the formation of collective identity. First, individuals join together when they find that they have some shared characteristics that become salient. Second, the collective group forms a consciousness that delineates the movement's goals and actions. Lastly, the group forms in direct opposition to the dominant order where new expressions of identity
challenge the prevailing order (Pizzorno 1989, cited in Taylor & Whittier 1992:110). While RMT is firmly seated in structural explanations of how social movement actors mobilize by drawing on resources they are able to access, CIT was later formed to address the personal and collective meaning creation a group undergoes to motivate concerted efforts for social change. Both theories highlight the interplay between structure and agency and answer very important questions about social movements. Namely, the “how” and “why” social movements are mobilized.

The members of the Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition were uniquely positioned in a way that demonstrates the focal point of RMT. Through a process of strategic recruitment, the group consisted of members who possessed both local and specialized knowledge. Some members could recall spending their childhoods playing in grey PCB laden waters. Others had highly technical knowledge of the effects of PCBs on environmental and human health. And other members were specifically recruited because of their ability to understand the political process. This was showcased by members who were specifically recruited by the board because of their knowledge in political strategy and political campaigning. James, who was recruited a few years after the initial formation, had experience running a successful political campaign for local government. He shared that he wanted to bring that experience to the table; “I help come in with the tactical suggestions and strategy and the political angles and things that if you’re a scientist, if you’re an environmental expert, you may not be great at navigating the political waters”. Similarly, two other members stated they had extensive political experience with either a background in environmental studies or political science and wanted to offer that skillset to the community through KRCC.
Many experts within the group reflected on their ability to use their social and professional status to speak freely and openly with the public. Members spoke openly at City Hall meetings, with the press, and to EPA or MDEQ professionals at public meetings. Those with specialized knowledge not only had the skills to know what to question but they also had the luxury of being able to speak candidly and in an informed manner with a lower risk of consequences to their employment or their professional standing. In fact, some members asserted that it was their responsibility to the public to use their professional status to be of service. The “Uprising of 2007”, discussed below, helps us understand the significance of the timing of KRCC’s formation, or the “why now”, but we are still left with many questions, including; “why this constellation of people?” In the same way that collective identity is negotiated and constantly reinforced through piecemeal steps, the formation of KRCC was a result of a series of actions from the greater Kalamazoo community that crystallized into a smaller group of people with the focused objective of becoming an activist group. During the “uprising of 2007” in Kalamazoo, many concerned citizens expressed outrage, attended local government meetings, and protested in front of City Hall, but only a select few formed a group that would later be called the Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition.

The Catalyst: The Events Leading to the Birth of a Protest Group

“Remember the “uprising” of 2007” writes Jack Urban, who would later become a Kalamazoo city commissioner, “when the Kalamazoo city commissioners and residents successfully demanded that no more PCBs be added to the Allied Paper disposal site near the center of our city?” (Urban 2008: 1). Urban was referring to the overwhelming response of the Kalamazoo community to the EPA’s cleanup announcement of the Allied site in 2007. What
specifically enraged the community in 2007 was the EPA’s decision to remove some PCB contaminants from a nearby pond and then add them to the Allied site. The community might have been somewhat aware of the contamination at the former paper mill but was outraged at the idea of using that site as a toxic landfill, especially because of its close proximity to the city’s largest supply of drinking water. In fact, if the EPA was to clean up surrounding ponds and streams, many Kalamazoo residents were of the opinion that the EPA should remove the contaminants from the Kalamazoo River and the Allied site and take them out of the city of Kalamazoo. In other words, the community wanted “total removal” of all the contaminants. “Total Removal” means only removal from Kalamazoo. The contaminants would remain, they would just be located at a different disposal site. Not only did residents vehemently oppose the additional dumping of PCBs, but the city, and federal representatives for Michigan had also made official statements regarding the total removal of all contaminants away from the city of Kalamazoo.

The Kalamazoo “uprising of 2007” was a lesson in history repeating itself. Much like the many protests delineated in the Kalamazoo Gazette portraying decades of protests regarding the same theme, the 2007 protest signaled yet another point in time when tensions ran so high that it galvanized angry citizens demanding change. In the case of the “2007 uprising”, the catalyst was the EPA’s plan to use the Allied site as a waste disposal landfill. The response was multiple public protests from hundreds of citizens. On April 2, 2007, about 100 local citizens protested on the steps of Kalamazoo City Hall prior to the City Commission meeting with the hopes that it would motivate city government to represent the community’s demand for total removal when addressing and working with the EPA. The demonstration in front of city hall proved effective
because city officials at this meeting presented a unified front and encouraged citizen creativity and political involvement (KRCC, 2014).

From the point of view of the EPA, their proposal to cap and consolidate the PCB material would be protective of human health and the environment and that it is unlikely that the groundwater would be contaminated using this solution (EPA, Frequently asked questions April 2015). The purpose of “cap and consolidate” would be to take PCB laden material from the Allied site and adjoining bodies of water and leave on location in the form of a “cap” that would keep the PCB material from leaking back into the water. This differs from “total removal” which would take the PCB laden material off location and out of Kalamazoo into a different landfill in Bellevue Michigan, according to my interview with the EPA community representative. When I spoke to Allison, the community representative for the EPA, she was very much aware of the lack of trust the community had in that statement. She referenced the feedback she had gotten from the Kalamazoo community and offered a rationale for why removal was itself risky.

Although many feel like, Oh, you’re not going to do it because it costs too much.” $238 (million) is the price tag on that full removal. But there’s a number of other factors that we have to think about. Short-term impacts – the number of truckloads, comparatively, is enormous. Truck traffic for five years on public and residential roads. There’s not going to be any monitoring required but the amount of material you have to manage and remove can create, also, a short-term risk of being exposed to that material. Can we minimize these and still get risk-reduction in any of these other options?

Throughout the month of April 2007, many citizens of Kalamazoo continued to protest by writing over 300 letters to the EPA, marching to Congressman Fred Upton’s office, demonstrating in front of Kalamazoo’s City Hall, and by organizing a crowd of over 500 citizens and elected officials to protest in a local Kalamazoo neighborhood. The demonstrations were held in front of city hall presumably because of its central and visible location in the community, and also as a symbolic message of unity and strength, as multiple neighborhood associations
called on their citizens to protest and demonstrate as one voice for the Kalamazoo community to prevent the Allied site from becoming a landfill (from a primary document source). Most neighborhood associations also released official statements rejecting the creation of a landfill at the Allied site. These actions were meant to serve as a reminder that the Kalamazoo community would not be denied a voice and political representation. Many residents expected better for their community and they were not about to sit idly by as the EPA decided the fate of the city’s property values, drinking water, and reputation.

On Wednesday, April 25, 2007, the EPA announced that it had not yet determined that the Allied site was to be the permanent disposal site of the PCB contaminated sediment. It appeared the EPA was backing off their earlier decision to make Allied a landfill. The Kalamazoo residents who later led KRCC agreed that a group needed to be formed in order to monitor the plans of the EPA as they continued to unfold. KRCC’s records document June 22, 2007 as the official birth of the organization. In these documents, one goal is clearly outlined:

To assure that something like this would never occur again, leaders in the community suggested that an organization be formed to maintain and build on the momentum that had been created. Such an organization could monitor the cleanup and disposal of the superfund site and serve as a liaison with MDEQ, EPA, and other appropriate entities. (primary document source source).

Since KRCC’s inception, the group has intended on being a voice for the community by monitoring the actions of the EPA. The amicable wording of the mission statement belied the tension that permeated the relationship between the community and the EPA. The many protests leading up to the formation of KRCC had a much less agreeable tone with protesters demanding that PCBs leave Kalamazoo entirely. It was from this “not in my town” sentiment that the protest group, KRCC, was formed. This marked the beginning of their fight with the EPA that would last for nearly a decade.
In December of 2017, I began reaching out to KRCC members for interviews. I had a general sense of the group from attending meetings, reading meeting minutes and agendas, and by watching their publicized interviews with the Kalamazoo Gazette and local news stations. Most of this information was available to the public on their official webpage but some of it was graciously shared with me by various members of the group. From this information, I observed that KRCC was a hierarchical and formally structured group that consisted of an executive director, a president/treasurer, a government advisor, and board members, many of whom were academics and experts in fields related to the physical or social sciences. Many members were affiliated with local teaching and research institutions. The group held an official 501(c) (3), or non-profit, status and held monthly meetings that were open to the public. The group intentionally held their meetings at the Goodwill in the Edison neighborhood, which overlooked the Allied site. Their meeting agendas consistently listed about ten members who were invited to attend each month. Although these meetings were open to the public, usually just an average of four to seven KRCC members would attend meetings, which made KRCC resemble a small, single-issue, protest group rather than a new social movement.

I started by examining the early stories of some of the first members of KRCC and their initial interest in the Allied site prior to the formation of the group in 2007. Each story reflected the, at times, deeply personal frustrations experienced by the people who formed KRCC, and who became board members. Their individual grievances were evidence of their fears, irritation, and outrage. While they each had their own unique experiences with the contaminated Allied site, they were all connected by their shared concerns of the legacy of toxic pollution left behind by an industry that had died almost a decade prior. The backdrop of these experiences would prove to be salient once the group began to crystallize in June of 2007 when KRCC became an
official organization. For each member, this background served as a personal motivation that later became the foundation for the collective interests of KRCC. Many residents wanted to prevent Allied from becoming a landfill, but these key actors had personal motivations that resonated beyond the sole desire to move polluted contaminants out of the community.

“This is my home,” Janet says, as she tells me the story of the first time she realized her backyard was adjacent to a toxic landfill. Janet is one of the first and crucial members of the Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition. A talented writer and passionate advocate, she became one of the most vocal champions for removing toxic waste out of Kalamazoo. I met Janet at a local diner in Kalamazoo, called “Theo and Stacy’s”. The diner itself is a prominent character in Kalamazoo’s local history. Family owned and offering a casual atmosphere and Greek-style food, it has been a favorite for many Kalamazoo locals for decades. Almost any person who has lived in Kalamazoo would recognize the name and has likely dined there. A family with small children enjoyed breakfast in a booth nearby and, seated a couple tables from them, were some diners casually making conversation with one of the servers. The energy in the restaurant was high the morning that Janet and I sat down to an interview in early January of 2017.

Janet was also instrumental in recruiting the early members of KRCC. She explains that her goal was “really trying to get the right folks on the board”. She tells me: “So I’d used – with my communications, my written communication skills, emails initially, to say to somebody like, hey, we really want you to be on this board, this is why, do you wanna meet for coffee?”.

Janet begins to tell me about how she first learned of the PCBs that plagued Kalamazoo for so long. Just before 2007, Janet bought a home with a beautiful backyard, “It’s got this creek going by and you’d see deer and fox and turkey. I mean, it just was lovely, right?”. But what Janet did not know at the time was that her backyard was overlooking the Allied Superfund site:
a site that held a large concentration of toxic PCBs. Janet thought the Superfund site had been cleaned up a long time ago. After all, it had been years since anyone had seen the white residue that would collect on car windshields or on the banks of small creeks. But the PCBs had never been removed. They were merely buried a little deeper when the EPA started cleaning the area some years prior. Janet, like many other residents, did not know the PCBs had not been cleaned up until the EPA announced in February of 2007 that material from local sites would be dredged and trucked to the Allied site. For Janet, the concerns involved more than just herself;

Oh, and I just had a kid” she tells me, “And then learning no, this stuff really hasn’t been cleaned up, this is – and not only has it not been cleaned up but they’re gonna be bringing tons of crap from far away and they’re gonna dump it here. It’s like no, this is – literally, my child plays – or is gonna play in this backyard, run through the sprinkler, you know. This is my home.

Janet was right to be worried. It was no secret that PCBs were a known toxin to humans, animals, and the environment. However, missing from the EPA’s lengthy description of negative health outcomes were local stories of illness, loss, and speculation. One such story came from a long time Kalamazoo resident named Abby. Abby’s interest in the EPA’s plans for the Allied site were personal as well. Like many others who had grown up in the Paper City, Abby’s mother lived near the soot, smoke, and pollution that the paper mills generated. Living directly on Burdick street in a working-class neighborhood near the Allied Paper Mill, Abby’s mother was likely exposed to PCBs in larger quantities than the generations who grew up in town after the paper mills had closed. For Abby, the legacy of the Paper City meant watching her mother fall ill. Abby and I sit down over coffee one evening when she tells me about her mom; “my mom has a lot of health issues like multiple sclerosis, lupus, she had breast cancer. Her sister also has celiac disease”. Abby tells me about how her mom had a lot of rare health conditions and how she and her siblings grew up with their fair share of health problems too, ranging from
asthma to food allergies. However, the health problems did not stop with Abby’s family. She recalls that her mom’s neighbors on Burdick street were really sickly, with all three children eventually developing brain tumors and other forms of cancer in their adulthood. She also describes a memorable meeting with a close friend that made a lasting impression because Abby’s friend shared some unsettling news. His mother had just been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and breast cancer. She had also grown up just down the street from the Allied site on Cork street.

With that in mind, Abby attended the EPA’s public meeting searching for answers. The EPA held the first of many public meetings to follow about the Allied site in 2007. Their intention was to share a series of possible cleanup options for the landfill. As the EPA launched into their presentation on potential cleanup ideas, Abby raised her hand to ask about any health studies done in the area. She was quickly told there were none. She remembers the feeling of being silenced and speculates, “they probably didn’t want me bringing that kind of stuff up because it just makes their job more complicated. They want to just be done with this site, I’m sure”. But she was not alone. After that EPA meeting she met another Kalamazoo resident who had made many of the same observations; “a woman approached me afterwards – I don’t know her name – and she really didn’t want me to say anything about her – she was obviously really closed off to the idea of being public about her health issues – but she had MS, her sister had breast cancer and she told her that her brother died of brain cancer and she also lived on Cork Street”. But if Abby and the unidentified woman had attended the EPA meeting hoping to find some answers, they would not find any that night. While the EPA had provided a general outline of the health harms associated with PCBs, there was no local health study shared and none of the
respondents in this study, including experts, had access to one or knew of the existence of such a study.

For decades, in the absence of any local human health studies, Kalamazoo residents had to be informed by anecdotes shared by long-time residents and vague government warnings about PCBs. So, when Dr. Arthur, an environmental pollution expert, was recruited by a local research institution to come to Kalamazoo in the early 2000s, he immediately began tackling the unknowns of PCBs in the local water. What he found was startling. Not only was it unsafe to eat the fish from the Kalamazoo River, but it was also dangerous to be living near it. Beginning in the early 2000s, Dr. Arthur and his team were able to secure a grant from the EPA to create a website that informed residents of their health risks along the river. He describes his concept for the website;

*Okay, let’s put this online and show people: If you eat a fish from this part of the river, what is your risk of getting a neurological deficit if you’re a child, or a cancer, or reproductive effects? ...And so we did that for every single – every 1,000 feet of the Kalamazoo River you could go online and say, “What’s my risk from eating a fish here and how much should I eat or not eat? What’s safe? What’s not safe? – And then also, “What’s the contaminant levels at those – every 1,000 feet in the river? In the sediments, in the water, in the floodplain soils. And so we did all that and put it online and that lasted about ten years.*

Dr. Arthur’s website was not an epidemiological study, but it was the best available tool for Kalamazoo residents to use when assessing their risk to future PCB exposure. So, when the grant ended in 2009 and Dr. Arthur’s team approached the EPA for resources to extend the project, they did not expect to be turned away. He explains; “*And again, these are data – were all from the Michigan Department of Community Health and the MDEQ. We just made a tool that people could go on and try to understand it. And the EPA rejected our grants*”. Then Arthur tells me the
last words that were said to him by the EPA on the topic, “we’re not interested in communicating risk”.

My interviews with Janet, Abby, and Dr. Arthur uncovered more than their own personal experiences and motivations. Their stories highlighted many of the collective concerns echoed by not just other members in the group, but by many citizens who galvanized the “Great Uprising”. Until the EPA revealed their plan to dispose of more PCBs at the Allied site in 2007, many Kalamazoo residents had no idea that the contaminants were still located in the city, much less near the city’s drinking water aquifer. Later, members of KRCC would express to me how often they encountered shock, confusion, and outrage through the course of the next decade when they informed residents of the continued PCB threat. Residents, both in 2007 and many years to follow, felt unsure of their futures and the safety of their water. Threats to health were poorly communicated, if communicated at all.

Through the use of this tool and a KRCC web page with linked articles and documents, the scientists on KRCC’s board made it a goal to inform the public that PCBs accumulated not only in soil and watery banks, like the Kalamazoo River, but they were also airborne in areas where their concentration in water and soil was high. But mostly, PCBs were stored in the fat tissue of fish that were later ingested by humans, which was the highest risk of exposure to humans. “Sometimes, the signs are in places that only the fish can read. If there are signs”, Dr. Mary tells me. Dr. Mary was recruited into KRCC the same way the other members were: through a colleague. She worked closely with Dr. Arthur on similar projects due to their shared specialty and was asked to join the group. Dr. Mary’s extensive knowledge of PCBs and fish was one of the reasons why she was sought after by the board to become a member. She explained her work to me; “So, what I did was basically looked at the health impacts of the PCBs in carp
in the Kalamazoo River. And it was kind of in this big picture of environmental health risk assessment”. Dr. Mary continues to explain her research, she says; “my studies show that we're picking up higher levels of PCBs than expected in the animals as well as a biological response to those PCBs. In terms of the health effects, they're there. The fish are responding”. Like many scientists, Dr. Mary is very conservative with her claims. She tells me that she still has many unanswered questions. That, yes, she is observing responses, but she doesn’t know exactly how far reaching the health consequences are for the fish or for the people who eat them. She does know, however, that the risk is high enough that the entire 77 mile stretch of the Kalamazoo River needs to be cleaned in order to prevent negative health outcomes for humans.

The frustration in Dr. Mary’s voice was evident when she critiqued one of the EPA’s local cleanup projects in downtown Kalamazoo near Arcadia Park where the Kalamazoo River begins. She tells me about a time when the EPA was particularly proud of finishing a project ahead of schedule and under budget. My first question to her was about the EPA’s standards of safety. Dr. Mary assured me, “well, the protective standards they have are just fine. They know the levels to be protective”. Dr. Mary was referring to the levels of toxicity that could remain in a contaminated area while offering a level of toxins that, according to the EPA, posed a negligible amount of threat to human health. But she also tells me, “that's not what you see in the environment. They don't really clean up to their own standards”. Dr. Mary describes a confrontation she had with the EPA at a celebratory event they held. She explains;

And I asked, well, what was the surface value that you've cleaned it up to? By your own EPA health risk assessment data, it should be – I think it's 0.05 to be protective of human ecosystem health. And that's for the basic bottom of the river. Because then smaller organisms eat that. Then fish eat that. The level for fish to be toxic of PCBs is two part per million. So, they left it at two part per million. So obviously, as it goes up the food chain...In my point of view, maybe they didn't do a risk assessment. Maybe they did a cost benefit analysis of cleaning up
Given the EPA’s lack of transparency, the limited awareness of threats to human health, and the daunting possibility of more hazardous material making Kalamazoo its permanent home; it was appropriate that a group of experts in a college town would network together to form a protest group. Dr. Mary’s encounter with the EPA demonstrated not just her irritation, but it also revealed the unique set of skills, knowledge, and legitimacy that allowed her to have such a confrontation with EPA officials. She was able to publicly address concerns using first-hand knowledge that very few had access to. She described her role in KRCC as someone whose responsibility it was to police the EPA; “I think this is our job as KRCC. It's to keep the EPA – say, Hey. We're here. And our job is to hold you to your standards. To be protective of ecosystem health and human health. And that's number one”. Dr. Mary’s perception of her role in KRCC was that of a legitimacy disrupter. Her perception of her identity merged two salient concepts of how she defined her role. Her identity as a scientist and an activist converged during her time as a KRCC member. Her actions filled an important need in the community and also resonated with her desire to fight for what she saw as just and fair.

While formally the mission statement was extremely brief, KRCC members had their own interpretations of the group’s overall function. Dr. Mary tells me, “So, we’re kind of this liaison between figuring out what’s best, kind of the voice of the community, and talking with the community”. Janet also contributes to Dr. Mary’s earlier notion that KRCC exists in order to disrupt the status quo; “I think it was 2008, right around the time we were forming. And so myself and another neighbor, basically, went and we literally circled the EPA guy that had come down to talk, like a shark. We both had our kids in strollers and we were circling around him.
And I did feel like, okay – well, he’s the shark, but I guess I felt like we were more trying to be the sharks, you know?”.

Despite not formally being a part of KRCC, there were many residents who participated in activism in response to the 2007 EPA decision. I met with Lidia, a prominent leader in the Edison Neighborhood. Edison houses the largest low-income community of color within Kalamazoo. Edison is also located very close to the contaminated Allied site, with a large portion of its business district located near the site. Lidia explains the anger and confusion felt by the Edison community when they realized in 2007, along with everyone else, that the Allied site remained contaminated; “for a while there, everybody, at least, that I knew in Edison thought that the million-some dollars that were spent on the Allied site in the ‘80s was cleaned up the site. We didn’t realize that there was actually contamination still on the site”. She too recalls the uproar in the Edison neighborhood, and she echoed many of those sentiments during one of the first EPA meetings held in Kalamazoo. She recalls her words to the EPA; “Oh, no. Not in my neighborhood. You can’t do this” in response to the EPA’s proposal to potentially leave the PCBs on site permanently. Lidia was prepared to fight to permanently remove those PCB contaminants. At the time, the EPA had very little rapport with the community. Lidia describes the EPA’s response as; “Oh, no. We’re the EPA. We’ll do whatever we want”. Her words back to the EPA were “You do understand I’m going to have to try and fight you on this”, and so she and many others began their work. She describes that she was not alone;“ So, that’s when we started organizing – a bunch of residents of the city of Kalamazoo, commissioners, county commissioners, Fred Upton, everybody from here out to try and get them around not making that a permanent waste site”.

