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JENNIFER THOMSON

Toxic Residents: Health and Citizenship at Love Canal

Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between American political culture and grassroots environmentalism in the 1970s. To do so, it examines how the white working class residents of Love Canal, New York, claimed health and a healthy environment as rights of citizenship. To date, the Canal has remained a sore spot for environmental scholarship; this article demonstrates how the analytic difficulties posed by the Canal stem from the crosscurrents of American political culture in the late 1970s. Canal residents put their local experience into several larger frames of reference: the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, the plight of Cuban and Vietnamese refugees, and a culture of skepticism toward government and medical authority. Residents' use of these frameworks illustrates two broader points about American political culture in the late 1970s. First, the claim to health as a right rather than a privilege, articulated by health radicals throughout the 1960s, had by the late 1970s been decoupled from its origins in left-liberal struggles. Second, the crosscurrents of localism, nativism, racism, and anti-authoritarianism characteristic of the reactionary populism of urban working-class whites could, quite logically for their proponents, co-exist with rights-based claims to health and a healthy environment. Love Canal demands that we embed our narratives about the development of environmental politics—environmental justice in particular—within a broader story about deregulation, the rise of the New Right, and the political and economic marginalization of the working class in the United States.

I believe it's time to re-evaluate who is doing the governing
and who is being governed in this country.
—Carrol Mrak to President Carter, June 22, 1980

In the summer of 1980, Love Canal resident Carrol Mrak wrote a heated letter to President Carter. In her opening salvo she accused the president of “undermining the importance of the Love Canal situation and the rights of every American citizen in this country.” She charged Carter with green-lighting refugee amnesty programs that “cause a direct threat” to the well-being of American citizens. She argued that Carter should rectify unemployment, homelessness, illness, and social instability among his own citizenry rather than open the borders to refugees who “will compete with my own children for jobs.” In a burst of antigovernment

populism, Mrak asserted, "Americans are again reminded that the government is concerned with governing only it [sic] own political best interests."¹

Mrak was a recent evacuee from the toxic waste disaster at Love Canal, New York. One month prior, the beleaguered Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had announced that out of thirty-six neighborhood families studied, eleven showed evidence of chromosome breakage.² Following this announcement, neighborhood residents held two EPA officials hostage for five hours until President Carter agreed to the temporary evacuation of eight hundred families. Yet Mrak's letter, prompted by an unresolved and volatile toxic waste crisis, was concerned with much more than her immediate experience of illness, plummeting property values, direct action, and evacuation. For her, life at the Canal was inseparable from foreign policy, economic scarcity, and the responsibility of government to its citizens. This article explores the competing notions of self-sufficiency, dependency, resentment, and exclusion through which Mrak and other white working-class residents of the Canal understood and attempted to redress their situation. It argues that these competing notions illuminate the relationship between American political culture and grassroots environmentalism in the late 1970s.

Love Canal residents were buffeted by the crosscurrents of the 1970s. Indebted on the one hand to the promises of the Great Society, they were just as keenly attuned to New Right neoliberalism. These opposing influences produced profound ideological contradictions. Residents demanded government intervention while decrying bureaucratic meddling. They claimed themselves to be refugees while denouncing the entrance of Southeast Asian and Cuban refugees into the United States. They asserted their victimization while demanding to be recognized as full citizens. They articulated health and a healthy environment as positive rights of citizenship yet many believed citizenship to be an exclusive privilege of white Americans.

To date, scholars have analyzed Love Canal in relation to the development of late-twentieth century environmental politics, especially environmental justice activism.³ Underlying many of these inquiries is an assumption that environmental justice is politically progressive.⁴ This assumption has produced a categorical dilemma. Either Love Canal, by virtue of its truly grassroots activism, is embraced as a formative moment in the development of environmental justice, or, by virtue of many of its residents' racism and xenophobia, it is disavowed. Yet both celebration and critique founder on the shoals of identity politics. They necessitate an either/or conversation, which precludes serious engagement with how Canal residents could simultaneously articulate claims central to environmental justice politics while at the same time expressing beliefs antithetical to environmental justice activists' pursuit of structural equality.