Lidia was familiar with KRCC, even in the very beginning when the group was just forming. However, despite having community leadership experience, passion, and connections of
her own, she decided not to formally join the group. She spoke about her concerns over a conflict of interest. She was on the board at the time in the Edison Neighborhood Association and she did not want to be put in a position where she would be asked to do something on behalf of KRCC that the Edison neighborhood did not agree with, but that did not mean that Lidia was not still participating in activism. She explained her role; “I was in charge of a committee, but it was more of the community committee. Like organizing residents from various neighborhoods in the city of Kalamazoo around actually showing up to the rallies, showing force, that kind of stuff, writing letters to our congressmen and all those folks. That kind of stuff”. Lidia participated in many of the protest actions that KRCC initiated, but without accepting the identity of an official member of the group.

Lidia’s story demonstrated that although many citizens were outraged by the prospect of permanently housing a toxic landfill in Kalamazoo, they were not always able or want to formally join the group or join in the actions that would, at times, question the EPA. Dr. Arthur explained how important it was that he had the freedom to speak authentically in a way that could sometimes be seen as antagonistic to the EPA or government in general. He explained that he was protected by the position he held as a professor. Dr. Arthur tells me;

Way back in the beginning, my involvement – it was really clear that the scientists who worked for the government – all kinds of governments, not just the feds but state and everything – were recalcitrant about standing up and making comments that might be counter to what apparently was going to be the solution. And – But my situation was, “Hey, I’ve got tenure, I’m an academic, freedom – and we’ve got what’s called ‘freedom of speech’ as academics, we can say whatever we want and not get fired. And now with the current administration, the new one, all scientists who work for the government are quaking in their boots because they all think they’re gonna get fired, that’s my opinion, and so – yeah. I was lucky.

Dr. Arthur’s position was not just lucky, it was his key to be able to participate in social action. Dr. Mary, as a colleague of Arthur’s, was in a similar position,
But none of us can lose our jobs for saying what we're saying. That's the important part. We're not restrained. We're all – like myself, not affiliated with a government institution that's expecting me to respond in a certain way. We're faculty and local businesspeople, so we can say what we need to say without any repercussions.

This idea of not being restrained is important to understanding why this particular group of concerned citizens crystalized into a protest group. It separated KRCC members from the hundreds of other protesters who were part of “The Uprising”.

A Voice of the Community

When I asked members of KRCC about the composition of their group, they reflected on the fact that most of their members represented a very narrow demographic. Some KRCC members seemed to be cognizant of the fact that KRCC did not represent the most vulnerable in society. The former president of the group, and its driving force during the last critical stretch of the lifecycle of the movement, stated; “I look at our board sometimes, and we're not representative of the communities that are actually affected”. Another member reflected on this during an interview by stating “it’s hard to not be like oh, we’re all educated, white elites”, when I asked her about the diversity of KRCC.

To get a sense of the composition of the community that KRCC represented, I examined the demographics of the neighborhoods closest to the Allied site. The Allied landfill technically is located on the outskirts of the Milwood neighborhood, a mostly white, middle class neighborhood. The landfill bumps up against both the Westnedge Hill neighborhood and the Edison Neighborhood. While the landfill is located in the Milwood neighborhood, it is bordered
mostly by businesses and shopping centers that are located in the Edison Neighborhood on two of the busiest streets that run through that area.

Compared to the two white middle to upper class neighborhoods surrounding the landfill, the Edison neighborhood houses residents who are 26%-57% below the poverty level and 17.8%-44.9% of residents identify as persons of color. The 2014 census also suggests that the city of Kalamazoo is highly segregated by income and race, and that neighborhoods with the highest income level are predominantly white. The Oakwood, Winchell, and Westnedge Hill neighborhoods in contrast have 2.7% of their residents living in poverty and 5.7% of their residents identify as a person of color (Kalamazoo City, Fair Housing, 2014: 70-71). These data suggest that Kalamazoo is a segregated community and KRCC membership did not reflect the demographics of the entire community it represented.

The systemic underrepresentation of people of color and low-income residents in social movements is not a new pattern. In fact, the exception to the rule is both an uncommon and a fairly new development within social movement history. Dorceta Taylor cites Buttel and Flinn 1974, Lowe et al. 1980, Paehlke 1989, Fox 1985; Mohai 1990, and Taylor 1989, as cited in Taylor 1993:53) when tracing the shift in diversity within environmental social movement group identity. According to Taylor, the 1980’s ushered in a change in membership demographics. Prior to this, environmental social movements were not inclusive and were missing the participation of marginalized groups (Taylor 1993: 53-54). While Taylor points to the numerous examples of environmental justice efforts led by people of color, most often women of color (1993:53), she also draws attention to the extensive history of white European conservationists excluding people of color from any effort aimed at advocating for the environment (Taylor 2016). The exclusion was steeped in a history of European colonialism and the
disenfranchisement of people of color. Out of this legacy, Taylor argues, emerged a pattern of configuring parks and various green spaces as locations for whites to enjoy as forms of recreation or luxury. Conservation, national parks, and outdoor recreational spaces became culturally synonymous with privilege and whiteness (Taylor 2016).

The emergence of the environmental justice movement ushered in a paradigm shift toward an analysis of a clean and safe environment as a necessary resource for life and not just as a privilege to be enjoyed. While many environmental groups acknowledged that communities of color were disproportionately impacted by pollution, not many white led groups were making the necessary connections between environmental hazards and other forms of societal oppression (Taylor 1993). Taylor argues that white led groups are far less likely to incorporate intersectionality into their movements or critique the overall system which produces multiple forms of oppression which are experienced differently across groups (Taylor 1993).

McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) draw on a concept called homophily that might help draw attention to the noticeable pattern of group homogeneity. McPherson et al. explain, “homophily means that cultural, behavioral, genetic, or material information that flows through networks will tend to be localized” (2001:416). In other words, their aptly titled article, *Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks*, falls in line with the common sense notion that people who are alike will tend to build relationships and networks with those who are similar to them. The opposite is also true, most people are less likely to build connections with people who are not like them. The “likeness” that is discussed in McPherson et al.’s (2001) work can include demographics like race, class, gender, political affiliation, religion and so on, but these group affiliations are not always about identity politics. Tajfel and Turner (1986) developed Social Identity Theory to explain the tendency that people prefer their own “group” over other
groups, even if the groups were made in a seemingly arbitrary way. This can mean that a group was formed from a cohort in school or from a group of employees at work and a similar dynamic would apply. The underlying assumption still remains: once a set of people create group identity, they favor that group and are less likely to make connections with people from a different group. The process through which group relationships are formed can be complex. Sometimes groups can be formed in an arbitrary way like mentioned by Tajfel and Turner (1986) but often, broader systems of power contribute to relationship dynamics.

Sidanius, Pratto van Laar, and Levin (2004) discuss Social Dominance Theory which adds an additional layer to group segregation that includes an analysis on power relations. Social Dominance Theory posits that there is an overall societal pattern of “group-based oppression” and that it is perpetuated by a reciprocal relationship between individual ideology and institutionalized discrimination. Individual biases are infused into institutional relationships which then create hierarchical oppression within societal groups across time. In addition to biased beliefs leading institutional relations, resources are allocated across groups unevenly (847). Sidanius et al., explain that highly valued goods like “prestige, wealth, power, food, and health-care” (2004:847) are given to privileged groups, while less powerful groups are allocated “undesirable things such as dangerous work, disdain, imprisonment, and premature death” (2004: 847). So, while “birds of a feather” may flock together, not every “flock” will have the same access to resources or influence. When this dynamic is paired with the tendency for people to rarely make cross-group connections and relationships, these findings in the literature can help demystify the mechanics behind what makes groups so insular.

Bonilla-Silva further develops this idea of homophily and draws from Bourdieu’s notion of habitus to do so. Bourdieu’s notion of habitus shows how culture is reproduced and used as a
symbol of legitimacy for classifying a set of habits, preferences, and tastes of the hegemonic class (1984: 170). While Bourdieu’s analysis seems limited to class cultural differences, Bonilla-Silva extends this analysis by examining what he calls, white habitus. Both Bourdieu and Bonilla-Silva draw attention to the importance of culture when examining power but Bonilla-Silva focuses on hegemonic whiteness. White habitus explains why white groups seem to self-select into groups with little to no racial diversity and also why these groups fail to see this pattern as problematic (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, Embrick 2006). It may also explain why it is difficult to build meaningful cross-cultural and cross-racial relationships for many groups, including social movements and protest groups.

If KRCC lacked diversity, it was not entirely for lack of effort on behalf of the group. Thomas, one of the original and most outspoken representatives of the group, expressed his frustration at failed attempts to include people of color in the group; “we had a meeting at Second Baptist Church on our side, not one Black person there. Here we are in the basement of their church, we got food, we got signs, and the only people who are there are the same people that are always there”. His comment was the result of years of frustration that KRCC experienced while trying to recruit any new members and sustain public interest over the course of a decade. It spoke to the common obstacles and concerns any protest group faces when trying to galvanize a movement, especially long term. Specific to the problem of little diversity, however, the group would learn that including membership from vulnerable populations was a complicated and daunting goal.

Focusing on the early beginnings, this chapter explored a segment of a larger story about KRCC. A collection of theories were used as a framework for understanding the story of early members of KRCC and what drew them together to form a shared group identity. I framed this
story as an interplay between the interests and motivations of individuals and the structure in which they were either free or constrained to act.

The key question regarding the interplay between structure and agency draws on understanding the degree of control that individuals have at shaping their destinies against the backdrop of structural constraints that may limit those actions (Clifton, Banks, Remnant 2013: 516). Clifton et al., draw on Giddens’(1984) concept of structuration theory to explain that the two concepts co-create a reality together and that highlighting that interplay offers a more nuanced representation of how actors assert their goals within their “social, economic, political, and cultural frameworks”(Clifton, Banks, Remnant 2013: 516-517).

For some of the early KRCC members, the story begins with a landfill that shaped varying relationships and meanings for individual members. Their initial interest crystallized into a shared interest as a process of recruitment forged a shared connection. Drawing from local and specialized knowledge, early members were able to strategically recruit other members, not just based on interest, but based on the knowledge others could offer. Strategies for recruitment and action were made based on the expertise of existing and prospective members, effectively bringing in more like-minded members with similar backgrounds. The position and status of each member created pathways to actions that would not have otherwise been available to them. Dr. Arthur and Dr. Mary’s specialized knowledge and employment status, for example, gave them a certain degree of freedom and ability to participate in activism on their terms with a level of transparency that may not have existed for others in the community.

For example, Lydia’s interest and early actions of letter writing and organizing demonstrated her agency but her affiliations with other groups and her responsibility to them kept her from being able to join KRCC in any formal capacity. This did not take away from her
interest or all of her actions, but it did constrict her participation in KRCC. The pathways that pulled some people together into a formal group were some of the same pathways that led to the particular strategies used by KRCC members. The end result was a group of elite, mostly white, experts who were able to authentically communicate their concerns publicly. In contrast to this strength, what also resulted was a group that struggled to find people from a background that differed from their own.
CHAPTER IV  
RACE, CLASS, NEIGHBORHOOD

The difference between diversity and inclusion is difficult to define. Both terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but the term ‘diversity’ seems to fall short of achieving a sense of belonging or a true sense of integration between groups of people who differ culturally and racially. McCleary-Gaddy offers a definition to distinguish the two concepts by stating that, “diversity” is being invited to the party, but “inclusion” is being asked to dance” (McCleary-Gaddy 2019:1443). Attempts have been made to achieve greater diversity within institutions, especially colleges and universities, with the goal of integrating different ethnic and racial minorities into predominantly white institutions (Sidanius, Levin, van Lear, Sears 2008:3). Sidanius and colleagues simply define diversity as the interaction between the four main racial categories (Sidanius et al. 2008: 311). This definition, as simplistic as it is, seems to capture how limited a concept “diversity” really is. The intention behind achieving diversity was to enhance knowledge, and to introduce new ideas into learning environments (Sidanius et al. 2008: 3). With the introduction of the GI bill after the second world war, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and later affirmative action programs in the 1960s and 70s, more people of color were able to access institutions of higher learning in some parts of the United States (Sidanius et al. 2008:4). But achieving access to higher learning was only the beginning. Beyond diversifying the demographics within an institution, an additional concept has become more salient.
Where diversity may refer to the demographic changes, inclusivity refers to cultural and ideological changes. Sidanius et al. (2008) draw from studies that suggest that once people of color enter predominantly white institutions, like colleges, they may experience “lower feelings of belonging and exclusion on campus, and experiences with prejudice and discrimination” with consequences directly impacting well-being and academic success (Sidanius et al. 2008:251). For example, mentioned in this discussion is the research of Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993), who found that the stress of being a person of color in a predominantly white institution of higher education significantly impacted the academic performance of students of color negatively due to what the authors called; “sociocultural stress” (p.446). While these findings pertain specifically to institutions of higher learning, they still illustrate the idea that achieving diversity may not be enough to achieve equity. Building conceptually beyond diversity, the concept of inclusivity has been offered as a means to identify the missing elements from simply striving for the interaction of different racial identities. According to Jansen et al., “inclusion is established when individuals have a sense of belonging to the group, and at the same time, perceive themselves to be a distinct and unique individual” (Jansen, Otten, van der Zee et al. 2014: 370). Jansen and colleagues stress that inclusivity hinges on the importance of individuals not only being accepted into a group, but they must also be able to authentically connect with the rest of the group and remain true to oneself (Jansen et al. 2014:370,372). This “intergroup contact serves to reduce intergroup prejudices and other conflict-related attitudes” (Sidanius et al. 2008:319) and allows for what Sidanius and colleagues call “change-inspiring contact” (2008:319). Sidanius et al. warn that it is not enough to simply place racially diverse people in the same institution, there must be some meaningful connection made possible in order to achieve a true integration of ideas and perspectives.
According to literature on intersectionality (Oluo 2018,) (Chun, Lipsitz, Shin (2013) Carbado and colleagues (2013), and scholars arguing for recognition (Parsons et al. 2021), and those centering voices from leaders of color (Coulthard 2014:153), a missing element from many of the interactions between neighborhood leaders and local activist groups is a willingness to integrate the perspectives of marginalized groups into the decision-making process of advocacy. People at the margins in predominantly white spaces are often labeled as aloof, or simply not useful to the goals of a movement. One of the valuable contributions made by the literature on intersectionality is clarifying the difference between diversity and inclusivity. While many groups and organizations make an effort to include diversity in their mission, taking steps toward building relationships with marginalized groups in order to build inclusivity is typically where many organizations fall short. This chapter explores the literature on intersectionality that helps to reframe the perception of marginalized groups from helpless and disinterested to potential allies with unique contributions emerging from specific positions at the margins. This chapter also examines some missed opportunities and points of growth for neighborhood organizations and activist groups involved in the fight against the Allied landfill. The research questions guiding the discussion in this chapter are: Why is the distinction between diversity and inclusion important to social activism? What is the importance of situated knowledge to social activism? What were some examples of missed opportunities and points of growth for KRCC with regard to building an inclusive activist group?

Intersectionality as a Social Movement Tool

With its conceptual roots dating back to Dubois (Hancock 2005: 82), and later popularized by Kimberle Crenshaw, intersectionality is an analytic tool designed to elucidate the complex
relationship between identity and power beyond a single-axis of identity, like gender, race, or class. An intersectional lens offers a nuanced depiction of multiple subjectivities, or situated knowledges, that can be used as a framework for what Chun, Lipsitz, Shin (2013) describe as “democratic self-activity”. Carbado et al., define intersectionality as not just an analytical perspective but also as a blueprint for social movements. For Carbado and colleagues (2013), the wisdom of intersectional social movements is in finding seemingly “unexpected coalitions” and to form solidarity between groups that have not yet been explored or fully realized. Chun, Carbado, and colleagues agree that the principles of intersectionality like placing the voices of marginalized people at the center, when applied to social movements, can illuminate the hidden dynamics of oppression in order to transform them (Carbado et al., 2013: 312). Intersectionality, as an analytical lens, is a pathway to creating possibilities and avenues to social change that were not previously discovered or explored by directly interrogating the structures that create barriers for people to equally participate in political action.

Chun et al. describe a grassroots pan-ethnic organization that advocated for Asian immigrant women in the garment industry who had undergone an intersection shift in organizing. Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA) had started in 1983 to advocate against the exploitation of Asian immigrant women garment laborers in the San Francisco Bay area. The group began as an issue-oriented group whose focus it was to empower Asian immigrant garment laborers. The group began by making a connection with these laborers and asking about the daily lives and struggles they faced. From there, the organization assisted many workers in accessing resources like English lessons or information on worker’s rights (Chun et al. 2013: 926). About three years after the start of AIWA, the organization was successful in influencing change in the form of new standards and protections within the garment industry (Chun et al. 2013: 932).
However, AIWA reflected on their organizing and despite the accomplishments it had made, it wanted to switch from “an issue-based to a relational approach to organizing” (Chun et al. 2013: 932). This meant that the organization decided to put those it meant to empower in the driver’s seat of decision making. By consulting Asian Immigrant garment workers, the organization focused on placing “immigrant women garment workers in more horizontal and collaborative relationships” with key stakeholders in the community (Chun et al. 2013:932). As a result, AIWA was able to draw from the situated knowledge of garment laborers “who had accumulated years of backaches, repetitive stress injury, eye strain, and headaches to design a model ergonomic garment work station” and this created much needed reform in the local garment industry and set a precedent for holding “local communities accountable for workplace standards” (Chun et al. 2013: 933).

Ijeoma Oluo also acknowledges that intersectional social movements offer the most opportunity for social justice as they tend to be the most inclusive and mindful of the multiple obstacles in place for marginalized groups of achieving equality. Intersectional movements tend to look at how social problems are experienced across intersecting points of identity. Therefore, they are more likely to observe and address social problems beyond a singular experience of just race or just gender or just class. Intersectional movements tend to unify concepts such as these and are able to observe the problem more holistically, while single issue social movements tend to operate in silos and fail to notice how a social problem, like environmental justice, connects to and is co-created with other social problems like poverty and racism. Oluo (2018) addresses the obstacles to starting transformative conversations about race and racism, but her critique on the existing barriers to organizing intersectional movements is widely applicable. According to Oluo, intersectional movements slow down the process of collective action. Many groups rely on the rule
of majority, or the rule of those who are heard the most often, in order to move the process along quickly with the intention of addressing any lingering concerns later. Unfortunately, those who are disempowered never seem to get their due process. Oluo also points out that intersectionality forces people to face their privilege and how some people have unfair advantages over others. This is sometimes rejected by those who are not in favor of introspecting about their unearned privilege, nor is this a quick and easy process. It takes a lot of effort, self-reflection, and willingness on behalf of those who are leading and taking part in advocacy.

Similarly, Oluo argues that intersectional movements decentralize those who are typically in the center of decision making and leadership. This can often make it seem like more time is being spent on topics that seem less focal to the overall goal to those who have become accustomed to having their concerns at the forefront of discussion. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Oluo argues that intersectional movements force people to build relationships and interact with people they do not typically interact with. Oluo observes that it is human nature for people to cluster with those who are like them, a position elucidated by the literature on homophily. According to Oluo and many supporters of building transformative social movements, it is the job of a social movement to break through those tendencies and to extend the conversation across groups with the intention of transforming structures that produce oppression (Oluo 2018: 78-79).

Oluo offers these critiques because she, like many others, believes that people who start social movements do so because they care about justice for everyone. Unfortunately, operating in silos will not accomplish justice for everyone. Faber (2008) and proponents of intersectional movements take this critique a step further and explain that movements which fail to incorporate an intersectional lens are movements that are doomed to fail because they will continue to reproduce systemic oppression, including their own.
Due to the historical and political influences that specifically place people of color in vulnerable positions environmentally, race is the single strongest predictor of where waste and toxic facilities are located (Checker 2005:13). These practices have direct consequences for the health of populations exposed to pollution. Checker states, “African Americans are more than three times more likely than whites to die from asthma, and the hospitalization rate for African Americans with asthma is three times that for whites” (Checker 2005:13). Additionally, “Black babies are four times as likely as White babies to have their mothers die in childbirth and are more than twice as likely as White babies to be born at very low birthweight and to die before their first birthday” (Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci 2011:187).

Walker draws on Pulido (1996) who argues that “trying to prove (racist) intent is a complex and difficult task and that racism has to be understood instead as integral to collective social life in the U.S., part of the way in which private and public organizations work, infusing culture, politics and economic structures” (Pulido 1996, as cited in Walker, 2012:92). In other words, racism needs to be analyzed as a power creation process, rather than a static “race” variable that is divorced of context and history. The way that race as a concept has been handled, as somehow separate from economic systems that create socio-economic inequality, is problematic and overly simplistic. Pulido (1996) also warns researchers that framing ‘racist intent’ as abnormal or deviant suggests that racism is not an ideology that is embedded in the way that U.S. society operates (as cited in Walker, 2012:92), a sentiment that is also shared by Mills (1999) and Faegen (2013). This suggestion offers insight into the way that research, especially quantitative research, is done on concepts like ‘race’ and ‘class’. Since the concepts of race and class are so closely linked, they likely cannot exist as two discrete variables when it comes to analyzing environmental injustice.
When I first became interested in the Allied landfill, I expected the story to fit neatly into many other stories about environmental racism where I would find a low income community of color struggling to remove toxins from their neighborhood while nearby wealthy white residents enjoyed the benefits of their clean communities from a safe distance. This story of racism is an all too common one that is woven into the cultural and economic context of U.S. history. In the United States, after the second World War, the nation experienced a mass increase in the increase of industry (Checker 2005:19). This process created an increase in the amount of toxic waste that was released, and it also limited the amount of space for discarding toxic waste. This started the practice of disposing toxins into “less desirable neighborhoods”, which often meant that low income communities of color were carrying an unequal burden of pollution.

What I found with the Allied landfill, however, was a much more complicated story that still troubled the idea of unequal toxic burdens but it became less about where the toxins were located, and more about who was able to fight for their removal. In other words, much like many predominantly white institutions, grassroots activism was capable of mirroring a similar pattern of centering the voices of white elites. The role of the Milwood community is described in detail below. The community that technically houses the Allied landfill, illustrates a few important points. It adds context and nuance to the story and complicates the idea of unequal burdens from a more literal presentation of toxic exposure to one that included a discussion on agency and voice. It also demonstrates the barriers that were built between groups, despite the fact that many Kalamazoo neighborhoods had some concerns and goals in common, they did not create meaningful connections, but were instead operating in silos and tending to their own specific agendas at the cost of creating larger networks of stakeholders. Additionally, the story of the Milwood community is demonstrative of the very concerns put forward by critics of distributive
justice that warned against the devastating damages that would no longer be avoidable even for
the neighborhoods that usually enjoyed the most protection from such pollution in the past (Faber
2008: 252). Finally, the recollections of a community leader in the Milwood neighborhood
illustrates the dangers of a system that served the needs of polluters and left communities reeling
in the wake of its callous disregard for human health and safety. Not every neighborhood faced
the same challenges, but all were eventually left with a sense of resignation about a system that
was never designed with them in mind.

Milwood

Walter served as the president of the Milwood Neighborhood Association at the height of
the Allied fight, at about the same time KRCC struggled to promote their group’s interests and
goals. Like many people who grew up in the area, Walter’s relationship with PCBs began far
before the Allied site was a landfill. He reflected on his earliest recollections of the Allied site, “I
grew up as a kid on that short piece of Sheridan Drive that goes west off of Lover’s Lane. And as
a kid, we used to play back in the mill property there”.

Walter, like many locals, remembered the opaque Kalamazoo River that would sometimes
wash up gray PCB laden sludge onto its banks. The river also had a foul smell at times, which
would waft into the neighborhoods every now and then; “even after the mill shut down, you had
all that cellulose fiber out there rotting. And it smelled a lot. You had this whole part of Milwood
here, I’d say from the far end of the playground there at Milwood Elementary School all the way
to about here was known for its smell because it smelled like rotting paper”. When I asked Walter
why he thought residents had tolerated the paper mill industry and its stench for so long, he mused;
“For a lot of people, it smelled like a job because a lot of people in Milwood here worked in the
mills”. Walter’s relationship to the paper mill would change from bittersweet nostalgia to one that was rife with aggravation and disappointment when he, as an adult, purchased a home in the Milwood neighborhood; “We bought this home here in 1999. And that’s been our main reason for coming into contact with the PCB issue is because basically, we’re neighbors to the Superfund site”.

When Walter reflected on his time serving as a community leader, it was clear that the idea of responsible leadership was important to him;

We started our meetings with prayer. And as a Christian, I believe that that can account for a lot of superhuman behavior that you wouldn’t see otherwise. And we had that thread even though the diversity ran all over the place in that regard too. There was a sense that maybe that was appropriate that we ask for the Lord’s blessing on our neighborhood before we started out on something like this. It gave us a sense of respectability among others looking in that I don’t think we’d have had otherwise.

This idea of “respectability” was a very important one to Walter. He would weave that concept in with many of his other descriptions of the various groups and neighborhoods in Kalamazoo that were also facing the EPA in their own battle for clean water and soil. His descriptions of key players, like EPA officials, city officials, and other residents would all be measured against this notion of “respectability”. Sometimes respectable meant politically non-partisan, like in the case of Walter’s descriptions of why the Milwood Association did not directly partner with other groups who were also concerned with removing PCBs from the Allied site;

The thing that I personally felt was divisive was that some of these organizations were heavily and noisily extremely liberal Democrat organizations. It was a difficult place for a conservative Republican to function. And that really wasn’t helpful in getting progress or getting attention on this...It was too radicalized. And in some ways, the effort got a little bit hijacked... all that was left was a bunch of wild-eyed radicals.
Walter did not name KRCC as the main target for his criticism, but it stands to reason that his opinion extended to the mostly liberal group. While the Milwood Neighborhood Association did not partner directly with KRCC on all actions, they did network with them and use some of their legal resources. The Milwood Neighborhood Association, the closest in proximity to the site, qualified for a class action lawsuit which paid damages to residents who were entitled by law to be compensated. Walter explained that he used legal help and services provided by KRCC to obtain legal representation for his neighborhood. The result was a win for the community in the sum of a few thousand dollars;

We built a case for millions of dollars of devalued property here in the neighborhood because of the smell and all the stuff that went on. And when they finally did disperse the funds for Lyondell, I still think they were only dispersing like, $0.04 on the dollar for your illegitimate claim. But the end result was that we got two checks and were promised a third. I don’t know. One was about $2,500.00, and another one was about $2,300.00 or so. Come out to about $4,800.00. And then the third check was going to be the final sweep the floor by the bankruptcy judge. Whatever was left, they were gonna cut up the little pieces and distribute them out.

What was most important to Walter was that the neighborhood successfully drew public attention to the loss in property value. The settlement was not a large sum, and Walter explained that most of it went to cover other costs, “So, we got a little money. And that paid for some of our media time, which we had to pay for. But that again, was a letter put together by three or four of us that tried to highlight the fact that yeah, it has impacted property values in the neighborhood”.

For Walter, the Milwood neighborhood’s struggle took center stage and eclipsed any other potential hardships that may have been facing other communities. When I pressed Walter about other vulnerable neighborhoods and unequal burdens, he was unconvinced that there was a valid concern. In particular, Walter was critical of the popular claim that the Edison neighborhood was disproportionately impacted by the Allied landfill. He explained; “Among those that were there
for largely political reasons, there was always this effort to depict the poorer segment of the population as being the ones that were taking it on the chin in this whole deal. Absolutely no evidence to support that at all. But that was their standard message, so somehow it had to fit”. According to Walter, this message was misleading and dishonest, rather than a strategic political decision to draw attention to a complicated problem. Walter acknowledged that some residents had voiced concerns that the Lantinx community was disproportionately consuming PCB contaminated fish, but in the absence of an epidemiology study, Walter felt that the entire discussion was much ado about nothing; “But there’s never to my knowledge ever surfaced any evidence that their health has been affected one way or another by it”.

In addition to his dismissive stance towards potential poor health outcomes for marginalized Kalamazoo residents, Walter’s general perception of the Edison neighborhood served as a juxtaposition to his perceptions of his own neighborhood. His conceptualization of the Milwood neighborhood was again steeped in this notion of respectability. He described Milwood as a neighborhood full of homeowners who had a stake in the community’s future. From Walter’s viewpoint, the Milwood neighborhood differed from lower income communities like Edison because Milwood included more property owners; “We didn’t wanna see our property devalued any further. It’s already taken a pretty good hit”. Walter communicated that homeownership was an important factor in motivating the Milwood community into action but that it was not the only important factor. However, he struggled to name exactly what was creating a sense of cohesion among the group; “But for a lot of people in the larger Milwood Neighborhood Association, they were renters. They were absentee owners maybe or whatever... and it didn’t seem to matter. There was a unity that I guess really, I can’t explain”. While it was difficult for Walter to articulate the
exact quality that held the Milwood community of homeowners and renters together, it was clear that he did not feel the same way about the renters in the Edison neighborhood.

I asked Walter further about the “sense of community” that he felt as a Milwood resident and he expressed his concern for his community and the influence from surrounding neighborhoods that might be eroding the fabric holding Milwood together; “Because we are more and more surrounded by higher and higher crime neighborhoods. The Edison effect is coming up the hill here” he explained further; “And the rest of Milwood is becoming surprisingly Hispanic. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. But I sure hope they don’t build any more apartments in Milwood because that’s where the trouble comes from”. Walter expressed his disapproval of building more rental properties and was quick to state that other Milwood homeowners would be disapproving of adding more rental properties as well, explaining that; “The residents don’t own a thing. They have no long-term view of the neighborhood at all. And we’ve got enough of that already. People just passing through and leaving their trash behind when they go”.

This opinion about renters is a common view that often places renters in the category of “other” and not truly a part of the community in which they live. Rollwagen (2015) explains the general perceptions that homeowners may hold in relation to renters and crime. The findings of Rollwagen’s research is also aligned with findings in the literature on the negative perceptions of renters held by society. Rollwagen (2015) explains;

Renters pose an indirect threat to the neighborhood insofar as they are perceived to be as transient, uncommitted, and disinvested residents of a community; therefore, their capacity to be trusted to act for the common good is lowered. In some cases, renters were perceived to pose a direct threat to neighborhood safety, as they were considered to be more “Criminal” than homeowners. It is interesting to note that in many cases, the homeowner did not have personal relationships with renters; instead, generalization about renters were used to construct them as a risk to the community (p. 14).
Walter’s perception of the Edison neighborhood, and possibly the LatinX community, was shaped by a limited view that characterized them as a monolithic group of low-income renters with little connection to or pride in their neighborhood. This may have been further complicated by Walter’s limited perception of diversity. He described Milwood as a diverse neighborhood; “We have – it goes Dutch, Greek, Dutch, Greek, in this neighborhood too. So, it’s nice to be able to mingle with them and learn their culture a little bit and their festivals and all that. So, it works. We have a diverse neighborhood here, and that’s – we work together really good”. While it is unclear if Walter recognizes Greek heritage as an example of white ethnicity, Walter’s description of diversity appears to only include ethnic differences within white groups. While his characterization of white diversity was couched in positive terms, his view towards communities of color was filled with wariness and suspicion. Whether Walter meant to or not, his words effectively “othered” the Edison neighborhood in a way that created distance between Milwood and Edison. Walter, although not the solitary voice for Milwood, was the community leader and set the tone for many of the partnerships that were made between Milwood and other organizations. His perception may not have been representative of the entire Milwood community, but his perceptions were demonstrative of the types of barriers that he both perceived and created between himself, the Milwood neighborhood, and other potential stakeholders in the greater Kalamazoo community. Both KRCC and the Edison neighborhood were outsiders, albeit for different reasons.

In the end, despite the small sum the community won, Walter felt disillusioned by his experiences in the fight against Allied. Like almost every other resident in Kalamazoo, Walter and the Milwood community wanted the landfill removed from the city. After a successful lawsuit, protests, and letters written to the city and EPA, Walter lamented the EPA’s final decision to cap the landfill and leave it on location. He reflected on the important lesson he learned through his
“the whole experience for me personally was an exercise in seeing how ineffective government is in trying to accomplish good things. They just can’t put the pieces together. I’ve never been more persuaded of that than I am now that I’m completely done with this experience”. He felt that the government, including the local government, had compromised the safety and integrity of the Milwood community. From Walter’s point of view, the people had very little say in their own futures; “Somewhere in a smoke filled room somewhere, they came to some kind of peace about a pile”, and thus the government sealed the fate of the Allied site, creating what many saw as a permanent liability to the neighborhoods surrounding it. Perhaps it was his frustration talking when Walter struggled to find meaning in the decade long saga; “And without meaning to sound cynical, I’m not sure any groups are at risk. And the longer this goes on, the more I suspect that’s the case since the whole thing was a lot of noise about nothing”.

Diversity/Inclusion KRCC

In congruence with Walter and the Milwood Neighborhood’s experience, KRCC also had a marked lack of both diversity and inclusion. However, some members of the group struggled to recruit a demographic different from their own and expressed the desire to be able to do so. In addition to the group’s frustration over the lack of diversity and their concern about equity, the lack of varied perspectives weakened the group’s collective action efforts. Efforts to include diverse members were not only unsuccessful, but at times also added to the vulnerability of marginalized communities while wasting valuable KRCC resources like time, effort, and money to make protest signs that could not be used for fear of drawing unwanted attention to the LatinX community in Kalamazoo. Moreover, in an effort to include varied identities in their group, KRCC practiced what Harris, Barone, Davis (2015) call “diversity” rather than “social justice”. Harris et al. assert that the goal for reaching diversity often stops at achieving numerical representation, i.e.
diversity, and falls short of considering systems of oppression (Harris, Barone, Davis 2015:27). Much of diversity work does little to disrupt the status quo, in fact, Harris et al. draw on Derrick Bell’s assertion that “gains in racial equity are advanced only when it benefits white society” (as cited in Harris et al. 2015:22). Diversity has been understood as a buzzword that gives the appearance of progress while addressing very little in the way of true equity (Harris et al. 2015:24). This distinction has been flagged as an overarching pattern in many institutions and this was also the lens some KRCC members applied to their advocacy work.

KRCC expressed their concerns and frustrations about their lack of diversity and the difficulty they faced representing a diverse community that had a range of vulnerabilities and needs. The then president of KRCC, Rebecca, echoed the same concern many others stated when I inquired about the group’s diversity. When asked, Rebecca stated that the Edison residents were likely the most vulnerable population in Kalamazoo in terms of exposure to the Allied site; “So, if anybody was going to be going over there and jumping over the fence as kids, those were those people”. Rebecca was referring to the fence surrounding the actual landfill, but there were so many other ways to be exposed to PCBs beyond coming into direct contact with contaminated soil and water. Subsistence fishers, or those who consumed fish as a part of their food intake, were the most vulnerable group and most KRCC members agreed that this risk was not adequately communicated to the public nor was the extent to which the community was consuming the fish studied. Rebecca explained that KRCC also did not frame their mission from the environmental justice angle and admits that the group could have fought harder to follow the legal precedent of environmental justice that would address “disadvantaged folks”, and the unequal burden shared by communities of color and pollution. Looking back, she conceded that this strategy “could have been a larger overall argument”.

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In hindsight, many KRCC members mentioned that they could have considered the disparate vulnerabilities of local residents more in their mission; which had no mention of environmental justice. Janet recalled that, at the time of the early formation of KRCC, environmental justice was not a part of the discussion; “You know – before all this I didn’t really think of environmental issues and poverty or social justice in terms of environmental issues. So where is this located? It’s near Edison, which is one of our poorest neighbors”. The difficulty of framing a mission and goals, particularly in the midst of a time sensitive problem, became apparent when KRCC members reflected on their decision-making process almost a decade later. Rebecca conceded; “the environmental justice angle could have been a much bigger angle. We were able to – I think you choose whatever argument you have at the time, and with limited energy and resources, it was like, “We’ve got this drinking water threat. Let’s go with that. That’s a good one”.

One branch of environmental justice, human well-fare ecology, focuses more on unequal health burdens rather than on preserving green spaces. Until communities of color began advocating on behalf of their own residents who were systematically more likely to be exposed to harmful toxins, the dominant discourse shaping collective perceptions regarding environmental concerns was steeped in preserving parks and green spaces mainly for more affluent communities to enjoy. On the surface, preserving green spaces seems logical and rather innocuous, but lurking beneath the surface is what is left unspoken about those spaces that are not preserved. When toxins are simply moved from one area to the other, in a “not in my back yard” fashion, they are usually moved to low income communities of color. An environmental justice lens would interrogate this point and examine the mechanisms within a larger system that reproduces unequal burdens for marginalized communities and favors privileged spaces for more affluent, predominantly white
communities. The most compelling critique, however, is the argument put forward by the environmental justice literature stating that simply moving toxins, a form of distributive justice, is a short-term solution (Faber 2008: 270). Eventually, there will be fewer and fewer backyards to carry the burden of housing toxins and even the most affluent will have nowhere to hide from environmental harms. The environmental justice lens calls for transformative change and the restructuring of a system that produces such harms.

Despite the lack of an environmental justice goal, KRCC made an attempt to add some marginalized voices to their board. Rebecca mentioned that she worked very hard to get a former leader in the Edison Neighborhood Association on KRCC’s board to serve as a neighborhood representative. She explained; “that is the quintessential low-income diverse neighborhood of Kalamazoo that is adjacent to the site”. To Rebecca, it stood to reason that if she recruited a former leader in the Edison community, he would be able to speak on behalf of the community’s needs and concerns. But when I spoke with John, Rebecca’s recruit, his vision of his role on KRCC’s board and Rebecca’s vision did not align.

I sat down with John one morning at a local coffee shop in Kalamazoo to speak about his time on KRCC’s board. It happened to be his birthday that day and I remember thinking it was generous of him to meet with me before he and his son went to a concert later to celebrate. As John spoke, his passion for the environment and the Kalamazoo community was evident as he recalled his various interests with fondness, especially when he mentioned the work he and his late wife did together. John explained to me that he and his wife would often join various local organizations and were very connected to the many goings-on in the Kalamazoo community. So when the then president of KRCC, Rebecca, approached John to join KRCC’s board, he accepted the invitation. John joined the group about four or five years prior to its end in 2017. Despite Rebecca’s main
motivation to recruit John because of his connection with the Edison neighborhood, he never felt that he joined KRCC for that reason. According to John, it was his education and experience that made him a good candidate, with his past connection to Edison a mere afterthought. John had a degree in aeronautical science and cared deeply for the environment and for Kalamazoo. He identified himself as a conservationist and explained to me that this tradition of conservationism started in his family generations before him. He told me; “my great grandfather was a hunting and fishing guy on the Manistee River in northern Michigan. So, the licensing and the fees that go along with that help protect wildlife and our forested grounds, state parks, and all that kind of stuff. So, that’s generally kind of – I’d like to see the environment protected”. John also remembered his earliest memories of the river; “I grew up when the Kalamazoo River was white. And a lot of people don’t remember that...the water was pretty well white. It was opaque. You couldn’t see down into anything. And we dug for worms for fishing”. With these bittersweet memories in mind, John joined KRCC to help the group fight to remove the contaminants out of Kalamazoo and away from the river that was such a fixture throughout his life.

John also agreed that there was a general lack of diversity or new interest during any public discussion about the Allied landfill; “Well, we saw; like I said, the same people that were at every meeting”. This frustration with “seeing the same people” was a recurring feeling experienced by the entire group. KRCC would frequently hold meetings in the community centers and churches of communities of color only to later lament the lack of any new recruits. I asked John about the obvious absence of Edison residents not only at KRCC meetings, but also EPA or city hall meetings regarding the Allied site. He explained what he called the 80/20 rule of social activism; “the 20 percent are the ones that are the most active and stay with it, while the 80 percent go on with their lives, and somebody else is doing the job”. In addition to the ubiquitous problems with
recruitment into activist groups, John described the specific reasons he thought there was a lack of Edison voice in the public discussion about Allied. In John’s viewpoint, the biggest barrier the Edison neighborhood faced was a defeatist attitude; “I think a lot of it kind of goes right back to the fact that they’re not normally involved in things other than complaining when the services aren’t there or that kind of thing. I guess a barrier would be just negativism”. A common thread throughout most of John’s interview was this idea that the world was composed of two types of people; those who do and those who wait for others to do it for them. As our conversation progressed, John would often refer to the Edison neighborhood as a community that was in the latter category and he often put himself in the first.

In contrast to his harsh words, John was a soft-spoken person with a very kind demeanor. As he spoke, he would smile often, and he would speak in an agreeable tone. John appeared to be a little older than middle aged with graying hair. His racial identity was not clear to me and he did not mention it during our conversation. Despite his experiences as a former resident and community leader in the Edison neighborhood, John distanced himself from the community of which he was once a part. John continued to describe the Edison neighborhood and shared his opinion on its many barriers to community empowerment; “It’s just that you’re seeing individuals, well, I could never do that. Even with the fact that you have the opportunity to have an education that you don’t really have to pay for. And still, I mean, if everybody took advantage of that, we would see probably more productive citizens, more active citizens, and we would see a shift in the ability to do things financially”. The educational opportunity to which John was referring was the Kalamazoo Promise: a program that provided payment of college tuition in the state of Michigan to any student who attended Kalamazoo public schools. While John acknowledged that poverty created limitations, his perspective included an emphasis on agency that mirrored earlier cultural
retellings of success measured by one’s ability to “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”. He stated; “But poverty does things to people. And I didn’t grow up in a wealthy home. My dad was a plumber. My grandfather was a plumber. I ended up in the trades and worked as a sheet metal worker for 25 years. But that wasn’t what I wanted to do. That’s what I ended up doing for a period of time. I actually went back to school”. John’s account of his own life served as a juxtaposition to the community in which he once lived as he continued to place himself in the role of a person who takes initiative to create change despite his upbringing, not because of it. His presumed role as the Edison representative on KRCC’s board was in direct tension with his overall perception of the community. It is unclear if the rest of the board was aware of this dynamic, but it appeared to be a topic that was never explored by the group. In a taken-for-granted way, KRCC viewed John’s distant connection to the Edison Neighborhood as enough reason to deem him its representative, despite his criticisms of the community and its residents. John may have appeared to contribute diversity to KRCC, but his views served as a barrier to inclusion.