This article takes these contradictions as its point of departure. It argues that Love Canal illustrates two broader points about American political culture in the late 1970s. First, the claim to health as a right rather than a privilege—articulated in the 1960s by activists such as the Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Black Panther Party—had by the late 1970s been decoupled from its origins in left-liberal struggles. Second, the localism, nativism, racism, and anti-authoritarianism characteristic of what Richard Formisano has described as the reactionary populism of many urban working-class whites in the 1970s could, quite

logically for some of their proponents, co-exist with rights-based claims to health and a healthy environment.⁵

Environmental historians have thoroughly documented the assault on environmentalism and environmental regulations that resulted from the ascendance of the New Right to national power in 1980.⁶ Business historians have shown how lobbyists successfully attacked regulatory agencies like the EPA as wasteful, inefficient, and impractical.⁷ Love Canal raises new questions about the relationship between conservatism and environmentalism in the late 1970s. How did New Right ideas about taxes, regulations, foreign policy, and welfare influence grassroots environmentalists? How did these activists articulate claims to health and a healthy environment within a neoliberal framework? How did residents use a language of citizenship rights to grab hold of the federal government and pull it into their lives, while at the same time professing their radical disaffection from that same government? What impression did the white working class at Love Canal—in all of its complexities and contradictions—leave on the development of environmental justice politics?

After a brief introduction to the crisis at Love Canal, this article explores the state of medical, residential, and institutional uncertainty in which residents lived. It examines their varied and conflicted responses to this uncertainty and then traces how residents contextualized their experiences within contemporary foreign affairs in order to formulate rights and citizenship claims. It concludes with an examination of how the Canal residents, in all of their contradictions, can redirect and enrich our analyses of environmental justice.

Toxic (Un)certainities

In 1892, entrepreneur William T. Love began excavating a five-mile canal in the Niagara Frontier. Love intended the canal to connect the upper and lower Niagara Rivers, with an artificial falls installed at the southern end that would generate enough hydropower to sustain Model City, the proposed company town for his Niagara Power and Development Corporation. In the late 1890s, with only 3000 feet of canal completed, Love ran out of funding and abandoned the region, leaving Niagara Falls residents with a recreational waterway.⁸

Beginning in 1942, Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation, in cooperation with the United States military, buried approximately 21,000 tons of toxic waste in the Canal.⁹ In 1953, the company sold the property for a single dollar to the city of Niagara Falls, which built an elementary school and working class suburban development atop the barrels of buried chemicals. By the mid-1970s, after several seasons of unusually high rainfall, the barrels rusted and chemicals began oozing into neighborhood basements, front yards, and gardens.¹⁰

Following the initial discovery of the hazardous wastes present in the Canal, the New York State Health Department (NYSHD) and Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), as well as the EPA, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Centers for Disease Control performed scores of epidemiological and environmental studies on Love Canal residents, homes, gardens, and creeks. These studies ranged from adverse pregnancy outcomes, home basement air testing for seven “Love Canal indicator chemicals,” autopsies on three dogs, one blackbird, and two gulls, and medical examinations of 112 construction workers from the Canal remedial construction project.¹¹

The results were alarming. Elevated levels of toluene, chloroform, and benzene vapors were found in many homes; twenty school children were diagnosed with severe liver problems; the New York State Department of Health concluded that women living near the Canal were one-and-a-half times more likely than the general population to have a miscarriage; and in May 1980, the EPA announced that a statistically significant number of residents suffered from chromosome breakage.¹² Residents expected these results to prompt swift government intervention. They were deeply mistaken. These studies bespoke an increasingly uncertain future; scientists insisted that causal links between Canal chemicals and resident ailments could not be confirmed, and, absent these definitive links, state and federal officials delayed action on evacuation.

Once provided with their test results, residents were told to make their own informed decisions. As Eileen Matsulavage, an employee of Niagara Falls-based Airco Alloys whose family was diagnosed with liver toxicity, testified in 1979, "I was told by Dr. Nancy Kim that the readings were quite high and I should not use the basement . . . she suggested that I seal the bottom of the doorway with rags. When I questioned whether the house was safe to live in, she stated that it was a personal decision."¹³ Similarly, following a study that found increased rates of miscarriage and low birth weight in Canal women, the New York State Department of Health announced that it had "provided women of childbearing age with sufficient information as to the risks before making a conscious and voluntary decision to become pregnant."¹⁴

Love Canal, at which a shifting population had been exposed to approximately two hundred chemicals at indeterminate strengths and for indeterminate lengths, posed serious scientific and jurisdictional problems for state and federal authorities. Representatives of the EPA, the NYSDEC, and the NYSDH met on April 26, 1978, to establish a research and intervention plan for the Canal.¹⁵ Shortly thereafter, each agency opened an array of health and environmental studies. Scientists acknowledged elevated rates of illness and death at Love Canal, yet unable to prove disease causation, they refrained from stating causality.¹⁶

The concurrent nature of these investigations amplified the existing jurisdictional tensions between local, state, and federal authorities, each of whom was keen to circumscribe their fiscal and legislative responsibilities.¹⁷ Concretely, the unwillingness of scientists to make causal claims or specific policy recommendations served as sufficient justification for the state of New York to refuse to take action on residential evacuation.¹⁸ The state's refusal to evacuate the neighborhood, along with its position that informed consent was the extent of its responsibility, reflected to residents their deliberate exclusion from decision-making. To them it seemed, as Mrak would later claim, that "government is concerned with governing only it [sic] own political best interests."¹⁹ Compounding the problem, the summer 1978 revelations of PCB contamination at Warren County, North Carolina, concurrent with escalating news coverage of the Love Canal crisis, escalated popular suspicion toward the EPA's fitness to conduct science and craft policy.²⁰