I asked John what barriers he observed to political participation within the Edison neighborhood. John’s opinion was congruent with his overall perspective; “— anything outside of their own little lives, unless it affects them directly, if you ask them about it, oh yeah, they think it’s a good idea to clean it up, but other than that, that’s not something that’s on their mind on a daily basis”. Despite John’s dismissive tone, the implication that people focus their actions on the things that impact their daily lives is a rational observation that can be made about any group. Other KRCC members, like Janet, acknowledged that the barriers to participation were complicated and included nuances that went beyond personal interest alone; “It’s like –Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, you know? They’re focused on the basic needs, you know? What’s this aquifer and 50 years from now it may start leaking, who gives a crap, right?”. Janet explained so succinctly
the tension behind recruiting members from marginalized communities. Often there was interest and concern, but the pathway to action was obscured by everyday burdens and worries, with some residents facing more obstacles than others.

Lidia, who served as a leader on the Edison board for several years prior to our interview in 2017, had a different perspective while working with Edison residents. While both John and Walter held the opinion that low income residents of color and renters were disinterested, with Walter stating, “Really, there wasn’t a lot of participation by any minorities at that time. This was basically just us white folks raising a fuss. And I’m not saying that with any kind of real sauce or – it’s just the way it was. Nobody else showed up”, Lidia remembered it differently. She remembered when the infamous EPA announcement of 2007 reached the Edison neighborhood and the outrage it created. Edison residents were very quick to realize the importance of the landfill’s location; “My neighborhood took it as a, “Why would you put it in a low-income neighborhood? It just doesn't make sense?” There’s no logic there to us at all except for just another dump on the poor people because they can't fight for themselves”. As mentioned prior, the Allied site is closer to the Milwood neighborhood than the Edison neighborhood, but its close proximity to Edison’s businesses and main roads was often one of the first characteristics that Kalamazoo residents noticed.

Lidia admitted that the Edison neighborhood was intimidated by the idea of fighting the EPA, but more than that, the community was also aware of the many constraints they faced to mobilizing. Lidia echoed many of Janet’s words when she explained why Edison residents were not present at many public discussions about the Allied site; “people have things they have to do, they do the best they can. But they have children to raise and such. So, they didn’t have as much of the luxury to attend meetings and do all of those things that others did. So, a lot of ours was
surveys and taking people's input to the meetings for them”. Lidia’s efforts to include Edison voices in EPA and city hall meetings were admirable, but they served only as a temporary fix to a deeper problem of access and representation.

As Resource Mobilization Theory helps elucidate, people who live on the margins are often not positioned politically in such a way that allows them to have the energy or resources to participate fully in the political world, instead they are burdened with the task of surviving or fighting for basic needs, and often alone or with little support from the majority of the community which is usually unaware of the obstacles many of their neighbors face. Sometimes communities exist so far in the margins that their mere presence goes unacknowledged or recognized. Most of the KRCC members I interviewed were aware that the Edison neighborhood was a diverse community that included many low-income people of color in Kalamazoo, but there was little mentioned specifically about the group that existed in the margins of the Edison neighborhood: the Latinx community.

Charles Briggs’ research involving a Venezuelen society’s response to a cholera epidemic explores the concept of “erasure”. Briggs found that the lived experiences of marginalized groups, who were disproportionately affected by the cholera epidemic, were systematically diminished and erased. Their experiences of death, suffering, and grief were publicly overridden with blame, suspicion, and blatant racism. By erasing the experiences of marginalized groups, the narrative was controlled by dominant society and served as a method of silencing and dehumanization (Briggs 2004:166). While the Allied landfill did not play the same role as a cholera epidemic, the response from neighborhood and activist leaders in Kalamazoo to the experiences of the most vulnerable in the community created very little room for the awareness of the day to day lives of
those at the margins. Walker’s (2012) discussion of recognition, or “misrecognition” may help contextualize this observation. Walker (2012) explains:

At the core of misrecognition are cultural and institutional processes of disrespect which devalue some people in comparison to others, meaning that there are unequal patterns of recognition across social groups (defined by gender, race, religion, ethnicity and so on) (p.50).

“We also live here,” said Arturo, a leader within the Kalamazoo Latinx Community. The Latinx community is the most marginalized and vulnerable group within Kalamazoo and they live furthest at the margins of Kalamazoo’s largest low-income communities of color. Arturo’s words to me were spoken during an interview in September of 2017 when he shared his frustrations, and the frustrations of many residents in the Kalamazoo Latinx community. Those are the words he found himself saying constantly to various organizations and leaders within the non-Latinx community who served the Kalamazoo area. When I spoke with him, he was the director of the Hispanic Council and was managing a very busy schedule. He was gracious enough to give me an interview one morning in his office, which was located adjacent to St. John’s Catholic church, just a couple miles from the Allied landfill. As we spoke, he was frequently interrupted by members of the community who sought his help. They came into his office and readily communicated their concerns. There was a sense of rapport and familiarity between their exchanges, so much so, that some were surprised to see me in his office. I took this to mean that perhaps not many people from outside the community asked to meet in the Hispanic Council. Arturo would politely pause our interview to address the various questions residents had. They spoke exclusively in Spanish and the exchanges were short and polite, and sometimes business-like in nature. He explained to me that the council was one of the only resources in Kalamazoo for Latinx residents and that he was
constantly advocating for their many needs; “we’re the only Hispanic organization in the community. We do serve about 2,000 or so people a year, we reach out to almost 1,700”, he stated.

Arturo told me that most of his outreach dealt with advocacy after residents had been denied services. He described a time when he called a local organization that denied services to Latinx residents due to their immigration status. It was not clear to me from his description whether the organization denied the service because of perceived or verified undocumented status, but Arturo insisted on equal treatment either way; “how can you say you’re serving the community? Our members are from the community; they pay taxes. They should be able to be served”. The most focused strategy to prevent these instances included Arturo reaching out to various directors of organizations, as an effort to build a bridge between those with resources in Kalamazoo and Latinx residents. In Arturo’s opinion, his efforts to make connections worked, but the community was still extremely vulnerable. Furthermore, at the time of our interview in 2017, the Hispanic council was the only resource serving the growing Latinx community in Kalamazoo, and the burden was felt by both leaders and residents.

Although there was only one Hispanic Council serving the Kalamazoo area, Arturo was not the only leader in the Latinx community who was constantly advocating for residents who were at the margins. “I’ve been here for almost 40 years here in Kalamazoo. And I’ve watched our communities – meaning our Latino community, Hispanic community – staying under the radar on a lot of issues”, Claudia told me one day in her office. We met at a local college one morning in April of 2017. I asked Claudia the same question that I asked Arturo regarding the low level of involvement of the Latinx community in what was once a prominent social problem in Kalamazoo. Claudia had decades of experience as an advocate for equal access to education and had successfully obtained grants that would serve Latinx students on their journey to obtaining a
college degree. Claudia explained to me that her position in the community, a community that was incredibly diverse, was one of relative privilege; “I have a job. I have health insurance. I have retirement. I have a home. I have all of that. And for me – and I’m speaking just personally, I’m not saying about any other Latino or whatever – I have a responsibility to my community because I have access”. Claudia revealed to me that the Latinx community in Kalamazoo was a diverse group of nationalities that were often lumped into one pan-ethnicity by predominantly white society. To say that every person within the community faced the same obstacles would be a mischaracterization of the vastly differing life experiences within that community. Claudia explained the Latinx community in Kalamazoo;

So, we have a community, our most vulnerable is our immigrant community. I say that because I believe they’re our most vulnerable because, yes, there are a lot of issues that impact their livelihood within a community. You also have another community who’s been here since the 1930s and 40s. It was part of a migrant and seasonal farmworker community, so they’ve been here, they’ve had children, they have grandchildren, so that’s another community. You have another community that is made up of professional Latinos, and so that community, you have some who are involved in working with our most vulnerable community, and you have some that are not.

For Claudia, her work was closely positioned to Kalamazoo’s most vulnerable populations. Because of her experiences as an educated professional in a leadership role, she was able to speak to the limitations that were placed on the most vulnerable. She, like Janet, explained that life for the marginalized in Kalamazoo was about survival. Claudia reiterated that interest in a social problem was often shaped by the priorities that comprised the lived experiences of life at the margins; “So, a lot of times, that’s not an issue they’re looking at. How are they gonna feed their families? How are they gonna pay for a medical bill? Do they have to watch over ICE? Those are the pressing issues in their lives, so this is something that’s not a priority. It’s not a priority”. Citizens of Kalamazoo seemingly lived in vastly separate worlds that were close in proximity but
differed in almost every other way. Like many other Kalamazoo residents who lived in predominantly white spaces, the members of KRCC were mostly unaware of the specific concerns and constraints that many Latinx residents, especially immigrants, faced. It was the distance between those worlds that KRCC struggled to bridge and their inability to close that distance led to one of the group’s most memorable losses.

While KRCC did not have insight into the specific vulnerabilities facing Latinx immigrants, they were somewhat aware that one of the most marginalized communities within Kalamazoo was the Latinx population. Some years after the 2007 Uprising, KRCC participated in a collective effort to keep the public aware of the Allied landfill and its precarious future. In doing so, they made t-shirts and signs that read “Don’t Dump On Us” to be disseminated widely and to serve as a reminder of the very real threat that one day Kalamazoo may be the permanent home of a toxic landfill located near the city’s drinking water. It was a call to action and KRCC needed the community’s support. In an effort to include some of the most vulnerable residents in their collective action, KRCC had translated protest signs that read “Don’t Dump on Us” into Spanish. But aside from the difficulty of translating an American English idiom that did not exactly make sense in Spanish, the Spanish speaking community wanted nothing to do with the signs; “They didn’t wanna be identified as Spanish speaking folks. They were afraid ICE was gonna drive down the road and say there’s one there, there’s one there. We didn’t think about that. We thought we wanna include and we wanna have our message in Spanish. The signs were a total loss”. This lesson in loss was a complex lesson. It illustrated how identity shaped the experience of loss. KRCC lost resources like time, effort, and money. However, their failed attempt at inclusion was a cataclysmic meeting of their good intentions and lack of awareness. The motivations were well-intentioned, but KRCC had unknowingly planned a protest action that could have put the Latinx
community at further risk. KRCC lost material resources that day, but they also unintentionally lost an opportunity to partner with members of their community, arguably, in a way that could have even been beneficial to their overall mission.

The barriers to engaging marginalized groups include very practical obstacles like material resources as well as less obvious symbolic structures like cultural practices. Claudia’s interview elucidated both examples very clearly. She described a meeting she attended about community engagement a week prior to our interview where the inevitable question about engaging the Latinx community arose. Claudia recalled “And the meeting I was in last week, they’re saying, “Well, how do we get engaged the Hispanic community?” Well, you can engage them, but they don’t have healthcare. Can we start there? And so, that’s the reality of it”. Claudia’s point about “the reality of it” acknowledges the ways structural limitations rob entire communities of their political power. The literature on building intersectional social movements describes those who are disempowered as a lost resource, their contribution to political discourse effectively stifled by their life at the margins (Chun, Lipsitz, Shin 2013:936). In contrast to John’s earlier account of marginalized communities, their lack of participation was not a reflection of who they were, but rather a symptom of how the system was structured to “devalue their worth and potential” (Chun, Lipsitz, Shin 2013: 936). If basic needs were a limitation for disenfranchised communities to political participation, it would stand to reason that they would need to be addressed in order to make the pathway to political participation more equitable.

While material resources are an important obstacle, an equally important yet more elusive barrier is steeped in the symbolic distance that can be measured by cultural differences operating in a hierarchical system of values.
Much like KRCC, I struggled recruiting respondents who were residents in the Edison neighborhood or a part of the Latinx community. The recruits I was able to find were often leaders in the community who felt obligated to “give back”, and in some cases, that included agreeing to an interview with me. I explained to Claudia that I was having trouble making contacts with people in the Latinx community who were not advocates or working professionals. When she asked me why I thought that was, I explained that I struggled with building connections with a community so different from mine. Much like KRCC members, I shared proximity and attended meetings in some of the same buildings as Edison or Latinx residents, but I still felt a distance that was not measured tangibly. I felt very hesitant to attend church events or various cultural events hosted by the Latinx community in fear that I would be viewed as inauthentic or intrusive, and I feared the possibility that I would not be received well by members of the community. For Claudia, the feeling I described was not a cursory experience that presented itself in a brief moment of discomfort, it was her everyday reality of working and advocating in predominantly white spaces. Claudia explained to me; “and I wanna say something, and this is no disrespect – what you just described, welcome to my world”.

Grayman and Godfrey’s (2013) research analyzed the gap between social justice attitudes and the application of these attitudes into practice. Grayman et al. found that although many white respondents believed in social justice and racial equality, they were less likely to support policies and practices that would implement the social justice ideas they supported, like in the case of anti-discrimination policies like affirmative action that typically lack support by dominant society. Dixon, Durrheim, and Thomae (2017) also aimed at exploring the numerous reasons for this phenomenon, referred to as the “principle-implementation gap”. Some insights given by Dixon and colleagues explaining the PI gap suggested that white groups had a tendency to react with
hostility toward policy that was aimed at producing racial equality if white group interests are perceived to be threatened. Dixon et al., referred to structural examples where white groups feared that resources would be decentralized and funneled away from the group.

Generally, the attitudes of white respondents reflected that many white groups believed that racism was a problem of the past and that most racial disparity can be explained by poor choices and the “cultural failings” of communities of color (Dixon et al. 2017:99). For white groups subscribing to this particular stance, their reactions towards communities of color were steeped in “feelings of threat, anxiety, and dislike” (Dixon et al. 2017:100). These assertions about the PI gap connect to Oluo’s observations about barriers to building intersectional movements, specifically her points about white privilege operating as a barrier to creating a movement centered on inclusivity. Dixon and colleagues also elucidated many of the themes presented by Bonilla-Silva’s work on white habitus. Bonilla-Silva’s central point about the white socialization process, or white habitus, as a reinforcing mechanism for white solidarity and hostility towards non-white groups, connects to some of the findings Dixon et al. (2017) described in their research. A common thread connecting all of these findings points to the inability of white groups to reframe their perspectives from that of reproducing their own privilege to one of interrogating it.

Walter and John both illustrated, in their own words, the barriers they had to forming connections with both the Edison neighborhood and the Latinx community. Their words drew from a dominant narrative that depicted the Edison neighborhood as many low-income communities of color have been depicted, in terms of “the other” or as something to be feared and resented. While Walter and John were not a part of the same group, they worked as colleagues, shared resources, and shared some of the same opinions about the Edison neighborhood, with whom they did not partner. Their perspectives were a part of the social fabric that served as a backdrop to much of
the activist work done by various neighborhoods and organizations connected to Allied. KRCC, as a group, may not have shared those same opinions, but the group left some of these perspectives unexplored and unexamined. Some members troubled the idea of unequal burdens individually, or when asked directly in an interview, but the group did not discuss these concepts together, nor did they make it a focus of their work. KRCC, like so many other groups and organizations who fit this pattern, simultaneously wanted to achieve social justice for everyone, yet from the perspective of the Latinx community, did not make an effort to build a relationship that would take the necessary steps to address their own barriers to creating inclusivity.

While predominantly white groups struggle with identifying the barriers they create to forming inclusive movements, many people of color are acutely aware of the difficult work they face to overcome those barriers. In Claudia’s experience, her world was shaped by the constant reminder that she may not be welcome or valued in any given space. My temporary discomfort with entering a space where I no longer was the majority was her daily experience:

_Every single day you walk out the door. Even myself – and I identify myself as an educator, as a leader, all of that – I still walk into spaces with what you just described. So, again, it’s not easy. It’s not easy, but what’s the alternative? We continue to engage in silos, nobody’s talking to you, nobody’s engaging, nobody’s having conversations. So, I guess we have to come to a point, either we’re gonna do it, or we’re not. It’s scary, it’s intimidating, it’s frustrating, you get mad – all the emotions, all the emotions. I had one two days ago, closed my door, got my Kleenex, and then had to get back on board because you can’t afford to not._

Much of the efforts that focus on achieving “diversity” typically portray well-intentioned white groups extending an invitation to select marginalized individuals so that they may enter predominantly white spaces. Diversity assumes that once included into predominantly white spaces, marginalized individuals may now enjoy prosperity despite their experience with oppression. Intersectional feminists trouble that notion and instead perceive the situated
knowledge of marginalized groups as a strength for the movement as a whole. Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin (2013) argue for a paradigm shift where the situated knowledge of marginalized groups is not just one voice within a multicultural “melting pot”, but rather, it is put in the “driver’s seat” and is used specifically to mobilize transformative, systemic change. Claudia’s reflection on “engaging in silos” is an important reminder that many organizations, including KRCC, were failing to observe the varied forms of oppression that were the result of the same system. For Claudia, inequality facing the Kalamazoo community could not be so easily demarcated as either an immigration problem, an education problem, or a water problem. These problems were all connected; “If we have a portion of our community that’s not being all that they can be, we all have a problem. It’s not Latino problem, it’s all of us... So, again, we have to be able to view this as an issue for all of us, and not just one population. That’s gonna get us in trouble”.

Chun et al., stress the importance of questioning current assumptions of “who can and should participate in changing our society” (2013:920). Unfortunately, this paradigm shift is not ushered in easily. Communities at the margins are often still not viewed as appropriate leaders. Bullard offers the following observation;

> Many of the decision making boards and commissions still do not reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the country. The exclusion of significant segments of the population has biased environmental decision-making in favor of white middle-class communities. However. Tokenism is not the answer. Inclusion of persons of color on boards and commissions does not necessarily mean that their voices will be heard or their cultures respected. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of any inclusion strategy should be to democratize environmental decision making and empower disenfranchised people to speak and act for themselves (Bullard 1993:13).

Unfortunately, Lydia’s reflection on the Edison Neighborhood’s role in Kalamazoo activism suggested that she also perceived a distance between her community and other groups participating in local activism:
Because Edison's a little bit different than some of the other neighborhoods. We have different ways of dealing with things. Don't listen to me, but more or less – I had residents calling me saying, "Well, we can just go take all our junk autos and pile them up in front of the gate. They won't be able to get in." Or, "I'll just chain myself to the gate to show we don't want this to happen. They can't get in," kind of stuff. There were folks out there willing to do whatever it took.

While KRCC members did not explicitly state in their interviews with me that they disagreed with this form of protest action, their relationships with the EPA was framed as a partnership that positioned the EPA as allies in the mind of most KRCC members. It stands to reason that this type of protest would not align with that stance. Edison residents, according to one leader within the community, may have had a different approach than other groups to confronting the EPA, or they may have agreed on some strategies with groups like KRCC. It is difficult to predict what might have occurred. What occurred instead was a familiar pattern within social movements that sought diversity but not inclusion: a fractured community was left fighting a seemingly insurmountable adversary.

The distinction between diversity and inclusion may elucidate the key to authentic engagement across diverse groups. While diversity may change the optics of an organization and make a suggestion of inclusivity, true inclusion reaches beyond the surface to engage in matters that are defined by those who are routinely excluded. The wisdom in exploring the merits of inclusion builds beyond benevolent attempts of creating diverse spaces. The benefits to building relationships across groups with a focus on inclusivity may be a starting place for building connections that may lead to a stronger, more engaged community. The reframing of marginalized experiences from one of mere vulnerability to one of potential insight, strength, and knowledge may open new possibilities for creating coalitions and forming stronger activism.
Communities of color demonstrate different activist strategies than their white counterparts (Taylor 1993; Bullard 1993). The differences are attributed in part, to the lived experiences such communities have with institutions that have historically been harmful and dismissive to them. Grassroots activists of color often draw on situated knowledge that later shapes their relationship with the institutions they aim to change. Due to their experiences with marginalization, activists of color are more likely to focus on systemic change and are less likely to see institutions of power as fellow stakeholders (Taylor 1993; Bullard 1993).

Alternatively, predominantly white led groups have demonstrated a tendency to partner with governing institutions that uphold the status quo. The effort to partner with institutions is done with the aim to make alterations to policies within the institution or governing organization that align with the group’s short-term goals (Taylor 1993). Critics of this approach, who view these institutions as exploitative, point to the lack of meaningful and transformative change when social movement groups partner with institutions that have historically not served the best interests of the public, and especially not of marginalized communities (Taylor 1993; Bullard 1993; Foster 1998).

In this chapter, I extend this critique to the relationship between KRCC and the EPA. This chapter situates the dynamic between KRCC and the EPA into a broader pattern described by social movement scholars and also draws on intersectional feminist scholarship to offer
insight into creating lasting change that transforms social institutions and addresses the many complexities underpinning a social problem. The core research questions guiding the discussion in these chapters are: What is transformative change and why is it an important focus in environmental activism? What can be gleaned from the way many activists of color organize environmental movements with regard to transformative change? How did KRCC’s actions differ from a transformative activist agenda?

Despite a lack of resources and political connections, as evidenced by Bullard (1993) and Taylor (1993), many communities of color have defied the odds and achieved change for the health and safety of their communities. While communities of color have also consistently dispelled the common misconception that poor people and people of color are simply not interested in the environment or their health (Bullard 1993), they have also demonstrated a different pattern in social movement mobilization. In contrast to their white counterparts, activists of color have been far more likely to interrogate institutions that replicate inequality by challenging the status quo by taking a more adversarial stance towards historically exploitative institutions.

According to Taylor, “people with little previous knowledge of environmental issues or experience with political activism have been compelled to take radical action” (Taylor 1993:55). Taylor explains that grassroots activists of color were more likely to take personal risks and to take an adversarial stance with their activism while their white counterparts were more likely to focus their activism in “courtrooms and lobbies of Congress” (Taylor 1993:55). Taylor cites examples from North Carolina where African American men, women, and children with little previous experience of political activism “militantly stood and lay in front of trucks to prevent them from taking PCB- laced soil to the dump (Taylor 1993:55). This pattern reflects a
difference in activism where white activists are more likely to try to work the political system, while activists of color are more likely to step outside of the system in favor of more radical protest actions.

Among Bullard’s (1993) criticisms of some environmentalists is their tendency to uphold white, middle class agendas at the expense of poor communities of color and general public health. While communities of color are the most likely victims of environmental pollution, a system that routinely produces contaminants, releases them into the environment, and irresponsibly addresses contamination is a system that is harmful for everyone. White middle-class communities have historically been able to relocate toxins, usually into the backyards, schoolyards, and workplaces of communities of color but they have not changed the structural conditions that create environmental harms.

Faber (2008) argues, however, that a system that produces waste and pollution at such an alarming rate with no regard for public safety is one that eventually even white, middle class communities cannot avoid. Additionally, Faber argues that social movements must address the underlying cause of pollution in order to achieve meaningful environmental change. Faber describes a movement that does not include this transformative intention as, “a movement of limited efficacy if the end result is to have all Americans poisoned to the same perilous degree, regardless of race, color, or class” (2008:266). Faber calls the environmental justice movement to action and asserts that activists should avoid top-down organizations that make public input meaningless and devoid of any true democratic process (2008:262). Instead, much like Bullard (1993), Taylor (1993) and other environmental justice scholars, he encourages that environmental justice movements form coalitions that address other concerns like poverty and
the lack of involvement of working class people in advocacy work, a likely product of the capitalist context which produces pollution (2008:262).

This vision of transformation and efficacy within the environmental justice movement is most in line with the actions already taken by communities of color, according to Bullard. Robert Bullard (1993), the leading scholar in the field of environmental racism, has long been criticizing mainstream environmental movements as movements that are both ineffective at creating lasting change and movements that continue to marginalize communities of color in the fight for environmental justice. Central to Bullard’s argument is that communities of color form a vastly different relationship with the EPA than predominantly white communities. Instead of viewing the EPA as the “protector”, communities of color are more likely to see the EPA as the “enemy” (Bullard 1993:201). According to Bullard, “These communities realize that environmental racism and injustice is real. They live with it every day of their lives” (Bullard 1993:201). Bullard asserts that communities of color “also realize that the EPA and other governmental agencies typically favor industry and well-organized white communities in disregard of both justice and basic democratic accountability” (Bullard 1993:201). According to this logic, communities of color build awareness of injustice from their lived experiences and are able to draw conclusions about institutionalized oppression from a place of situated knowledge. By experiencing oppression through such institutions, those living in the margins are more likely to recognize systemic oppression as it is being reproduced and are also more likely to take actions to disrupt it.

Bullard explains that communities of color have a different approach to environmental justice than white, middle class groups. The approach is one that is often steeped in working against regulatory agencies rather than working with them;
The environmental justice movement that is emerging in African American, Latino, and Native American, communities is thus led by residents who refuse to wait for the protection provided by corporate “good neighbor” policies and governmental regulatory agencies. They realize their communities must defend themselves and that they need to create a social movement powerful enough to force needed change (Bullard 1993:201).

At the heart of Bullard’s argument is that communities of color build different social movements than their white counterparts largely because they are critical of institutions that uphold the status quo, rather than to see them as potential stakeholders. Moreover, these social movements, according to Bullard, are more effective. He asserts that social movements led by communities of color are more successful “where the mainstream environmental movement and regulatory agencies have historically failed” (Bullard 1993:202). Bullard (1993) provides examples of communities of color uniting environmental justice and civil rights agendas while demonstrating effective community building, a quality that is often missing from many contemporary movements. Bullard points to trends in the environmental justice movement in African American, Native-American, and Latino community members who were focused on building movements powerful enough to go against regulatory agencies who were resistant to change. Bullard describes that such activists often had previous experience fighting institutional racism and were also partnered with existing social networks and protest organizations (Bullard 1993:202).

Bullard’s, Confronting Environmental Racism; Voices from the Grassroots, also illustrates examples of communities of color across the United States who built movements from the ground-up, formed coalitions with other groups, encouraged the formation of unions to build stronger activism, and put pressure on corporations and regulatory agencies to change their
practices. Bullard notes that these grassroots groups were able to defy the logic put forth by RMT and other theories that place heavy emphasis on resources stating that material resources and social connections set the tone for who can successfully mobilize, “The actions of grassroots groups deny the social movement and collective behavior theories marshaled to explain their longevity and success. In many instances, grassroots leaders emerged from groups of concerned citizens (many of them women) who see their families, homes, and communities threatened” (Bullard 1993:8). While RMT and collective action theories may help explain why groups with resources and political clout are able to mobilize more often, they do not necessarily demonstrate that such groups can mobilize successfully, nor should there be an assumption that marginalized groups cannot achieve their goals. Most importantly, the movement actions of grassroots communities of color focus more on creating meaningful partnerships with activists who include their situated knowledge of oppression into their mission. Unfortunately, many of the actions aimed at coalition building are often considered generic “social problems” categories by mainstream social movement groups and may be deemed irrelevant by mainstream environmental activists,

The struggle for environmental justice was not invented in the 1990s. People of color, individually and collectively, have waged a frontal assault against environmental injustices that predate the first Earth Day in the 1970s. Many of these struggles, however, were not framed as “environmental” problems- rather they were seen as “addressing “social” problems (Bullard 1993:9).

With the tendency for white activists to omit inclusive coalition building and holistic approaches to the multiple forms of oppression into their conceptual framework, many mainstream groups have mobilized in silos, rendering their actions less effective, according to Bullard (1993) and Faber (2008).
In order to understand how grassroots communities of color mobilize differently than their white counterparts, Bullard examined nine examples of community opposition groups that worked together to successfully counter pollution in their communities. A general pattern found throughout these observations indicated that the groups conceptualized social inequality in a broader and more interconnected manner. Bullard stated; “All of the groups have multi-issue agendas and incorporate social justice and equity as their major organizing themes. The leaders see their communities as “victims” and are quick to make the connection between other forms of discrimination” (Bullard 1993:30). Also noted was the tendency for these community leaders to align with other organizations that “fought discrimination in housing, employment, and education” (Bullard 1993:30). Gender also seemed like an important factor, with the typical grassroots leader a woman who was quick to interpret environmental concerns as directly threatening to the family, home, and community (Bullard 1993:30). Interestingly, despite the average grassroots organizer thrust into a leadership position with little warning or previous training, Bullard found that this lack of experience was not an obstacle for effective community organizing, (Bullard 1993:30) a key point that defies assumptions regarding both the level of interest and preparedness communities of color have when building social movements.

While all nine case examples showed similar observations, two key examples from Dallas and Houston illustrated the characteristics of how grassroots movements were able to do the unexpected. The West Dallas Neighborhood Coalition was founded by residents of highly segregated neighborhoods in Dallas. Considered one of the “black enclaves” with a population of 13,161 residents, 85% of which is black, West Dallas fought hard to remove lead from its neighborhood that had persisted for over five decades (Bullard 1993:27). The Coalition was able to achieve their goal without any assistance from outside mainstream environmental groups.
Instead, it relied on assistance from a grassroots group called the Common Ground Community Economic Development Corporation. This group had a long history of working alongside the black community and helped the coalition get its grievances communicated with the public (Bullard 1993:31). Common Ground, in keeping with Bullard’s findings, had a long history of focusing on equity issues for African American communities (1993:31).

Houston served as a similar example to West Dallas. Inhabiting one of the largest black communities in the South, it was unfairly chosen to house a municipal landfill and The Northeast Community Action Group (NECAG) formed to block the construction of the landfill (Bullard 1993:27). In their dispute with Browning-Ferris Industries, the polluter, NECAG drew on the help of local social justice activist groups by intentionally adopting an anti-discrimination agenda. By adopting this perspective, the group became connected to key organizations that proved to be a very important resource in helping directly with their dispute (Bullard 1993:31). Both communities were able to achieve their goals despite being in a marginalized position. The key in every instance was the adoption of an anti-discrimination focus and a strategic effort to confront governments and corporations from that perspective by connecting to existing organizations with established practices of fighting inequality in marginalized communities.

Bullard also notes a few other characteristics about the organizing tactics of these nine cases. Besides the tendency to connect environmental concerns to other forms of oppression, these grassroots organizations drew on tactics that were used by early civil rights movements. They targeted local, state, and federal governments by using “public protest, demonstrations, petitions, lobbying, reports and fact-finding, and hearings to educate the community and intensify public debate on the dispute” (Bullard 1993:33). Leaders in the community were responsive to the local issues that arose and made connections with the additional social justice
needs of the community, a key point of failure on behalf of mainstream environmental movements (Bullard 1993:33).

According to Bullard, regulatory agencies, like the EPA, have promoted policies that put communities of color at risk while offering some protections to white, middle class communities by protecting green spaces and moving toxins out of highly desirable neighborhoods and into the backyards of poor communities and communities of color. His criticism of the Environmental Protection Agency also warns against its tendency to obscure voices, particularly voices from communities of color, and the insidious nature of the agency to court some members of the community who may prove to be useful to the agency’s overall goal, while obscuring voices that may be most critical. Bullard explains that Environmental Justice groups are “attacking the institutions they see providing advantages and privileges to whites while perpetuating segregation, underdevelopment, disenfranchisement, and the poisoning (some people would use the term genocide) of their constituents” (Bullard 1993:8). This argument perhaps points to the importance of social movements creating opportunities for liberation by incorporating a vision of justice that focuses on inclusivity and recognition into the movement goals and actions. Walker’s discussion on procedural justice and justice as recognition (2012:10) highlights the importance of practicing inclusivity and mitigating harms done by systemic oppression while being careful not to reproduce such patterns within the social movement itself. The main focus of environmental justice groups are the mechanisms that promote marginalization and disenfranchisement, not just within the political system, but also within social movements. Activists of color are more likely to directly reject mainstream organizations than activist groups that uphold the basic tenets of environmentalism that promote privileged greenspaces in favor of promoting an activist agenda.
that reflects their lived experiences with “social, economic, and political disenfranchisement” (Bullard 1993:7).

Bullard draws on the words of Reverend Benjamin Chavis, an experienced civil rights activist, when he describes the EPA’s tactics to draw in local support from certain groups in order to placate the public; “Reverend Benjamin Chavis described the EPA’s communication strategy as an “attempt to seduce certain members of the community” (as cited in Bullard 1993:201). Because predominantly white groups tend to be far less adversarial toward agencies like the EPA, the EPA is able to gain more traction and more support with predominantly white groups by forming alliances with these groups while silencing groups that will be more critical of the EPA’s process. Bullard’s advice to disrupt this pattern is to include varied voices in the form of a coalition that has allies across multiple interest groups. The primary first step, according to Bullard, would be for main-stream environmental advocacy groups to make connections with communities of color to join as a united front and a true coalition: “Building a powerful movement with an integrated program and genuine racial-ethnic and social-class diversity is the first step in changing the elitist image traditionally projected by the environmental movement in this country” (Bullard 1993:203). This would not only address the marginalization of poor communities of color within social movements, but it may also offer an opportunity for stronger and more effective social movements overall.

Rocky Beginnings

When I asked Janet and Rebecca about the early relationship members of KRCC had with the EPA, her description portrayed a relationship fraught with anger, resentment, and even violence. This depiction was in strong contrast to the amiable relationship KRCC had with the
EPA in the final years of its existence. Motivated by “the Uprising of 2007”, two scholars who would later become members of KRCC, held a community meeting at a local college that was attended by over 300 local residents and some members of the regional EPA branch. The intended purpose of the meeting was to draw attention to the EPA clearing PCB material from the nearby Bryant Mill Pond and using the Allied site as a landfill for that toxic material. The response from the community was explosive, Rebecca explained, “and 300 people showed up, and the EPA came, and they had no idea people were mad. They came with their regular dog-and-pony show, and people were, like, throwing things at them. It got – they were afraid”.

This visceral response was indicative of the rage felt by the Kalamazoo community and that rage also seemed to elicit a response from the EPA. Rebecca stated: “We got noticed. We got on the list of antagonistic communities”. At that time, it was Janet’s opinion that the EPA servicing the West Michigan area was led by a particularly uncharismatic individual who failed to build rapport with the community. While Janet couldn’t remember his name, she certainly remembered his demeanor; “He seemed like a joke, he’d just laugh; he didn’t call people by their names. You just felt like it was just a job for him”. When Janet reflected on KRCC’s initial relationship with the EPA when the group began in 2007, she conceded that it was characterized by antagonism and tension. Janet would often write articles for the Kalamazoo Gazette, with one dating back to 2008 warning that the community would have to watch the EPA closely. Her articles were not unlike the warning calls of the town crier, constantly keeping the community vigilant against an insidious enemy: the EPA. In one article, she drew attention to the EPA’s arrogant presumption that the Kalamazoo community may prefer to keep the toxins on location rather than risk exposure by having them removed and trucked out of Kalamazoo. Her articles were often a call to action, as were interviews that were included in the Kalamazoo Gazette by
other KRCC members. George, one of the founding members and a longtime resident of Kalamazoo, was often on record encouraging the community to use its voice to stand up to the EPA and to prevent Allied from becoming a landfill.

Although part of the community was passionate in communicating its anger in 2007, KRCC found it more and more difficult to keep public attention on the problem. Perhaps in an effort to stall a decision that was inevitable and to fatigue protestors and angry community members, the EPA declared the Allied site as the “not yet permanent” holding site for PCB toxins. Allied was placed in EPA purgatory while the EPA decided, after almost a decade, to leave pollutants in Kalamazoo. Years waiting for a response seemed to mellow rage into exhaustion. Many residents forgot about the problem entirely or assumed that it had already been solved. Aside from the difficulties of sustaining public attention long term, KRCC and the EPA had also undergone some internal changes that may have shifted the tone of their relationship from one marked by antagonism to that of being partners. One of those changes included what Rebecca, the former president of KRCC, called the EPA’s “secret weapon”.

The Seduction

While Janet had nothing but harsh words for the previous EPA community outreach coordinator, she had a very different impression of Allison, who replaced him in 2014, “Whereas she really – she uses people’s names, she remembers, she’s proactive, she’s from this community. I mean, she went to Western, right? So you feel this – like she has –a stake in this as well”. Allison did attend the local university and even lived in Kalamazoo for a short time, a detail she would mention sometimes when connecting with local residents about the Allied site. But what was perhaps most noteworthy about Allison was the way she used her common ground to disarm and
build connections with KRCC members in a way that garnered sympathy, and as a result, humanized the EPA.

“I'm a people person. It's just my default” is how Allison described herself to me. By the time I interviewed her, she had been the EPA Community Outreach Coordinator for the Kalamazoo community for about one year including during the 2015 EPA decision to leave toxic contaminants at the Allied site. She sat across from me at a local restaurant in Flint, Michigan, located not too far from her office. Allison looked to be in her mid to late thirties, white, with medium length brown hair and an easy-going manner. When she spoke, she used colloquial language to explain complicated ideas and her relaxed demeanor had a disarming effect on me. I could see why people liked her. Allison had the professional training of an environmental scientist with the Midwest charm of a self-proclaimed Michigander. She explained that it was her background in teaching that really helped her speak to a wide range of audiences about the environmental problems facing their communities. She was relatable and came across as sincere in her desire to partner with the communities where she worked; She explained, “So teaching is really, inherently, a lot of communication and then, for me, that just really came naturally. I enjoy the topic of Science – I found it very interesting, I was excited to teach people about that”.

As Allison and I talked, we fell into a comfortable rhythm of me asking her questions and her giving me diplomatic responses. It was easy to forget that Allison worked for the federal government, and that she was a part of the EPA regional branch in Flint as they were fighting an insurmountable battle for safe water on behalf of lead poisoned children and countless others who were injured by the 2014 Flint Water Crisis. Allison did not come across as just another bureaucratic “suit”, she was a reminder that institutions were comprised of people. While we cannot know the reason for certain, Janet and the rest of KRCC had a drastic change of heart when
Allison joined the EPA. Perhaps it was the exhaustion from battling the EPA for so long, or it was the hope that a different strategy would yield different results, or perhaps KRCC was coaxed into a partnership with the EPA through the use of Allison, their “secret weapon”.

The answer likely was a combination of these factors, but what was clear from interviews with KRCC is that at some point before 2015, they shifted their anger away from the EPA and toward other “enemies”. While I asked many unstructured questions of KRCC members, I was careful to ask some specific questions to all of them. I asked who was the “bad guy” in the story of Allied. Some mentioned the “Industrial Polluter Complex”, others mentioned Republicans in Congress, still others held the paper companies accountable as the villains. What was perhaps most telling was that no one mentioned the EPA. In fact, several members explained that the EPA was just the messenger, an entity that was caught up in a bad system just like everyone else. Janet explained to me that some colleagues within the community confronted her about KRCC’s amicable relationship with the EPA. Her response to that question suggested a sense of protectiveness toward the EPA,

> And it’s kind of like if you look at the superfund process and you think of all that the EPA is charged with to protect the community... – they have no Superfund fund, no fund in the Superfund to really work with. And then they have the community that’s fighting them and seeing them as the bad guy.

Janet was not alone in her revised view of the EPA. Rebecca also sympathized with the agency, “But, when you look at the full perspective – and I can have some sympathy for the agency in saying, “What are you supposed to do with this gargantuan toxic legacy that is the United States?” We did this everywhere. Everywhere”. Yet another KRCC member responded with, “I could kick and scream and I could stand out on the street with a sign and a bunch of people blocking EPA vehicles from getting in, but the EPA is not the target. They’re not my enemy. My enemy – the real
decision makers who have power to change anything are the people we choose to send to Lansing – or well, to Washington, D.C. They don’t seem to care a whole lot”. The blame seemed to now be attributed toward a faraway enemy, the “bad guys” at the top of the ladder, effectively absolving the local EPA bureaucrats of any culpability. This diversion was a stepping stone to the next phase of KRCC’s strategy: partnering with the EPA.

Just prior to Allison coming on board at the EPA, KRCC too was experiencing some changes in 2013 with the arrival of Rebecca, the new president. When Rebecca joined KRCC, she brought her extensive knowledge about environmental policy and law. It was this expertise that first drew Janet to Rebecca at a party they both attended a couple of years earlier. Rebecca recalls Janet recruiting her very soon after she moved to Kalamazoo, “When she found out what I did – environmental law and environmental policy – “she was like, “Oh my gosh, I’m on this board. You have to come check us out,” and I did. I think that was within the first six months of me living there, moving to Kalamazoo”.

Rebecca stayed on with KRCC as their President until 2016 and during these years she worked on a specific political strategy. She knew that total removal of PCB material was unlikely, but she still, like the rest of KRCC, wanted to get the best solution for the Allied site. With her leadership, KRCC decided to go on record as requesting total removal anyway; “We call it the “Malcolm X Theory.” Without Malcolm X, you would have never accepted Martin Luther King Junior’s policies. It’s a continuum, and you need all voices out there. For my perspective, I said, “Oh, we’re the Malcom Xs. We’re the ones over here screaming bloody murder for total removal,” which, in my opinion, has never been anything realistically we were going to get”. Although KRCC may have been screaming “bloody murder” in 2007, their tactics became more bureaucratic as the years went on. Presumably, the change in leadership and the availability of a new strategy
shaped some of these changes. But for a group that adhered to the ‘Malcolm X Theory’, they seemed to have a very close working relationship with the EPA officials who worked for the federal government of which they were so critical.

For Rebecca, it was important that KRCC and the Kalamazoo community “worked the political process”. From her perspective, “it seems like the EPA is our enemy, but they’re really not our enemy. They need us to push for things, and that’s how politics – for better or worse – work(s)”. In keeping with this perspective, KRCC began to host Allison at their meetings and they even collaborated on a few projects. One of their collaborations involved helping the EPA create a better information sheet for public use. The EPA had an “Frequently Asked Questions” document that was handed out at every EPA meeting and sometimes mailed to residences in the area. It addressed commonly asked questions and concerns voiced to the EPA about the Allied site and PCBs. It also delineated the clean-up options and included information about risk assessment. Allison found her collaboration with Rebecca and other KRCC members to be extremely useful in drafting a document that more clearly answered concerns held by the public.

In addition to aiding with public feedback, KRCC wanted to alert the public that EPA meetings were being held in the community, especially as it came closer to the EPA’s decision-making time. KRCC felt that it was important for the community to stay informed and take advantage of the public comment portion of the EPA meetings. Rebecca’s motivation was to make sure that enough awareness was raised so that more neighborhoods had representation, “I always felt weird about whether the KRCC is really representing the folks of this community in the right way, or that I don’t know the folks that live right next to this. I know they sort of brought those ideas together, and worked with Allison, and canvassed 2000 people in the adjacent neighborhoods”. The goal during this canvassing effort was not to sway residents to argue for one
outcome or another, but rather, it was a last-ditch effort to involve more of the community in the final weeks before the EPA’s final decision deadline. In a document provided by KRCC, Rebecca shared the following results with me about the canvassing event: “On Friday September 25th we set out on a mission with our 25 volunteers to inform the masses. The group knocked on roughly 1,600 houses and spoke to 420 citizens. This also meant that as a group we distributed almost 5,000 packets of information (door knocker, FAQ sheet, EPA’s Proposed Plan)” (primary document source

Unfortunately, even though efforts were made, not many more people were in attendance at the next EPA meeting, “It was a really good effort; we managed to accomplish a lot, but I think two more people came to the listening sessions then...but I don’t know. Are those the two people that matter? That’s where it gets so hard”. Rebecca’s statement was indicative of the internal tension and frustration she and so many other KRCC members expressed in their interviews with me. For Rebecca, leadership carried with it a sense of responsibility, but also a heavy sense of uncertainty, “to me, the fundamental worry is I still don’t really understand if I was representing anybody. I definitely felt a burden like I was”.