Doubt that the federal government would safeguard its people's health was relatively recent. Through the early 1970s, the federal government had expanded its investment in the public's health through Medicare, Medicaid, the Social Security Act (1965), and the Health Maintenance Organization Act (1973). The debates preceding these federal interventions had represented health care as

a right of citizenship.²¹ However, amidst the economic downturn of the mid-1970s, such claims were replaced by fiscal arguments. Although President Carter had endorsed a national health insurance system while campaigning, it was on economic grounds, and once in office he decided to tackle medical inflation rather than health insurance. By the end of the 1970s, healthcare for working-age Americans was decidedly something that individuals were responsible for securing in the realm of employment-based benefits.²²

The federal government's retreat from the promises of the Great Society occurred in a climate of flourishing popular skepticism toward both government and medical authority.²³ Revelations concerning official secrecy, manipulation, and betrayal of trust at Watergate, Vietnam, and Three Mile Island, as well as state-sponsored medical abuses, produced a national culture shot through with wariness, mistrust, and outright rejection of authority.²⁴ The Love Canal crisis happened amidst these competing world views: one in which expectations of federal assistance had emerged from the implementation of social welfare laws and the creation of regulatory agencies; and an equally powerful one that criticized this assistance and advocated skepticism toward authority overall. A desire for government assistance and scientific certainty, coupled with a robust skepticism toward government and medical authority, infused Canal residents' responses to what they saw as the combined negligence of government and scientists.

These conflicting impulses were manifested in the formation of the Love Canal Homeowners' Association (LCHA) on August 2, 1978, immediately following New York State Commissioner of Health Robert Whalen's announcement that the neighborhood was unfit for habitation by pregnant women and children under the age of two.²⁵ Initially comprised of roughly five hundred members, and growing by March 1979 to one thousand families, the LCHA became the most nationally visible of neighborhood organizations. Although the LCHA first argued for the right of home-owners to protect their property values by burning their mortgage envelopes and attempting to organize a tax strike, within six months its president Lois Gibbs had recast it as a citizens' organization focused exclusively on health. Until the neighborhood's permanent relocation in October 1980, the LCHA insisted that residents' bodies should be the proper focus of scientific and political attention, called attention to the inability of available scientific tools to explain their health experiences, and ultimately asserted that residents had a right to health.²⁶

In 1978, resident Mrs. Walters related her family's experience following their 1964 move into the neighborhood,

During the following two years, I had two miscarriages and our daughter, Michele, was born in July of 1966. A year later, when we celebrated her first birthday and she was not attempting to walk, we were concerned because her right foot was turned inward. I took her to an orthopedic doctor and he prescribed corrective shoes. One morning, not long after her first birthday, I went in to get her out of her crib and there was something the matter with her leg. It was drawn up toward her back . . . This was the beginning of a nightmare.

Michele was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, along with the discovery of the absence of her second teeth, "a common problem experienced by many Love Canal children." Walters herself suffered from a blood clot in her lung, gall

bladder problems, and diabetes, and her husband suffered from severe psychological trauma, all of which she attributed to life in the Canal. Speaking as a resident who had fled the Canal shortly after the discovery of the chemical wastes, she noted improvement in Michele's health following the family's departure, "She has grown and her health is excellent."²⁷

For Mrs. Walters, life at Love Canal had meant prolonged and unresolved illness. She was far from alone in making this equation: scores of resident testimonies narrated a frightening array of spontaneous, unresolved ailments. Joann Hale, a homemaker and a prominent neighborhood activist, had been temporarily evacuated from the area in August 1978, only to be moved back into her home three months later concurrent with the discovery of dioxin in the Canal. As she explained in 1983 to a New York State Congressional hearing concerning future uses of the site, "After moving into the Love Canal in 1976 our problems began." Her elder daughter experienced recurrent bladder infections, a strictured urethra, and had a tumor removed from her eye; her younger daughter suffered from osteomyelitis and the decalcification of four teeth; Hale had two tumors "the size of a grapefruit" removed from her right femur; and her husband had a large tumor removed from his right femur. Hale stated, "I hope this [relocation] ends my family's medical problems. But, being exposed to dioxin, benzene, and 198 more compounds, I wouldn't bet on it."²⁸ In contrast to official claims of uncertainty, Hale and Walters were certain that their illnesses were caused by living at the Canal. As Walters so succinctly stated, "We don't need health testing to prove that once you move away from a toxic dump, your health can improve."²⁹