The Betrayal

While Rebecca may have felt the burden of representing the community’s interests to the EPA, there were times she questioned the representation of her own group’s interests to the City and the EPA. Despite the close working relationship KRCC had developed with the EPA, they experienced a humbling lesson that taught them the realities of political decision-making. The agency used their secret weapon, Allison, to court KRCC and lull them into complacency. In the end and when final decisions were being made, KRCC was not at the table with the EPA and the
City. The EPA had full legal decision-making power regarding superfund sites, but their conversations with the public were limited to “public feedback” forums where residents could come and offer feedback, concerns, and ideas for cleanup solutions.

Despite having a good relationship with both Kalamazoo city officials and the EPA, KRCC found themselves on the outside of some important conversations. In addition to making public comments at EPA meetings and reaching out to EPA officials, KRCC also attended city commission meetings to make public comments about their stance to remove all contaminants from the Allied site. For many years, city representatives and the Mayor of Kalamazoo were extremely vocal and encouraging of such statements, including those made by KRCC. But in the months leading up to the decision deadline, KRCC’s commission statements fell on deaf ears. The abrupt change elicited confusion and frustration among many KRCC members. Rebecca recalled times when she and other members would make their usual public comments about total removal at city hall meetings only to be met with silence. Rebecca remembered an especially frustrating experience when one of the most trusted and well-liked city commissioners withheld his support in the months leading up to the EPA’s final decision about Allied. Rebecca expected that this particular city commissioner would at least give some degree of public support for their position but was instead met with frustrating ambivalence; “I remember staring right after (sic) him after we finished, and he wouldn’t say anything. These are our biggest allies for the last three years! I’m so confused, and I’m sort of pissed”.

Abby, who first became concerned about the Allied site because of the numerous health concerns she noticed in family members who lived close to the paper mills and the landfill, wrote a song about the site and performed it at a local venue several years after the uprising of 2007[2]. As a singer/songwriter, she felt that this was the best way for her to use her influence and talent as
an activist. Her plan was to include names of local and federal level government representatives in her song lyrics in order to attract their attention and support. For a time, her plan worked. Fred Upton, the Mayor, and local City Commissioners all were vocal about agreeing with Abby and others in KRCC that removing all of the contaminants away from the site was the best decision for Kalamazoo. Her performance was well attended and government officials ranging from the local to federal level came to speak at the event. All were in agreement; the toxic PCB material had no place in Kalamazoo. A couple of short years after this public declaration of support, something changed. Kalamazoo City officials traveled alone to Washington D.C. to meet with the EPA. What happened behind those closed doors is pure speculation, but Abby surmised, “So then, basically, after that meeting, I just felt like no longer was the total removal even discussed by the city”.

In an effort to presumably divert the community’s attention away from the unlikelihood of a total cleanup, the EPA held a meeting designed to encourage the public to attend and offer ideas about how the Allied site should be repurposed into a recreational area. Rebecca referred to this meeting as the “dream big” meeting. The meeting never discussed or made room for a total removal option,

*The one thing I would take issue with – when the city first came out and presented, the EPA – and they were very smart. When they met with stakeholders, the city hosted a public meeting – which they had never done on their own before – in maybe February of the next year, and they presented the option to citizens. The whole meeting was focused on, “What do you want to do with this 27 acres, Kalamazoo? What are your dreams?” I’m sitting there going, “All right....*

Despite many residents participating in this brainstorming exercise, KRCC members were very skeptical of this event and mostly viewed it as a form of distraction designed to pacify the community. Residents were encouraged to present their wildest dreams on poster boards that would be drafted as public comments with the idea that the community had some creative license over the fate of the site. The unspoken message at the meeting served as a gentle reminder that
total removal was very unlikely, and that despite the lack of a formal announcement, the EPA was already preparing the public for a “waste in place” solution that capped the landfill and repurposed it into something that would be used by residents in the future. Residents could choose the final design much like choosing their own poison.

For Rebecca and many of the other KRCC members, any hope that KRCC and the community were “in this together” with the city and the EPA was lost and many members felt betrayed. It appeared to KRCC members that city officials had made a deal with the EPA without including anyone in that discussion, including KRCC. The deal would allow the city of Kalamazoo to have taxable land in the form of a landfill disguised as a recreational area and the EPA would be able to avoid total removal of contaminants, an outcome that would cost significantly more money and time to accomplish. Rebecca reflects on her reaction to this outcome;

_I can understand why you wanted to keep that hush-hush until you made your own deal, but on the other hand, a part of me still is troubled by that because you’re supposed to be representing us, and KRCC is supposed to be representing these other people. There’s this hierarchy here of our goals and who we’re representing._

From Rebecca’s perspective, and perhaps from the perspective of many other KRCC board members, there was an unspoken understanding that the process was supposed to be a democratic one and that if everyone played their intended role, the democratic part would be respected and observed. Unfortunately, following these supposed rules did not protect KRCC from being excluded. It was a difficult lesson for Rebecca, who was the KRCC president at the time; “So, from a political standpoint, to let your bureaucrat – to let your agency folks, your city bureaucrats and your EPA bureaucrats just work out a deal is not how democracy works – or is supposed to, in my... It’s a hard thing to do; don’t get me wrong. I have learned a lot of hard lessons over the last seven years, but it doesn’t really work sometimes.”
While KRCC might have found it perplexing that placing trust in the democratic process does not always lead to the desired results, this notion is a very familiar one to poor communities and communities of color. Bullard explains that the environmental justice paradigm was built on the idea that grassroots activism should shape social movement agendas. What unfortunately happens far too often is that poor communities and communities of color are left fighting for their interests alone “since too often middle class white environmentalists, planners, political and business elites, government officials, and industry representatives sat at decision-making tables and made policy for people of color and the poor, not with them” (Bullard 2007:25). The result is one that usually disproportionately places toxic burdens on communities of color. This historical pattern has shaped the way these communities have responded to regulatory officials, and by doing so, these communities have made an important criticism of the systemic causes of pollution and the need for a radical restructuring of such a system, not for working within the system with the hope that there might be a different outcome.

Simply finding a different location for toxic contaminants has always disempowered communities of color and has stalled the inevitable for more affluent, predominantly white communities. A “waste in place” outcome, much like the compromise found with Allied, is not a radical restructuring of the system, it is the expected result from a system that will continue with business as usual. Communities of color have long since used the environmental justice platform to warn against the inescapable reality that one day there would be nowhere else to put the toxins, effectively rendering the relocation of toxins a process that can no longer serve anyone. Faber (2008) critiques the polluter industrial complex illustrates and supports the point that through stepwise changes in law and policy that supported industry growth while weakening environmental
protections, we have created a system that has led to a dead end with little to no escape from toxic contaminants.

Faber’s (2008) critique of environmental justice movements is one that is rooted in the distributive justice versus productive justice debate. Distributive justice is typically focused on an equitable relocation of contaminants. Due to the nature of political and social dynamics, most communities that can effectively argue for the relocation of toxins are those that have access to resources and are less politically disenfranchised. This leads to an overwhelming trend of pollutants accumulating in low income communities and communities of color (Bullard 1993). Faber (2008) argues that as long as social movement actors follow this tactic, their actions will not only contribute to the perpetuation of a system which pollutes, but these tactics will also contradict the very goal of environmental justice which aims to reduce environmental harms and create equitable environmental benefits. Distributive justice will do nothing about the amount of toxins released into the environment and will only temporarily prevent groups with more resources to enjoy short lived safety from environmental harms.

Faber, and many critics of distributive justice, call for a paradigm shift toward productive justice. Productive justice aims to address the root cause of pollution and to restructure the system that produces it. There are difficulties with building a transformative movement of this nature. Sometimes social movement groups are presented with an urgent concern and form activism around a time-sensitive problem, much like KRCC did with the Allied landfill. Social movement groups may focus on a single issue at the expense of broadening their scope to include changes that go beyond one single problem. But beyond being overwhelmed by a time-sensitive problem, there are ideological barriers to building transformative movements. Oluo (2018) argues in favor of building intersectional movements in much the same way that Faber argues in
favor of building coalitions that aim at transformative change. Oluo explains that even though “intersectionality makes our systems more effective and more fair” (2018:78), so many movements fall short of this goal and fail those who are living at the margins because those who lead the movement are incapable of addressing unexamined privilege (p.78). Oluo states, “because of how rarely our privilege is examined, even our social justice movements will tend to focus on the most privileged and most well represented people within those groups” (2018:78). Oluo also explains at length the challenges of examining privilege within social movements and concedes that it is a time-consuming process of awareness building and self-examination that is not easily accomplished. However, despite how difficult and rare this is, Oluo cautions, “but if you don’t embrace intersectionality, even if you make progress for some, you will look around one day and find you’ve become the oppressor of others” (Oluo 2018:79).

Faber’s attempt to dismantle what he calls the “polluter industrial complex” (2008), a set of political and economic institutions which work together to exploit the environment and labor force for profits, is firmly seated in an intersectional and productive justice approach. According to Faber, the environmental justice movement has become so distracted by distributive justice that it has lost sight of the root cause of pollution. Productive justice will only work if it unites with other movements that seek to restructure the political and economic apparatus that drives systemic inequality and exploitation. Faber explicitly argues for the coalescing of multiple advocacy groups that fight for workers’ rights, human rights, immigrant rights, anti-racism efforts, and so on. Without the inclusion of such groups, the environmental justice movement will likely keep reproducing the very system it is fighting against, Faber argues. The productive justice paradigm aims to create a transformative social movement that unites like-minded advocates to address “democracy, ecological sustainability, labor unions, and human rights”
that build from local to national and global scales. Critics of this perspective focus on the likelihood of such an endeavor, especially with a finite amount of energy, resources, and time. The argument against this is usually steeped in notions of practicality and what is possible. Walker (2012) tries to reconcile this by offering a strategy that includes a spirit of “working towards”. In other words, Walker suggests that environmental justice can be a process of working towards a pattern that creates the kind of sustained change that can be a “work in progress” rather than a perfect and immediate solution (Walker 2012: 221).

This idea of creating intersectional connections between communities on local, national, and transnational levels is not an entirely new concept. Feminist research, especially research aimed at demystifying the connection between identity and situated knowledge, has referred to this process as building intersectional understandings of identity and growing conversations from that standpoint. The goal is often to de-center privilege in the hopes of creating missions, frames, and social justice agendas that are not steeped in a privileged experience. The goal is also to break barriers that create silos in an effort to create stronger, less divided groups. Both intersectional feminism and supporters of productive environmental justice aim to create very similar transformative missions.

However, it is important to note that while building inclusive movements is sometimes erroneously framed as a benevolent decision made on behalf of groups that are more “fortunate” than others, inclusivity does not hinge on simply including some members of diverse groups for the benefit of the “less fortunate”. From a privilege-centered perspective, including the lived experiences and voices of marginalized people is sometimes seen as a risk that some benevolent privileged groups are willing to take. However, Chun et al. (2013), interrogate that stance and instead argue that it is the situated knowledge of marginalized groups that offers the most
transformational insight. Bullard understood this point and asserted a similar argument when he stated;

...increasing numbers of people of color are assisting mainstream organizations to redefine their limited environmental agendas and expand their outreach by serving on boards, staffs, and advisory councils. Grassroots activists have thus been the most influential activists in placing equity and social justice issues onto the larger environmental agenda and democratizing and diversifying the movement as a whole. Such changes are necessary if the environmental movement is to successfully help spearhead a truly global movement for a just, sustainable, and healthy society and effectively resolve pressing environmental disputes (Bullard 1993: 39).

Intersectional feminists draw on situated knowledge as a social movement tool in much the same way that Bullard describes the difference in activism between white, middle class communities and low-income communities of color: those who are typically left out of the conversation are paradoxically those who understand what stands in the way of transformative change. If transformative change is to occur, the starting point may be with social movement groups themselves taking a stance at decentering privilege and following in the footsteps of activists of color.

While it is impossible to know how the outcome for the Allied landfill would have been different if KRCC had changed their strategy and there is no definitive way to measure why exactly KRCC did not achieve their goal of “total removal”, what remains is a critique in the literature outlining different strategies and approaches that illustrates many of the same dynamics found within KRCC and the broader Kalamazoo community. After a long battle and many disappointments, KRCC reflected on their best efforts and many members wished they had been able to accomplish more inclusivity, better representation, more community engagement, and a better outcome to a long legacy of corporate profits at the expense of community exploitation.
A perfect solution likely does not exist, but improvements to mobilizing social movements more effectively may lie in building meaningful connections with the marginalized communities that are erroneously deemed the least likely to make a difference. It is impossible to predict how the fate of Allied would be different in any other situation, but it stands to reason that an intersectional lens aimed at building true coalitions, like in the spirit of transformational change, across varied social problems would make it possible to fortify a stronger, more unified community that could withstand the next inevitable threat. The way communities of color have demonstrated activism and their transformative approach to activist agendas may offer some insights into future mission statements and goals.

[1] "Janet's" publication titles and direct words have been omitted to de-identify the respondent
[2] The name of the song and details of the performance have not been mentioned in order to de-identify the respondent.
CHAPTER VI
RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

Case Study

In this chapter, I will describe case study research, why I chose it for my project, the strengths of using case study to analyze social contexts, and how it applies to my work on a local activist group. I will then discuss the different sources and types of data I collected and analyzed in this study and why they were important to include.

Case study research offers some unique advantages. Drawing from Merriam (1998), case study can be described as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Case studies take a holistic approach to understanding how a group of people have approached a specific situation or problem by considering the many factors that may influence the case rather than observing the case as an isolated incident. Case study also relies heavily on thick description, offering a detailed narrative that captures the complexities of a situation that accounts for the many contributing factors found in any given setting, including time, differing opinions, differing perspectives and experiences. Case studies can also be used to interpret how a problem develops with the intention of understanding its applicability to other similar contexts (Merriam 1998:29-31). Merriam cites Stake (1981) to illustrate that case study offers concrete, vivid, and contextual depictions of one specific example (1998:31) and is exceptionally useful when a study focuses on monitoring the process of the social phenomenon in question, like when evaluating a curriculum or program (Merriam 1998:33). Among the many advantages of using case study research, the ability to
analyze “complex social units consisting of multiple variables” that are anchored in real-life situations is a strength that I draw on for my assessment of KRCC (Merriam 1998: 41).

The definitions of case study, while similar, diverge when discussing the idea of boundedness. One perspective focuses the definition on boundedness as related to context, while the other understands boundedness as it is related to process and methodology. Gillham (2000) and Yin (2004) both define case study in similar terms, with a focus on context. Gillham describes case study (2000) as some sort of human activity that is embedded in the real world, can only be understood in context, and has boundaries that are immersed in the context to a degree that it is difficult to draw its exact boundaries (Gillham 2000:1). Similarly, Yin (1994) understands case study as “a design particularly suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon’s variables from their context” (Merriam 1998:29). In the example of social movements, context is important because it is impossible to take the actions of a group and analyze them separately from the environment in which they take place. An activist group may be exercising agency, but it is doing so within the boundaries of community resources, public discourses, and political climate.

In order to illustrate why context cannot be separated from case study, I will use Black Lives Matter as an example. In the case of understanding a movement like Black Lives Matter (BLM), a discussion about technological advancements, history, and political discourse are necessary in the telling of the movement’s complex story. Police using excessive force while targeting communities of color is a persistent societal pattern that predates BLM. However, a specific set of variables contributed to the movement’s inception and influence in 2013. The popularity and easy accessibility of mobile devices and social media provided an expansive platform on which like-minded people could communicate about a shared grievance, mobilizing
a movement. While not yet considered an organization, BLM had become viral, or widely influential, through the use of hashtags shared on various social media platforms in 2013 (Garza 2020:119,121). The main catalyst for BLM was the “not-guilty” verdict of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watchman who had shot and killed an unarmed teen named Trayvon Martin who was walking home from the convenience store (Garza 2020:95-96,118). For supporters of BLM, Martin was yet another example of how the legal system had complete disregard for the lives of people of color. The outrage online was palpable, and it sparked a call to action to take to the streets in protest (Garza 2020:118).

The protests that ensued were the topic of much scrutiny and those who were opposed to BLM would demonize the movement for its actions saying that the movement should have used more peaceful approaches to delivering their message. Alicia Garza’s response to this criticism addresses the movement’s commitment to radically restructuring a legal system that is fundamentally flawed; “had folk listened to Al Sharpton asking them to go home and instead turn out to the polls or not to tear up their own community, there would have been no uprising, no reckoning, no calling to account- we would have simply continued in the same pattern as always” (Garza 2020:133). Without understanding context, BLM may have appeared as a group of rioters with no direction or purpose. The trajectory, popularity, motivations, and actions of BLM would not otherwise be demystified without understanding the contextual details involving specific events, technology, and the agency of individuals responding to a perceived injustice. These variables all came together to form the exact environment for which BLM could emerge.

Merriam’s discussion of boundedness, on the other hand, focuses not on context but on methodology. From Merriam’s perspective, boundedness can be determined by a finite process
of data collection where there is a finite number of people to be interviewed, time to collect information, or observations to be made (Merriam 1998: 28).

I found that it is difficult to draw exact boundaries around a case and its context. While there is most likely no exact way to draw boundaries, it is useful to draw from scholarship to frame a study in a way that can balance specificity with generality. For my study, I drew more from Yin and Gilham’s understanding of case study because it is important to consider that neither KRCC as a unit, and the information gathered about the group, can be separated from its context of a college town filled with activists and experts responding to the EPAs decision to name their hometown a landfill. I found Merriam’s design of case study to be a useful starting point that directed my initial sampling design.

Once I collected as much data as I could about KRCC, which consisted of organizational documents, KRCC meeting minutes, and in-depth interviews, I collected data beyond the bounded system of KRCC to better understand the dynamics of the group and the community in which KRCC was mobilizing. I made the decision to include more respondents outside of KRCC members based on the feedback, information, and suggestions offered by members who either suggested informants outside their own group or gave information that suggested I needed to explore more avenues of inquiry.

KRCC as a group can be understood not only by its members, but also by the community and society in which it mobilized. The historical legacy of paper mills, the political dynamics of a college town, and the community relationships and lived experiences of KRCC members all factored into the details of the group and their actions. Specific events served as a catalyst to mobilize the group and KRCC drew from their environment to best strategize a plan to achieve their mission. The activist group was in constant relationship with all of these factors, and the
social environment of the group needed to be examined in order to better understand KRCC as an organization.

**KRCC as Case Study**

This case study is a qualitative study that is rooted in a specific case involving community activism taking place in Kalamazoo, Michigan. This research project explored the creation of a social movement that emerged in defense of the land that once was the location of a local paper mill called Allied Paper. My research and this case were grounded in the experiences and perspective of a local activist group called the Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition (KRCC). The KRCC was a social movement advocating from 2007 until 2017 for clean water and soil in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The initial focus of the study was to understand the general motivations, formation, and mission of KRCC from the perspective of members and key stakeholders, members in the community, and other claims makers who were contributing to public discourse and who were informing, communicating with, and engaging with the public. I used primary and secondary data drawn from audio-visual materials, analysis of archival and historical documents, in-depth interviews, and observations at meetings to piece together a story about how a movement comes together and who is able to speak for the needs of the community.

In the case of this study, I used KRCC as an example from which I grounded my understanding of social movements and community organizing in order to draw observations from it that could be transferable to other situations that have a similar context. While the specific observations I make are unique in many ways to KRCC and the activism done in Kalamazoo, there are some broader connections to be made from this case to other cases, and to the general literature on activism.
When I first began searching for a research topic to explore, I looked for an interesting local social problem that I could understand better with the goal of designing a study that could be useful to the community. As I conceptualized my topic, I heard from colleagues about the Allied PCB landfill that plagued the Kalamazoo community and the activist group that was fighting to remove the pollutants. I used contacts I had from a local university to reach out to two key members within KRCC to discuss the social problem they aimed at solving. From there, I attended some public meetings in a non-research capacity to better understand what could be researched. I used the information I gathered from the KRCC website to construct a preliminary outline for the questions I would include in my research agenda. My questions, at first, centered on KRCC’s conceptualization of their group goals, their specific claims regarding the social problem in question, and their plans to act on solving the problem. I had a specific interest in the way KRCC framed the problem and how they communicated their claims to the public. Since the group spanned ten years, multiple presidents, and had a mission statement that was open to interpretation, I asked questions about what specifically KRCC members found troubling regarding the Allied landfill in order to understand their perspectives.

My access to the group was easily established, perhaps in part, because I was a graduate student and many of the members of KRCC were educators, professors, or former graduate students who were very welcoming to someone in my position. Once I made the initial contact with the first two members, one of whom was the current president of the group, meeting more contacts for potential future interviews was also easily accomplished. The timing of my interaction with the group was unique. I started collecting data at the end of the group’s trajectory and soon before they disbanded. One of the reasons for this was the final decision about the Allied landfill cleanup plan announced by the EPA. The group had centered its actions
on this one event and once the EPA’s decision was finalized, the group no longer felt it had much purpose. While this drastically changed my ability to observe the group in action, it did allow me to ask questions at a time when group members were best able to reflect on their participation.

**KRCC Meetings**

Starting on November 15, 2016, I attended four meetings before KRCC disbanded in 2017. I also collected as many past meeting minutes and notes from the KRCC secretary that were available to me so that I could also analyze the content in past meetings. These notes were used to better prepare for future interviews with KRCC members, and to triangulate information gleaned from interviews and other archival documents. The average KRCC meeting was typically held every month at about six or seven in the evening in a boardroom of the local Goodwill. The Goodwill had a sizable parking lot that overlooked the Allied landfill and the chain link fence that surrounded it. On a usual meeting day, the Goodwill storefront was closed and the parking lot was sparsely occupied by six or seven cars. The meetings usually started a few minutes late, as the KRCC members hosting the meeting would start a pot of coffee and set out cookies and snacks. Those in attendance were usually only about six or seven KRCC board members, despite the meetings being open to the public.

The meetings were held in a traditional looking boardroom with a U-shaped table where members sat facing one another. An agenda was passed around and a secretary took meeting minutes and notes for each meeting. I always took a copy of the meeting agenda and sometimes took notes on the back. I typically noted how many people were in attendance and what was discussed. I noted that the meetings generally felt formal but friendly, with casual jokes
exchanged in between the discussions of important group business. I did not participate in the meetings and only observed as I sat at the table with all the other members.

My main goal was to glean as much information about the group and how they communicated their concerns and framed their goals and activism. Of specific interest were the terms and phrases they used while discussing technical language regarding the EPA process and legal implications of the landfill. I tried to learn this technical language so I could ask well-informed questions later in interviews. It was important to me to use my interview time wisely, so I used these meetings and group documents to become familiar with terminology and the administrative details of the group.

Documents

Various documents were instrumental to the design of interview questions, and most importantly, building the context that surrounded the unit of analysis in this study (KRCC). Documents included KRCC meeting minutes, emails, letters written to government officials, political canvassing data, photographs taken by KRCC members, publications written by KRCC members, and televised or radio interviews with KRCC members. I also examined historical and contemporary records from the Kalamazoo Gazette and recent publications mentioning the paper industry or directly covering the developments in the Allied landfill or KRCCs involvement with the Allied landfill. Additionally, I gathered EPA meeting documents and available notes and transcripts from meetings spanning from April 20th, 2015 to June 7th, 2017 and examined those to better understand the technical language, as well as the process and background so that I could ask more informed questions of my respondents.
I used these documents to piece together several important narratives. Some served as resources for a descriptive narrative of the history of KRCC and their organizational goals and activism. Some offered information about the official statements communicated to the public by the government through the EPA, and others offered some additional context about local discussions within the community about the Allied site. I also collected many Kalamazoo Gazette clippings from a historical archive in the Kalamazoo Public Library and pieced together a mosaic of newspaper articles that were catalogued in no particular order by librarians over the decades. From these clippings, I searched for any historical context that could help me make sense of the legacy left behind by the paper industry.

The history I uncovered chronicled key figures, events and institutions, and provided an historical and political backdrop that illuminated the public tensions between economic prosperity and health and safety which spanned almost a century from the first paper mill. Through these newspaper clippings, I filled in the gaps from historical accounts that revealed a local conversation between citizens and their government, workers and their employers, and activists who used the newspaper as a platform to draw attention to their concerns. These historical documents also recorded how the semantics within the conversation shifted over the years from language steeped in conservationism to the language of environmental justice. This context allowed me to place KRCC in a specific trajectory and it helped establish their placement within a larger conversation.

Interviews and Data Analysis

When I began this study, my research agenda was broad and focused on general questions about KRCC and their group’s mission and goals. Over time, the research agenda began to refine
into a more specific focus. What started as a general goal of understanding the group’s history and dynamics became more critical investigations that examined inclusivity, voice, and the dynamics of power within the group and the greater Kalamazoo community. The initial research questions were used as a beginning point to create data and explore the social problem more specifically during the interview process. Throughout the design phase, data collection phase, and analysis phase, I was informed by Kval and Brinkmann’s description of the craft of interviewing as a co-creation of reality that evolves between the researcher and participant that includes the skillful building of rapport and attentive observation of the organic development of pauses, linguistic emphasis, and non-verbal cues during the interview referred to as “sensitive listening” (Kval et al., 2009:89). This was especially important because at times the subject matter was sensitive. Many respondents represented an organization and offered critical commentary about local government officials or the EPA and felt like they had to choose their words carefully. It was important to employ “sensitive listening” at a time when respondents chose to be less transparent or felt like they had to give a diplomatic response while communicating criticism.

When I began my interviews in December of 2016, I reached out to the active members who were listed in the KRCC meeting minutes and call lists that were given to me by the secretary and president of the group. From there I asked each person after our interview if they had anyone in mind as a future contact. The bulk of my analysis focused on my sample of 19 audio recorded and transcribed, in-depth interviews and one audio recorded public EPA meeting with the Edison Neighborhood Association. Interviews were conducted from 12/15/16 to 4/19/18. My sample expanded beyond 8 KRCC board members to include one EPA community representative, two leaders in the Latinx community, a representative from the Milwood
neighborhood association and one from the Edison neighborhood association, and the rest were various experts and activists in the community who were colleagues of KRCC or who attended many of the same events and EPA and city meetings regarding the Allied landfill over the years. Some respondents fulfilled more than one role. Most of my interviews were over an hour long each and I interviewed each respondent only once. No follow-up interviews were done, but I did reach out to some respondents via email to inquire about a point they mentioned in an interview. Some follow-up emails were sent to request more information, resources, or contact information for potential respondents.

Prior to conducting interviews, I designed a semi-structured interview schedule that was tailored to each respondent’s role in the organization and their specific set of knowledge. I first researched as much as I could about the background and expertise of the respondent and their role in either KRCC or the community. Some core questions were designed to better understand the group and some were designed to understand the personal motivations or contributions to the social movement of the respondent. Because of this, not every respondent was asked the same questions. Towards the end of my interview process, my questions began to change as I noticed new themes emerging. I added questions to my interview schedule and started to sample respondents who could better inform me about the theme I noticed. For example, some respondents from KRCC were transparent about overlooking the Latinx community when organizing events or inviting local organizations to EPA meetings. I also noticed that EPA meetings were not well attended by members of the Latinx community or their community leaders. This led me to a set of questions exploring why this lack of inclusion existed and I reached out to local Latinx community leaders for clarification.
I used a convenience sample that began with KRCC members who were willing to do an interview with me and then any contacts they recommended who agreed to do the same. I developed categories based on particular actions, experiences, events, or issues that were mentioned by individuals but conceptually expanded beyond the individual level (Charmaz 2006:109). Once the interviews were transcribed, I began the initial coding process in order to categorize the data into more manageable units for later analysis. I drew from Creswell’s guidance for organizing and reducing data which involves sketching ideas that highlight and describe the information, identifying patterns and regularities (and irregularities) in the form of codes, drawing connections between codes and theoretical framework in literature, and presenting the findings (Creswell 2007:149).

I also found Creswell’s description of a “data analysis spiral” to be a useful description for my own analysis process where many themes developed organically in analytic circles both in the interpretive (Creswell 2007:149), and data creation phase. During the coding process, I placed emphasis on remaining open to the possibility of any theoretical ideas emerging from the data and made no assumptions about what themes were present. In the manner of grounded theory practice, I tried to remain “close to the data” (Charmaz 2006: 60). I used tracked changes to attach a meaningful but succinct code or description to a line of transcript. With initial coding, I used smaller segments of transcript data, scanning for particular words or phrases that suggested provisional discoveries that would eventually crystallize into a theoretical understanding of the phenomena. For example, some segments of coding were labeled as contributing to a historical narrative, some were details about a situation that were compared across respondents, and others contained more semantic nuance. If someone stated a word or phrase like, “secret-weapon”, “disadvantaged”, or “politically
correct”, these words and phrases were noted and their semantic meaning was considered as well as the context of the rest of the sentence.

I also incorporated notes I took during the interview and general impressions I had of the respondent and the overall interview exchange. I analyzed the transcript alone, comparing categories within the transcript, and then compared categories across other coded transcripts. I drew on Charmaz’s (2006) description of Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) “constant comparative methods” by making sequential comparisons within transcripts, across transcripts, and by drawing on archival documents when available to analyze the data as thoroughly as possible and refining and as many categories as possible (2006:54) and triangulating data whenever possible (Merriam 1998: 204).

I used memo writing as a tool that served as a “step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (Charmaz 2006:72). By using memos, comparisons were made between different data segments, codes and data, codes and codes, codes and theoretical categories, and so on. Memos were used to draw connections between concepts and to explore the relationship of these connections. Memos served as a brainstorming tool that brought new ideas to light and kept me connected to the writing process (Charmaz 2006:73,85). I would sometimes make prompts in the margins that helped me reframe a perspective I held or a code I had written as I continued to refine the categories I was coding. All this was done with my original research questions and pertinent literature as guidance. For example, I would note segments of text and ask “The system creates acceptance and complacency?” “KRCC single issue, help or hindrance”. I would pose these questions to myself as I conceptually reframed an issue or needed to create a placeholder for future analysis and refining of codes.
Research Ethics and Reflexivity

When I analyzed my data, I focused on the way that KRCC framed the social problem they were facing and how they were able to mobilize resources at their disposal in order to politically represent themselves and their interests. My aim with this project was to observe and record the experiences of KRCC and the broader community through the vantage point of the activists who were engaged in activism for the Allied Landfill and how they made sense of the social problem they faced, as well as the potential solutions. While I cross-referenced and verified information with external sources, publications, and documents to have a more holistic understanding of the events I was observing, I also accepted the narrative that respondents offered to me and respected their ownership of their recollections, opinions, and experiences about an organization that had, from the perspective of some, failed. Beyond recording “facts” and information, I observed the lived experiences of those who shared their stories with me and placed those accounts at the forefront of my analysis.

Because my personal view of the world is limited to my life experiences that are largely shaped by my identity, I accept that this has positioned me in such a way where I ask certain questions and make meaning of the world around me through positioned lens or subjectivity, I drew on Adler et al. who stress that while taking part in any role, the researcher must always be aware of not only how they impact the data creation process. This awareness and reflection, the authors assert, is just as important as any other data collected and co-created with participants and must be included in the analysis (Adler & Adler 1987:35). As I moved through this research project, I reflected on my position as a white, cis-het, middle class woman with a higher education degree and how it granted me access into spaces where experts and professionals participate in knowledge production and political debate, but also positioned me at a vantage
point that allowed me to observe some things and not others. I also was very aware of how my identity, experiences, and world view prevented me from entering certain spaces and building a rapport with respondents I wanted to reach, like in the Latinx community. My experiences with marginalization as a white, immigrant woman and naturalized citizen have given me an awareness of both displacement and privilege in society.

These personal experiences informed the way I observed the world around me and how I examined social problems as a researcher. My stance as a politically liberal woman and researcher who examines the social world through the conflict paradigm has undoubtedly shaped the way I asked questions, analyzed responses, and co-created data with respondents. I used my stance to offer a critique that focused on the dynamics of marginalization and inequality. Without attaching a value judgement to my position, I acknowledge that all of the qualities have given me a specific vantage point that has shaped this research. A strength that I brought to this research is that I am aware of this dynamic and I accept that it is not a limitation, but an intentional analytical stance. To draw from Czarniawska’s (2004) assertion regarding objectivity, “Perhaps researchers’ writing objectively, in a scientific way, has the impact of silencing the participants, and silencing the researchers as well” (Creswell 2007:179). Creswell also draws on Gilgun (2005) to build on Czarniawska’s (2004) point that qualitative research has an overarching goal of providing a place for voice, not obscuring it.

One of the most pressing ethical concerns I had when doing this research was considering the consequences of including public figures who may be recognizable in my research. The respondents included in this study were generous enough to give me their time and a glimpse into their lives. Several respondents were gracious enough to share copious amounts of information in the form of records and documents to which I would have otherwise never had
access. I took that information and put it through a lens of analysis that at times involved critique. While the critique was grounded in the context of patterns found in many social movements, it was steeped in the experiences of local members of the community whose good intentions and efforts were directed at helping create positive change. Because of my orientation in the conflict paradigm and my tendency to use it as a lens to form my research agenda, I asked questions of the KRCC that explored potential inequality or underrepresentation found in the community and in the group. What I found was that responses illuminated the difficulties of leadership against the backdrop of a cultural legacy of marginalization. Through this exploration and the candid discussions from respondents, I discovered some patterns within KRCC and the Kalamazoo community that coincided with findings in the literature that applied a critical lens with suggestions for added awareness about inclusivity and privilege.

The difficulty in studying a public activist group that made many efforts to be visible in a rather small community is that anonymity is not always possible even if risks were explained and efforts were taken to de-identify the respondents as much as possible. At certain points in this study, decisions to not include additional descriptive details and sources like first-hand publications made by group members were made in an attempt to de-identify respondents. The Institutional Review Board offered guidance in the form of allowing respondents to be fully aware of the risks and knowing they had the option of stopping the interviews at any point. Respondents signed a consent form and were made aware that complete anonymity was unlikely.

Despite this procedural step, the experience of managing the expectations of ethics but adhering to the principles of descriptive qualitative writing were a challenge. Hopkins (1993) asserts this point by stating that thick description, the standard for qualitative writing, “may be somewhat at odds with the renewed concern for the privacy and “welfare” of our informants”
(1993:129). My goal for writing this study was to strike a balance between offering the stylistic and in-depth analysis characteristic of qualitative research and protecting and honoring the vulnerability of the respondents who were co-creators of data in this research.
CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSIONS

At the heart of this project is the acknowledgment that social movements are complex networks of people who face many obstacles in their efforts to achieve social change. The frustrations faced by social movement leaders and members are plentiful and falling short of expectations is unfortunately an all too common reality. Success likely does not look like one specific outcome, but is measured subjectively in many different ways. Most obviously, it may be achieving what was stated in the mission statement. It may be less recognizable, like galvanizing a different social activist group into action or offering some insight into what worked and did not work. It might be simply sharing some resources with another group or drawing in public support and attention.

The definition of success and failure greatly depends on who is doing the analysis. For example, group members will have their own measurement of success and failure, which may differ from the public’s, which may differ even further from the point of view of a researcher. Furthermore, there may not be consensus even among group members, scholars, or members of the public, on how this is measured. Although success is never promised, two specific goals that appear to be important next steps in cultivating lasting change are: implementing transformative change that addresses the institutional mechanisms of inequality and the re-centering of marginalized voices in social movement leadership (Faber 2008; Taylor 1993; Oluo 2018; Chun et al., 2013; Carbado et al., 2013).
Sometimes social movement groups form when there is a pressing social problem that demands attention. That was the case with KRCC when they formed to address the EPA’s decision to create a landfill next to the largest drinking water aquifer in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Formed as a pressure group, their mission remained limited to that specific problem. The obstacles they encountered mainly included a lack of public buy-in and very few members to draw on and mobilize. Without significant buy-in from the public, KRCC, like many social activist groups in a similar position, had very few avenues to achieving their mission, which was very generally stated: “The KRCC is committed to working with all stakeholders to develop and support a viable plan to clean up the entire Allied Paper, Inc./Portage Creek, Kalamazoo River Superfund site” (primary document source).

A common pattern with many social problems is their persistence. A poignant critique of social movements, that applies to the case of KRCC, is that their goals and mission are limited to short term ideas and not long-term, systemic transformation. The lack of long term, systemic change can be observed when social movement groups mobilize for the same cause over and over again with what appears to be little progress over a period of time, sometimes spanning decades. Unfortunately, the exact blueprint for a social movement’s success does not exist, but it is posited that transformative change (Faber 2008; Taylor 1993) is required in order to create a lasting difference. In other words, changes need to be made to the way a system functions in order for change to be meaningful at the grassroots level. In the case of KRCC and other environmental groups, the short term goal may have been to remove toxins from one’s town or backyard, but the problem of systematic pollution still persists. Without setting a goal to create a mission that addresses the many reasons why pollution is such a persistent and ubiquitous
problem, and without meaningfully engaging multiple community stakeholders, activist groups will likely try to put out small fires while the core problem still rages.

“Again, it goes back to prevention: how do we make sure this never happens again?”, said James, one of KRCC’s board members, when I asked him to reflect on the group’s wins and losses after the EPA’s final decision was announced. His reflection was made in hindsight, after the group no longer was active. This very question is at the core of transformative change, an approach that some of the leading environmental justice scholars, Taylor (1993) and Faber (2008), suggest is a needed shift in advocacy to create lasting change. Transformational change includes empowering communities by building coalitions and combining situated knowledge that interrogates systems of inequality (Taylor 1993, 54). Building true coalitions with the intention of empowering communities includes partnering with communities. Faber explicitly argues for the coalescing of multiple advocacy groups that fight for workers’ rights, human rights, immigrant rights, anti-racism efforts, and so on. Without the inclusion of such groups, the environmental justice movement will likely keep reproducing the very system it is fighting against, Faber argues. The productive justice paradigm aims to create a transformative social movement that unites like-minded advocates to address “democracy, ecological sustainability, labor unions, and human rights” (Faber 2008:253)

KRCC’s mission, whose goals included getting the “best outcome” for the Kalamazoo River and keeping the public knowledgeable of the problem, firmly situated KRCC as a single-issue group whose intention was to focus only on the Allied site with the hope that PCB laden waste would not be stored there. The short-term quality behind KRCC’s mission did not capture the spirit of James’s question of long-term prevention. The idea of prevention would, of course, fall in line with a transformative agenda. In the case of environmental justice, this includes forming
an agenda that focuses on the structural and institutional reasons creating environmental inequality so future problems can be prevented instead of simply mitigated. KRCC, like similar groups, aligned with an agenda that advocated for a specific community, rather than advocating for the prevention of future pollution in any community. In the end, the group unfortunately did not achieve their mission, but were instead left with some “qualified wins” and some lingering frustrations.

To KRCCs credit, the group members remained reflexive about their strengths and points of growth in their interviews with me. True to their mission, one of the strengths mentioned by KRCC members was their ability to keep the public notified of the problem and any developments announced by the EPA. James mentioned;

*I would say that the most important thing that we’ve done was the canvassing of the neighborhoods around the Allied site, in partnership with the EPA, to educate people about the EPA’s proposed remedies and to engage them and ask them to participate in the process.*

Another win mentioned by KRCC board members was the usable acreage to be restored for recreational purposes located next to the capped landfill of PCBs on the Allied site. On more than one occasion, KRCC members mentioned that keeping the waste on the Allied site was not their most desired outcome, but they settled for this compromise thinking it would be the most they could accomplish. Rebecca, the former president stated;

*Getting back a third of the acreage as usable in some form is a giant win. That never would have happened without KRCC, and it never would have happened along (sic) for KRCC if we didn’t have the unified support of our city and our elected officials.*

With these wins, James offered a sobering statement;

*...but in democracies like ours, success usually looks a little different than the goal that you set out with at the beginning. You usually end up with some compromised position.*
Behind the optimistic words, however, there was an undercurrent of frustration. And also to KRCC’s credit, group members were not afraid to voice doubts about their approach. Members reflected on their “white, elite” group composition. For example, the former president voiced concerns over “not really representing anyone”. Other members drew attention to the lack of buy-in from the public, especially from people of color. Other KRCC members had not necessarily made their peace with the “qualified wins” and were left feeling like the group could have done more. A board member stated;

   And I think we could have done a better job of helping to advertise those meetings, but we’ve had the challenges of a small volunteer board. Oh, and this was the thing I was thinking, that we should have done better is actually forming coalition partners with other organizations.

At the time when I interviewed KRCC, they were at a loss for next steps, or if there should even be any at all for the group now that the fate of Allied had been decided. James stated;

   We could potentially be in a unique position to have a major impact, but the tide seems to be against us in a number of ways. That’s why I’m struggling and I know others on our board are struggling to figure out what do we do from here, where do we go?

KRCC’s frustrations with their own inability to achieve the impact they hoped for presented a gap in their expectations and their ability to put those goals into action, especially concerning the lack of meaningful partnership with people of color. Literature shows us some possible culprits. Oluo’s description of why intersectional movements are needed for social change yet are so rarely implemented, Bonilla-Silva’s white habitus draws on the reproduction and dominance of white culture, and Grayman and Godfrey’s (Dixon, Durrheim, & Thomae:2017) “principle implementation gap” all address the distance between setting the goal of social justice and putting it into action. The concern is that predominantly white groups tend to reproduce what
they know, and that typically includes practices that further marginalize rather than include people at the margins.

One of the main suggestions of this project is to demonstrate the need for, and value of, transformative change. In order to draw from the most useful resources for addressing this need, I include insight from scholars who focus on including situated knowledge from marginalized groups who have experienced systemic oppression, typically at the hands of the institutions that need restructuring (Taylor 1993); (Oluo 2018); (Chun et al. 2013). Situated knowledge is knowledge that is obtained through one’s position in society and is accumulated through lived experiences that act as a lens through which a specific sense of knowing is available. Often, classic ideas of power and resources, like money and formal knowledge, come to mind when organizing resources for social change. But knowledge that is gleaned from experiencing life at the margins of society offers a unique vantage point that garners insight into the mechanisms behind systems of oppression. Unfortunately, this type of knowledge is overlooked and undervalued as not “real” knowledge. Because it is so undervalued, efforts to include marginalized identities usually are framed as acts of benevolence instead of a strategic form of inclusion. One of the main tensions that seems to persist among well-intentioned, social movement groups is the desire to build meaningful connections with diverse communities but not having the tools or framework from which to do so. One of my research goals was to reveal the problem and offer suggestions on how to re-frame the concept of inclusion to mean equity and relationship-building that focuses on mutual strengths and not benevolence.
What Did This Study Do?