By the summer of 1979, despite a plethora of ominous epidemiological data and a fresh wave of panic following the discovery of dioxin in the Canal, only a small number of residents had been permanently evacuated. Lois Gibbs, one of the first Canal residents to confront the Niagara Falls School Board and the New York State Health Department regarding her two children's mysterious illnesses, was by this point president of the LCHA.³⁰ On July 12, she sent a fourteen-point memo to State Commissioner of Health David Axelrod. In it, she detailed the LCHA's ongoing concerns with the direction and validity of the state's research, including its plans for dioxin testing, long range monitoring, and the identification of control populations for further testing. Gibbs insisted that the proper focus for scientific attention was the threatened human body, "There are many theories of how the contamination got there, but that is not the **most important question** to ask at this time . . . Most of these areas have homes, with people walking, playing, and living on the 'wet' areas. **These people are continually being exposed** to toxic chemicals."³¹

In the summer of 1980, having failed to alter either the methodology of scientific testing or government policy priorities, the LCHA boycotted all further government-sponsored testing.³² The boycott arose most directly from the association's fights with New York over its mishandling of residents' health data. Blood samples, medical records, and air readings repeatedly disappeared while in state custody. Mrs. Walters never received the result of her family's blood tests. Eileen Matsulavage—told to stuff the doorway to her basement with rags—testified that the state had lost water samples, air tests, and her daughter's blood test results. Luella Kenny, a research scientist and resident whose seven-year-old son Jon died of kidney failure in October 1978, documented the state's loss of water samples

from the creek adjacent to the Canal, as well as its months-long delay in providing Jon's autopsy report.³³

For many residents, withholding access to their health information was the only logical response to a situation of radical uncertainty and anxiety. As Gibbs wrote to Axelrod in January 1980, "Because of the insensitivity shown by various agencies both State and Federal, residents have become very angry and bitter. Because of their feelings of anger at you and the whole Health Department they have asked me not to give anyone their health information. By withholding the information residents believe they can 'get back' at the Health Department."³⁴ By framing the boycott as an act of revenge toward a single state department motivated by the insensitivity of "various agencies," Gibbs revealed residents' ambiguity over who was in charge, their loss of faith in science and government, as well as their insistence that all levels of government be held accountable to citizens. The following section will examine the discourses of citizenship rights that residents employed in an attempt to provoke a federal resolution to their situation.

Healthy Citizens

The boycott represented the LCHA's crystallized focus on health data and study methodologies. At the same time, its members and other Canal residents became increasingly reliant on a discourse of citizenship rights in order to make their health claims.³⁵ Yet residents' language of citizenship was far from stable. For some, citizenship meant that they had been guaranteed a particular set of rights at birth, including the right to have their health concerns recognized and remediated. For others, citizenship meant the maintenance of a contractual relationship with the federal government; for these residents, the scientists' inconclusiveness and loss of health data served as a microcosm of the government's broader abdication of a contract with its citizens. For yet others, citizenship was a racially exclusive privilege to make claims on the government. This discursive instability reflected residents' dual loyalties: to a waning Great Society in which government provided for its citizens and to an ascendant neoliberalism symbolized by Ronald Reagan's 1980 inaugural claim that "government is the problem."³⁶ Moreover, residents' expression of these dual loyalties was deeply gendered; women were often the most active claimants to government attention and intervention, as well as its most vocal critics.

A resurgent conservative interpretation of citizenship as a set of rights to be fiercely protected from unwarranted intrusion gained strength in the 1970s, partially in response to the progressive successes of the previous decade's rights revolution. Richard Nixon was central to this resurgence. His successful 1968 presidential campaign and 1972 re-election had succeeded on his ability to redirect white working class aspirations away from the gradually integrationist welfare state and toward bitter competition for limited resources with African Americans and immigrants.³⁷ Tax revolts, anti-busing activism, homeowners associations, and neighborhood watch organizations, which flourished around the country in the 1970s, were quintessential expressions of this understanding of citizenship as an exclusive privilege of white Americans.³⁸ Ronald Reagan's first presidential victory marked the triumph of this recalibration of citizenship. As Robert Self has demonstrated, following the election Reagan masterfully reframed American

citizenship as an issue not of “who deserved equal citizenship but [of] what the government would provide and support.”³⁹

The Love Canal neighborhood occupied a complicated position with respect to this refashioning of citizenship away from the inclusive claims of the 1960s and toward the neoliberalism of the 1980s. As Elizabeth Blum has powerfully demonstrated, Love Canal’s white residents ideologically resisted many of the claims of 1960s progressive politics. The neighborhood was geographically segregated by race, and many white residents policed these boundaries through violence, including the November 1978 firebombing of the recently purchased home of an African American family.⁴⁰ Most white residents defined their identity through homeownership, and leveraged this identity to assert an exclusive claim to government assistance.⁴¹ Nonetheless, some residents’ activism was selectively indebted to the 1960s. Many female residents embraced the decade’s values of equity, entitlement, and rights; its active use of the media; and its empowerment of women as public citizens.⁴² The neighborhood’s thorny relationship with a pivotal decade in American political culture produced conflicting discourses of citizenship rights, fraught with notions of self-sufficiency, dependency, resentment, and exclusion.⁴³

An anonymous flier posted around the neighborhood in the winter of 1978 declared, “We are fighting for the rights of everyone to live in a healthy environment. We are fighting for the rights of our little ones to live a long and healthy life!!!” Exhorting neighbors to “get out there and join the pickets” the author explicitly connected health to rights, and called upon residents to give active political expression to this connection.⁴⁴ This language of rights rebounded throughout the neighborhood. LCHA member Grace McCoulf spoke of “basic human rights” before the Senate in 1979, the same year that PEOPLE for Permanent Relocation decried the federal government’s denial of citizens’ rights to “health; bear normal and healthy children; to a safe home.”⁴⁵ Lois Gibbs, after quoting at length from the Declaration of Independence, pronounced that, “According to the Declaration we at Love Canal . . . should be able to use our rights to protect our families.”⁴⁶ In May 1979, Marie Pozniak demanded that Senators “Implement laws NOW to stop negligent polluters, fine them, take the profit out of polluting and protect our health and environment before it is completely destroyed.”⁴⁷ Implicit within her testimony was a presumption that elected officials respond to the rightful demands of their constituents. Writing to Senator George Mitchell in the summer of 1981, Ann Hillis declared that “my child and all the others should have the right to know, the right to have testing, if they so wish,” and claimed her “constitutional right to live in a safe environment.”⁴⁸ These statements, all made in a brief four-year period, bespoke a neighborhood engulfed in the meaning of citizenship, as well as a conceptual boundary between national and human rights so fluid that some residents felt empowered to claim as Constitutionally granted rights that were in fact enumerated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Others professed a more contingent sense of government responsibility. In a March 1979 personal letter to New York State Governor Hugh Carey, Joe McCoulf wrote,

I am not writing to you to ask you for any contributions or gratuities . . . I don’t want any hand outs and I don’t want something for nothing. I just want what

you and every family man and hard working citizen wants—a chance to raise a healthy family when I want to, where I want to, and be able to control my families [sic] destiny.⁴⁹

Joe's insistence on independence suggests a belief that the receipt of government assistance was a stigma that required justification. By contrast, the next month his wife Grace testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Toxic Substances and Chemical Wastes that,

We are left with the responsibility of deciding to have another child here and worrying about weighing the odds of conceiving a child with a birth defect. Why should we be trapped into such a corner . . . We must watch our families deteriorate and our health suffer. Our children are sick, our homes are valueless and we have boarded up homes for neighbors. The entire meaning of family has been corroded.⁵⁰

Grace put the government on the defensive by citing it as the source of her family's deterioration. Both McCouls understood sovereignty as central to citizenship, and asserted that they sought government intervention only when their sovereignty was besieged by sickness and financial ruin not of their own making.⁵¹ Yet how they sought remediation for their travails spoke to the nonunitary and often gendered nature of neighborhood discourse.

In a 1979 letter to President Carter and New York State Governor Carey, crafted in response to Carter's famous July 15 "crisis of confidence" speech, Lois Gibbs connected the McCouls' sentiments regarding the sovereignty of the nuclear family home to the broader question of national citizenship.⁵² Referencing Carter's diagnosis of a crisis of confidence within the American population, Gibbs wrote,

We were a proud neighborhood of working people who paid our taxes, paid our bills, served our country in war, and raised our children to respect the flag, the country, the government and basic values. President Carter, and Governor Carey, what can I tell my children to give them confidence in the government when they ask me, 'Mommy, why do we have to live here with the chemicals?'⁵³

For Gibbs, the residents had done their part. The Canal's toxicity revealed the federal government's failure to uphold its contractual obligation to care for its people; this abrogation rendered citizenship contentious and tenuous. Gibbs was joined in this contractual analysis by PEOPLE for Permanent Relocation, comprised of former LCHA members upset with the Association's failure to achieve permanent relocation. Arguing that residents had upheld their end of the constitutional bargain by paying taxes, serving in the military, abiding by the law, and voting in elections, PEOPLE indicted the federal government for abdicating its constitutional responsibility to protect its citizens' "human" rights to "justice, domestic tranquility, welfare, and the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our future generations."⁵⁴