Through exploratory qualitative analysis, my dissertation research contributed several insights to a larger discussion regarding social movements and the value of case study. This study also added to the discussion on a collection of classic social movement theories and united cross disciplinary theories, demonstrating their usefulness when discussing environmental movements and community organizing. For example, by drawing on classic social theories and theories that unite intersectionality and situated knowledge to reframe models of leadership in social justice, this research brought attention to the lack of community engagement, public buy-in, and inclusion of marginalized voices in environmental advocacy work and builds on existing scholarship that re-centers voices at the margin. It also highlights the importance of situated knowledge as a social movement tool toward transformative change. Through inductive analysis, this study elucidated the journey of a local Kalamazoo activist organization and contextualized its salience in a larger framework of social movement research.

Contributions to Theory and Literature

In my work, I have put several theories in conversation with each other in order to guide the exploration of my specific social movement example. I have demonstrated the application of Resource Mobilization Theory and Collective Identity Theory by illuminating a set of mechanisms that led to a specific constellation of people who formed KRCC through their shared connection to the Allied landfill and their position and status in the community. In particular, I found that “birds of a feather” flocked together from similar networks and backgrounds. In this case, group members crystallized from predominantly white, elite institutions like colleges and local government. I drew from theories discussing homophily, social dominance theory, and
Bonilla-Silva’s understanding of Bourdieu’s habitus to help contextualize the reasons for why group leadership and membership is so often dominated by privileged identities and why group goals and discussions are often shaped by the lived experiences of privileged groups. In other words, predominantly white groups cluster together at the exclusion of people of color and therefore unwittingly silence the experiences and the valuable knowledge available within communities of color, effectively limiting ideas and potential strategies for community mobilizing.

The set of theories mentioned in my work examine the interplay between agency and structure, and how the relationship between the two explains the composition of social movement groups, while being mindful to bring in discussion on the limitations to organizing groups in a way that limits opportunities for transformation. Since my analysis considered the role of status, these networking ties were not benign connections, but were in relationship with a broader system of hegemonic institutions. What I noted was that social movement groups mimicked the patterns of other predominantly white, elite institutions of power and held similar agendas that were aligned with an insular network of people and norms. The key question posed in Chapter Three asked who can join the fight in social justice matters and who is left behind?

What I gleaned from my observations of the way KRCC, a local activist group, first formed and then navigated their mission and responsibility to the community is that well intentioned people in positions of leadership are often nestled in their respective, insular networks. Breaking out of these silos is a difficult task and the formation of these groups typically leaves marginalized voices out of the conversation while bringing privileged groups closer together. This resulted in activist actions that unintentionally pushed marginalized groups away and prevented KRCC from recruiting members who could potentially strengthen their
group. For example, if the LatinX community was consulted about the protest signs before they were made, they may have had ideas of how to contribute their resources and interest in a way that was mutually beneficial and did not waste valuable time and money for KRCC, while not putting the LatinX community at risk. The aim would be to make a meaningful relationship based on reciprocity and not on benevolence.

One of the important contributions of this project is the discussion on the difference between diversity and inclusion. Where diversity remains focused on inviting marginalized voices to the table, inclusion seeks to build relationships with marginalized communities in order to extend an offering of partnership, reciprocity, and best practices that re-center voice at the margins. One of the main observations I made was that institutions of power tend to operate in their respective silos, and despite the awareness of lacking varied voices, most members tend to represent the demographics of predominantly white spaces.

Chapter Four illuminated that even when predominantly white groups make attempts to include people of color, the attempts fall short of true inclusivity. The attempts are usually what serves the status quo and do not have an intention of mutual beneficence. What I found was that practicing diversity can sometimes be a mere exercise in virtue signaling when done at the expense of true inclusion and the loss of much needed insight to the effectiveness of a social movement when marginalized voices are silenced. For example, KRCC’s inclusion of John, the Edison representative, was an effort to demonstrate diversity. In addition to the problematic assumption that one person can represent an entire group, John’s dismissive stance towards the Edison community only seemed to demonstrate his intention of creating more distance from the Edison community. In the example of KRCC, there was an attempt at diversity but the attempts lacked a meaningful and mutual line of communication and partnership with marginalized
communities. The discussion in this chapter sheds light on the importance of including marginalized groups as a tool for meaningful and lasting social change, not as a gesture of benevolence, but as an intentional strategy for benefiting from situated knowledge only found in the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

Social movement literature taught us that the message behind the social movement is greatly dependent on who is a part of the movement and who leads movement efforts. Communities of color form different agendas and different strategies than their white counterparts. The difference between the way different communities mobilize seems to be grounded in their relationships to oppressive institutions and the lived experiences that have shaped this relationship. For example, communities of color are far less likely to align their agenda with government regulatory agencies and are less likely to view powerful institutions as stakeholders. Instead, stakeholders are defined in grassroots terms and involve members of the community.

The experience of KRCC was that they, like many other white-led groups, were co-opted by a larger institution, the EPA in this case. KRCC was intent on framing the EPA as “not the bad guy” and their attempts to partner with them are an example of the problematic dynamic that activists of color warn against. In such a bargain, community-led organizations like KRCC run the risk of assuming that they have enough leverage to achieve their goals. Unfortunately, powerful institutions are reluctant to change so easily and will guard their interests while “courting” community activists. In fairness, one of the tactics used by the EPA was likely to stall and exhaust the community, including groups like KRCC, into compliance. It is also impossible to know if the EPA’s final decision would have been different had activism surrounding Allied taken a different approach and included marginalized communities or if KRCC’s leaders had
formed a less congenial relationship with the EPA. What is clear, however, is that KRCC experienced a similar fate like many other groups that took the same approach to working within the system, instead of restructuring it. Additionally, once the group disbanded, they missed an opportunity to leave any structure in place to continue the local conversation about pollution and environmental justice.

**Contributions to Local Knowledge**

I explored the following; the context behind the paper industry in West Michigan and its ability to illuminate key learning lessons about the industrial era, the community’s response to the tensions created by industrialization, and the consequences such an industry created in its wake. My research traced the history of Kalamazoo Gazette reports of the paper mill industry from its inception in the West Michigan area. Prior to my compilation of Kalamazoo Gazette clippings, the story of West Michigan paper mills mostly existed in fragmented and incomplete tellings of the industry and the community. My record, while not exhaustive, wove a narrative that contextualized the dangers of industrialization and its relationship to pollution while orienting the story of the West Michigan paper industry in a broader discussion on environmental social movements.

The second chapter opens with the beginnings of the industrial paper era in West Michigan that demonstrated an industry that created an impossible bargain for the communities in which it was located. Chapter Two recorded the steady community response to the industrialization of West Michigan and discovered that tension between industry and environment existed in the community decades prior to the environmental movement. In fact, despite the conversation changing over time, the tension between industry and environment was
present almost immediately as the industry grew. The community that powered the paper industry had to leverage economic prosperity against their health and safety. The second chapter outlined the inherent tensions between the community, local government, and paper companies that spanned decades after the first paper mill opened in West Michigan.

I expanded beyond the local example to examine a broader context of community response through the lens of environmental social movements. What I found was that community responses to massive fish kills, rancid smelling water, and river water that ran opaque with pollution may have ranged in tone and severity, but in contrast to conventional assumptions, were present decades prior to the environmental justice movement. The local history of the paper industry illuminated the fact that the community response to pollution and degradation of natural resources has been an ever present feature since industrialization began. Chapter Two highlighted the reality that the industrial era’s success was made possible only through the exploitation of human labor and natural resources. Pollution was not an unfortunate consequence of industry, it was factored into the planning of industrial expansion and played an integral part in its success. The importance of this context was not just a contribution to local history, it also laid the conceptual framework from which I built my understanding of the context that would later shape activism and struggle a century later. The repetitive nature of community grievances and failures to achieve meaningful change created the foundation for an argument towards transformative restructuring of institutions and broader power structures.

Suggestions for the Future

Given what I observed in the KRCC example and how it fits into the literature on social movements, there are some heuristic suggestions this case study offers. While there is no perfect
formula for a successful social movement, there are some patterns that offer insight on what has and has not worked in the past. KRCC was a microcosm for a larger recurring theme in social movements. The lessons learned from documenting KRCC’s experiences suggest that creating activist and social movement groups is difficult and complex, and despite a group’s best efforts and good intentions, their actions may fail at making meaningful and advantageous connections with members in the community who would form helpful alliances. Their actions also show that despite how antagonistic one’s stance may be in the beginning of the social movement, it is easy to become seduced by larger institutions and the promises they make at being diplomatic and community focused. Further still, KRCC’s journey shows that despite how energetic and full of fervor the activism might be at first, that level of stamina will likely not outlast the determination of powerful bureaucracies and their attempts at stalling and exhausting a community of invested stakeholders.

Despite these difficulties, social movement literature still suggests some key points for a more successful movement. I focused my discussion on the need for radical change, the need for actual coalitions instead of silos, and the need for a reframing of our traditional notion of what expertise and leadership look like to include situated knowledge from displaced and marginalized communities. Future efforts would likely benefit from acknowledging the interconnectedness between social activist groups and the need to center marginalized voices and the needs of the most vulnerable communities. This process would likely need to begin before a crisis occurs and meaningful connections would likely need to be made over time.

If a model that embodied this kind of change were to be identified, it would likely draw on the advice of multiple scholars and it would represent various qualities that capture the spirit of transformative change. Leading with Faber (2008), Taylor (1993), and Bullard (1993),
movements that aim for transformative change should focus on building coalitions that address the underlying structural reasons that may keep the most vulnerable citizens from participating in advocacy work. Oluo (2018) and Chun et al. (2013) make a case for restructuring leadership to resemble a more democratic and equitable process by centering the experiences of those most impacted by societal ills and placing their knowledge and experiences at the forefront of group decision making. Parsons, Fisher, and Crease (2021) echo this advice with their discussion of “recognition justice” where they draw on a broader conversation in scholarship to assert the need for recognizing the disparate environmental impact felt by those who are most vulnerable (p.45-46). When leadership, both in governing bodies and activism fail to do this, they contribute to further harm that could have been otherwise anticipated and prevented (Parsons et al., 2021: 45-46).

Parsons et al., cite examples like Hurricane Katrina and the environmental racist mistreatment of Indigenous populations to explain how misrecognition, or the exclusion of the experiences of those living at the margins, led to adding structural harm to the existing environmental harms already present (Parsons et al., 2021: 46-47). The argument behind the need for recognition presented by Parsons et al. resonates with a similar argument presented by Oluo (2018), Chun et al. (2013) for the inclusion of situated knowledge. These scholars emphasize the importance of centering the voices of those who are most marginalized and taking direction from those most impacted regarding the definition and future vision of justice and assert for the need to put these voices in the driver’s seat of decision making and leadership (Oluo 2018; Chun et al. 2013; Parsons et al. 2021).

Foster illustrates an example of social activism that may be used as one demonstration of how a grassroots organization used transformative techniques to create change in their
community. Drawing on an example of grassroots activism in Chester, Pennsylvania, Foster describes the dynamics of a small activist groups’ fight;

resistance quickly became a struggle over the legitimacy of decision-making processes, the exclusion and marginalization of dis-affected citizens in those processes, and the structural forces that constrain individuals in communities like Chester from fully participating in decisions that fundamentally affect their lives (Foster 1998:778).

The group, Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL) in Chester, Pennsylvania, were specifically fighting to “stop the clustering of commercial waste facilities in this predominantly poor African-American community” (1998: 777). Foster’s (1998) example begins with a description of a small grassroots group called the CRCQL.

The group tried many different techniques as they tried to battle both state and federal agencies. The activism first began with local citizens attempting to get as much technological information regarding their particular environmental problem, including specifics of the case from government officials. The group claimed that they were met with silence, resistance, and a lack of respect (Foster 1998:813). Next steps for CRCQL were to organize protests, but to no avail. In addition to public protests being ignored, local residents complained that supposed public hearings were not truly available to the public (Foster 1998: 815). According to Foster, these failed attempts at having a local voice garnered an important lesson for CRCQL; it demonstrated that the overall fight was political more than it was legal. Foster explains that; “While legal action brings much needed attention to environmental justice struggles, legal strategies rarely address what is, in essence, a larger political and structural problem” (1998:819-820).

Foster (1998) draws attention to CRCQL’s attempts to work within the system to assert that distributive paradigms are only a starting point to a much more complex problem of
environmental justice (p.826). Furthermore, Foster draws on this example to argue that “the very social and structural constraints that operate in the larger world continue to constrain individuals in the environmental decision-making process” (1998: 827). On their journey, CRCQL later demonstrated a mastery of tech language and formed a coalition where they drew on resources of other citizens and still used protest and lobbying as protest actions, sometimes with mixed results (Foster 1998:838).

What makes CRCQL’s efforts unique, however, was their ability to build a coalition. The group held an environmental justice retreat at a local college and was able to recruit students from over fifteen colleges to form a coalition called Campus Coalition Concerning Chester (C4). The purpose of the coalition was to educate, broaden the base of support, and create a platform for the exchange of ideas and questions across a swath of smaller, like-minded, groups of people (1998:823).

CRCQL created what Foster refers to as “free spaces”, or settings where community members had opportunities to communicate with a network of other like-minded and informed citizens to exchange ideas and resources. From here, citizens could move from “complainers and victims to participants in the processes which govern their lives” (Foster 1998: 839). These spaces, which did not exist in the community prior to CRCQL, decentralized power and understood that decision making was a process of contestation and open communication (2008: 839). Much like Faber (2008), Foster (1998) also asserts that the next phase to building transformative movements “lies in forging partnerships and networking with grassroots organizations across substantive areas” (p.840). Foster points to CRCQL’s success with opening the pathways for those partnerships as an example of overall success.
As compared to KRCC, CRCQL differs largely in their focus on building community “free spaces” or creating a setting that would foster open communication and connection beyond a narrow scope of activism. By connecting conceptually beyond one single issue, activist groups may offer more avenues for success that transcend even the initial mission of the group. In Foster’s (1998) words; “When local grassroots groups are able to link their victories in the environmental realm to broader political and economic struggles, the potential exists to redefine existing power relations” (779).

KRCC can be understood as a unique group that included specialized experts and academics doing advocacy work within an academic community. The main motivation behind the recruitment of many KRCC board members was their specialized expertise and in many ways, these members acted from that position of that expertise. In other words, it can be argued that these experts exercised their expertise in exactly the way that they were expected to. The group became a closed group and the group’s identity became insular. Rather than integrating with the community as collaborators, KRCC framed their identity as representatives for others without creating an entry point into meaningful relationships with the community, especially those at the margins. In the words of the then president of KRCC; “I think that what folks with good intentions – myself included – think they’re doing is being the Lorax and trying to speak for the folks who aren’t able to speak for themselves”. While these intentions are good, the assumption that laypeople and people at the margins cannot speak for themselves is problematic and perhaps creates barriers to the inclusion of ideas, forms of knowledge outside of expertise, and a complete definition of justice, as illuminated by Walker (2012) below.

Elucidating the concepts of participatory justice and recognition, Walker draws on Godsill et al. (2009) who exposes the tension between local communities and experts. At the
heart of the argument behind participatory justice, and justice as recognition, is the idea that people who are at risk should be able to participate in decision making regarding that risk, and that includes broadening perspectives and applying scrutiny to scientific expertise (as cited in Walker 2012:153). Walker explains that broadening perspectives and including local knowledge in planning processes and strategies is needed in order to conceptualize a complete picture of justice (2012:153). Walker asserts that participatory methods of including local and experiential knowledge have offered a way to reconcile the tension between knowledge presented by scientific experts, as well as, addressing missing gaps where epidemiological studies and risk assessments are inadequate or lacking (2012:62). Walker explains, “Whose evidence counts in such arenas is intrinsically wrapped up with inequalities in recognition, participation and distribution” and that the solution begins with “providing a further way in which justice and evidence are intertwined” (Walker 2012:63). Drawing from Walker’s assessment, the barrier between experts and local communities can be observed in the definition of valued and recognized knowledge. In the absence of recognizing situated knowledge as a valuable contribution, communities may experience alienation from conversations regarding both problems and solutions within their communities.

The transferability of this case study, and its applicability beyond the local, lies in the context of a group of experts operating in an academic community that presumably places emphasis on the role of such expertise in decision making and advocacy. The lessons to draw from this case speak to the ease with which such advocacy groups adopt that perspective and create a limited understanding of justice. By reaching beyond expertise, to include situated knowledge, groups with similar composition and contexts may benefit from defining a more
holistic conceptualization of justice in order to create coalitions from meaningful partnership with the community.

There is no way to predict KRCC’s success had the group made different choices, however, there are some lessons to be learned from scholars and activists that include setting a goal to re-center voices at the margins as a strategic tool that aims at prolonged community relationships set on transformative change. The key is not as simple as just including marginalized voices. The key lies in understanding the potential for transformational restructuring of an organization. If the goal is not to restructure a system, activists and the communities for which they advocate may risk becoming a casualty of the system. KRCC demonstrated a common trap that many groups experience and the avoidance of such an event likely relies on a group’s concerted effort to mobilize with transformative change and a more holistic understanding of justice as a clear, defined goal.
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APPENDIX A

HSIRB APPROVAL LETTERS 1 AND 2
Date: November 15, 2016

To: Ann Miles, Principal Investigator
    Karolina Staros, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 16-10-62

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Water and Soil Pollution in Kalamazoo, MI: A Society’s Response” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: November 14, 2017
Date: March 28, 2018

To: Ann Miles, Principal Investigator
Karolina Staros, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 16-10-62

This letter will serve as confirmation that the changes to your research project titled “Water and Soil Pollution in Kalamazoo, MI: A Society’s Response” requested in your memo received March 19, 2018 (to expand recruitment to include individuals involved in advocacy or who has concerns about the environment; to expand recruitment to include members of the Kalamazoo Hispanic community; to add questions to interview protocol; to revise recruitment and consent materials to reflect these changes) have been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

The conditions and the duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: November 14, 2018
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
Interview Schedule (for KRCC members, approximately 8-12 respondents)

1. Test recording device(s)
2. Pass out informed consent forms to be signed BEFORE starting the interview, explain informed consent HSIRB section
3. (Re) introduce yourself and explain the reason for the interview and the project, specify that the interview should only take about one hour.

Interview Questions

1. When did you join KRCC?
2. Why did you join KRCC?
   a) Why is the river or surrounding area important to you?
3. What is your role in KRCC?
   a) Are you affiliated with any other organizations? Has this affiliation helped your role in KRCC? Has it created tension for you?
4. What do you think is the biggest goal of KRCC?
5. What has been KRCC’s message to the public? Has it changed over time?
   a) Do you think this goal was accomplished?
6. What was the most challenging part of doing this kind of advocacy work?
   a) Were there any challenges within the group?
7. How receptive has the public been to KRCC and this social problem? How has public response changed since 2007 when the group was formed?
8. How has the group changed over time? (members, attitudes, strategies)
9. What is the connection between KRCC and other movements? (Flint Lives Matter, other local environmental movements)
10. How do you feel about the EPA’s final decision?
11. If you were able to pass along advice to other advocacy groups in similar positions as KRCC, what would be that advice?
12. What do you think the consequences of having a permanent landfill will be for Kalamazoo?
13. Is there anything you would like to add that I haven’t asked?
APPENDIX C

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR RESIDENTS IN KALAMAZOO
INCLUDING HISPANIC COMMUNITY
ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR RESIDENTS IN KALAMAZOO
INCLUDING HISPANIC COMMUNITY

1) Do you know if members of the Hispanic community are involved in any environmental advocacy work? or any other advocacy work?
2) What are some challenges residents in the Hispanic Community face?
3) What are some general concerns in the Hispanic Community? regarding work and school, or any other concerns I have not mentioned?
4) What might be some obstacles people face that prevent them from being a part of advocacy work?
APPENDIX D

KEY KRCC MEMBERS AND CONTACTS
# KEY KRCC MEMBERS AND CONTACTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Recruited by Janet 2013 (President) President at the time of data collection. Was recruited by Janet. President of the group 2013-2017. Served as a local educator with political organizing experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>KRCC board since 2007 (Secretary) Purchased a home overlooking the Superfund site. Was one of the first key members and set a goal to recruit the “right” specialists to the KRCC board.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>KRCC member Recruited by Dr. Mary Had a personal connection to the Allied site when she connected her mother’s and neighbor’s poor outcomes to living close to the site. Joined KRCC intermittently to learn more and to inform her activism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>KRCC board</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Arthur</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Mary</td>
<td>KRCC board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lidia</td>
<td>Not a member but a colleague of KRCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Information</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>A long-time resident of Kalamazoo who had first hand knowledge of the paper mills and the PCB pollution. Was an outspoken member of KRCC and worked with the press often.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRCC board since 2007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>A local government leader with campaign experience in local politics. Had the ability to network with other local officials and residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruited in 2013 by KRCC member</td>
<td></td>
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APPENDIX E

ALLIED SUPERFUND SITE MAP
Figure 1: Allied Paper Superfund Site. Map created by J. Glatz, Western Michigan University Libraries Mapping Service.)
APPENDIX F

KALAMAZOO RIVER WITH OPERATIONAL UNITS MAP
Figure 2: Kalamazoo River with Operational Units. Map created by J. Glatz, Western Michigan University Libraries Mapping Service.)