Some residents connected the federal government's dereliction of its domestic duties toward its citizens with its foreign policy. As Grace McCouls observed in her 1979 Senate testimony, "The American people see only the billions shipped out to strangers and never see the aid given to the needy citizens who are the ones paying the taxes—the same taxes going overseas. Who needs it more?"⁵⁵ Although McCouls had been invited to give testimony on her own experiences residing in the Canal, it is telling that she saw fit to challenge whether refugees

from Southeast Asia and Cuba deserved American taxpayer monies. Following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January of 1973, the evacuation of Saigon, and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees arrived in the United States. The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act (1975) granted special status to these Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees, whose numbers surpassed 400,000 by 1980. In late April 1980, Fidel Castro opened the port of Mariel to any Cuban who could arrange for transportation off of the island. The Mariel Boatlift brought approximately Cubans to the United States and prompted the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, which created an Office of Refugee Resettlement within the Department of Health and Human Services (the same Department which had proven unable to resolve the neighborhood's situation) to provide for the resettlement of refugees arriving in the United States for humanitarian reasons.

The plight of these "boat people" gave concrete form to how many at Love Canal articulated the link between the poisoning of their neighborhood and the Carter administration's foreign policy decisions.⁵⁶ In an October 1979 letter to "Senators and Assemblymen" Gibbs wrote, "We call ourselves the 'Canal People' for we feel a kinship with the Boat People of Asia. We are alone and forgotten. We have fled our homes in terror driven out by an enemy we cannot see or fight."⁵⁷ Although Gibbs expressed solidarity with the experience of Cuban and Vietnamese refugees, others stridently rejected the Carter administration's official open arms policy.⁵⁸ Eva Lynch wrote, "If we were starving 'Boat People' the government would come save us, but we are only hardworking, tax paying CITIZENS of the U.S.A., who can only come to the aide [sic] of Aliens, we are only needed for our tax dollar."⁵⁹ Just after the Mariel boatlift began, Patricia Pino explained to a local newspaper how, "He'll [Carter] generously use our money . . . when he wants to play directly into Castro's hands by accepting thousands of Cuban refugees to further drain our economy. What about the people in Love Canal who need his help, our money, and want our lives?"⁶⁰ Carrol Mrak furthered these sentiments in her letter to President Carter. Claiming that Carter had "insulted the rights of Americans by your choice of priorities," she demanded,

Please explain how you can justify the entrance of refugees such as we see entering Florida, who riot and cause injury, who are expelled for good reason from their own country? How can the government NOT impose restrictions to halt such potential and immediate problems ranging from unemployment, to housing, feeding, clothing, and educating (now and for lifetimes to come)? You have allowed the introduction of a Cuban, non-American minority to our future.⁶¹

Observing a contemporary social landscape fraught with limited resources and tenuous social order, in which their families were "unemployed, without homes, hungry, poorly clothed, and without educations," Lynch, Pino, and Mrak each tied the Carter administration's refugee policy to its lack of action at Love Canal. Perceiving the federal government's attentions to be directed away from its own citizens, the women insisted instead that the government's true responsibility was to protect its own citizens from harm—whether caused by hazardous wastes or refugees. In just a few sentences, each woman drew a parallel between Cuban refugees and the toxic wastes, juxtaposing the problems they believed Cubans would

inevitably cause American society with the havoc wrought in their own lives by Canal chemicals. They did so in ways that clearly rebounded off of contemporary domestic racial discourses that stigmatized African Americans and Puerto Ricans as “profligate breeders” and “welfare queens” and maligned their families as irrevocably pathological.⁶² Their comments also reflected a long tradition of linking pollution with the movement of people of color across borders—in particular, Mexicans, Chinese and Japanese, and Puerto Ricans.⁶³ Within the women’s imagination, both refugees and toxic chemicals were scourges upon the sanctity of “hardworking, tax paying CITIZENS.” Both directly threatened what the women saw as a uniquely American way of life—unmistakably, a white American life. In their separate ways, Lynch, Pino, and Mrak cast the federal government as a source of both disappointment and disorder: not only had it failed to resolve the crisis in the Canal, but it had welcomed future chaos into the country “for life-times to come.”⁶⁴

Still other residents, dismayed at the government’s inattention to residents’ citizenship claims, sought citizenship elsewhere. In October 1979, PEOPLE for Permanent Relocation decided to bypass the federal government completely. It appealed to the government of Canada to intervene on behalf of Canal residents, on the basis of Canada’s historic protection of American citizens “whose rights it felt were abridged.” Its petition opened plaintively, “We, the residents of the Love Canal, Citizens of the United States of America are suffering from economic ruin, chronic illness and death, the inability to bear normal, healthy babies (when we can bear them at all), and peace of mind due to a chemical disaster not of our own making.” This contract having thus been broken, PEOPLE requested four things from Canada, “1) Subsidized housing for those seeking it, within Canada; 2) Political asylum for those seeking it; 3) Temporary residence in Canada; 4) Petition the General Secretary of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim, to have our plea for human rights placed before the General Assembly.”⁶⁵

Rather than plead with the American government to uphold its contractual responsibilities, PEOPLE couched its appeal for political asylum in a universal human rights discourse. In so doing the organization cast Love Canal residents in the role of refugees, an argument which, to gain traction, would require it to prove that the neighborhood had been intentionally persecuted by the American government. Indeed, this case was pursued by PEOPLE member Luella Kenny. At the 1980 shareholder’s meeting of Occidental Petroleum (the parent corporation of Hooker Chemical since 1968) she cynically stated, “Why worry about an enemy who will destroy us when we are self-destructing. We don’t need sophisticated nuclear weapons; all we need are the multitude of dumps strategically placed all over the country that will insidiously destroy everything and everyone in its path.”⁶⁶ In 1983, testifying to the Senate regarding future uses of the Love Canal site, Kenny declared, “We condemn other nations because of the use of chemical warfare on an enemy, yet we are content to use this tactic on our own people.”⁶⁷ In three years, Kenny’s terminology had changed but her vicious indictment of the federal government had not; for her, domestic hazardous waste sites were equivalent to the mass destruction that the United States had inflicted on other peoples.

Whether focused on the meaning of family, the rights of taxpayers to government services, or the American government’s domestic chemical warfare campaign, a central motif of residents’ appeals to the federal government was the

meaning of American citizenship. Residents overwhelmingly agreed that the government had failed to abide by its responsibilities and, in so doing, had destabilized the security and serenity that residents had believed to be the essential attributes of their neighborhood. For some like Gibbs, this destabilization prompted a rhetorical expression of kinship to the "Boat People of Asia" without seriously extending the rights of citizens to others. Others, like Lynch, Pino, and Mrak, redoubled their insistence on the racial exclusivity of American citizenship by denying any commonalities with "foreign" populations. Still others, like PEOPLE, combined a sense of abandonment with a desire to have their full citizenship resuscitated elsewhere. Although logically incompatible, the co-existence of these differing citizenship claims within the neighborhood illuminate just how the crosscurrents of the 1970s refracted through the Canal. The concluding section will consider how these simultaneously expansive and exclusionary citizenship claims should reframe the analysis of the emergence and development of environmental justice.

Re-framing Environmental Justice

The activism of the Love Canal community occupies a liminal and uneasy position in the history of environmental justice activism. Canal residents articulated two central tenets of environmental justice: that health and a healthy environment are rights of citizenship, and that personal experience should constitute the authentic source of knowledge about the relationship between the human body and its environment.⁶⁸ Yet their racism, hostility toward immigrants, and radical suspicion toward government intervention contravene environmental justice struggles against the systematic oppression of poor communities and communities of color.⁶⁹

The Love Canal story has frequently been memorialized as a moment of progressive grassroots triumph, when ordinary citizens banded together to fight the environmental injustices perpetrated upon them by industrial and governmental negligence. Early scholarship described it as a "catalyst and prototype for the emergence of anti-toxics groups nationally," "the birthplace of the environmental justice movement as well as the beginning of hazardous waste policies as we know them today in North America," and as "prefigur[ing] a new way of defining what it meant to be an environmentalist."⁷⁰

More recent scholars have challenged this initial triumphalist interpretation. Elizabeth Blum and Amy Hay analyzed the racism of resident organizations, the insistence of many white homeowners on preserving their property rights, and female activists' explicit rejection of second-wave feminism. Giovanna di Chiro and Dolores Greenberg questioned, on the basis of many residents' frank bigotry, whether the Canal should even be considered as part of the emergence of environmental justice activism. For Robert Bullard, Love Canal's whiteness, which enabled the neighborhood's homeowners to escape from their situation, indelibly marks it as outside of environmental justice. Diverse in approach, these analyses follow a similar trajectory of using the social and political conservatism of community members to mark the distance between the neighborhood and contemporary environmental justice activism.⁷¹

Clearly, Love Canal remains a sore spot for environmental scholarship. Whether celebratory or critical, most interpreters have found it necessary to either embrace or reject the community when historicizing or theorizing environmental

justice activism. This forced choice stems from the dominant narrative of environmental justice activism as the continuation of the civil rights movement.⁷² While this narrative has helpfully illuminated the racism and classism of national environmental organizations and broken apart illusions of a monolithic environmental movement, it has also created an unresolved conceptual tension between environmental racism and environmental justice. This tension has had two consequences. First, commentators have either embraced or rejected the role played by politically problematic communities, like the white working class at Love Canal, in the emergence of environmental justice claims. Second, to date scholars have not investigated how the broader political transformations which informed the Love Canal community, namely fiscal austerity, the contraction of federal welfare programs, rising skepticism toward government and medical authority, and the general rightward turn taken by the white working class, historical transformations which could not have affected the civil rights activism of the 1960s, influenced the development and emergence of environmental justice.⁷³ The complexity of present-day environmental justice activism is diminished if we leave this tension and its consequences unexplored. If we understand environmental justice simply as a resuscitation of the ideals of the civil rights movement over and against the racism and classism of the mainstream environmental organizations that consolidated their power in Washington, DC, by the early 1980s, we elide exactly how significant the political culture of the 1970s was to the multiple expressions of late-twentieth-century environmental activism.

The history of Love Canal matters for what it illustrates about how the neighborhood's residents situated their local experiences with disease and environmental deterioration into broader social debates about health, rights, citizenship, and government. How residents laid claim to their rights as citizens to health and a healthy environment was fundamentally shaped by the broader political culture of the 1970s. This culture included a cultural and legislative backlash against the progressive achievements of the previous decades; a widespread process and ethos of deregulation, with its attendant beliefs about individual responsibility and the evils of government; and the political and economic marginalization of the working class in the United States. That Canal residents' progressive contributions were shaped by a situation of radical local and national uncertainty invites us to reconsider the histories that we write about the development of environmental politics in the late twentieth century. This reconsideration is particularly urgent in the twenty-first century, as environmental problems, environmental refugees key among these, won't necessarily meet with progressive responses but rather with new kinds of backlash, fortification, and nativist politics.

Endnotes

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1. Carrol Mrak to President Carter, June 22, 1980, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice, records, 1978–2001, Digital Collections and Archives, Tufts University.

2. Chromosome damage is linked to an increased chance of cancer and birth defects. The results of the EPA study were announced in the national press before residents were informed. Irvin Molotsky, "Damage to Chromosomes Found in Love Canal Tests," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1980: 1.

3. Elizabeth Blum, *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism* (Lawrence, 2008); Bob Edwards, "With Liberty and Environmental Justice for All: The Emergence and Challenge of Grassroots Environmentalism in the United States," in *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*, ed. Bron Taylor (Albany, 1995); Thomas H. Fletcher, *From Love Canal to Environmental Justice: The Politics of Hazardous Waste on the Canada-U.S. Border* (Ontario, 2003); Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington DC, 1993); Amy Marie Hay, "Recipe for Disaster: Motherhood and Citizenship at Love Canal," *Journal of Women's History* 21 (2009): 111–34; Rich Newman, "Making Environmental Politics: Women and Love Canal Activism," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 29 (2001): 65–84.

4. By contrast, historians have documented the classist, racist, and elitist aspects of certain strains of postwar American environmentalism. Lily Geisman, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, 2015); Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945–1980* (Chapel Hill, 1995); Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David N. Pellow, *The Slums of Aspen: Immigrants vs. the Environment in America's Eden* (New York, 2011); Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick, 2012). For an alternate account of the development of environmental justice see Martin V. Melosi, "Environmental Justice, Political Agenda Setting, and the Myths of History," *Journal of Policy History* 12 (2000): 46. The foundational association of "environmental justice" with the 1991 Conference has recently been problematized by Josiah Rector, "Environmental Justice at Work: The UAW, the War on Cancer, and the Right to Equal Protection from Toxic Hazards in Postwar America," *The Journal of American History* 101 (2014): 480–502.

5. On health radicals in the 1960s and 1970s see Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, 2013); John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care* (New York, 2009); Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis, 2011). On national health insurance see Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York, 2006), 85–87; Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine: The Rise of a Sovereign Profession and the Making of a Vast Industry* (New York, 1982), 404–405. On reactionary populism, see Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 3.

6. Jacob Darwin Hamblin, "Ronald Reagan's Environmental Legacy," in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew L. Johns (Hoboken, 2015), 257–74. James Morton Turner documents the Sagebrush Rebellion's complicated relationship with the New Right and the "polarization" of environmental politics beginning with the Carter administration. James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964* (Seattle, 2012), 229–38, and "'The Specter of Environmentalism': Wilderness, Environmental Politics, and the Evolution of the New Right," *The Journal of American History* 96 (2009): 123–48. For a thorough account of the New Right's complicated ideological relationship with environmentalism, see Keith Mako Woodhouse, "A Subversive Nature: Radical Environmentalism in the Late-Twentieth-Century United States" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010), 181–224.

7. Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York, 2009), 176; Benjamin C. Waterhouse, *Lobbying America: The Politics of Business from Nixon to NAFTA* (Princeton, 2014), 186.
8. Andrew Jenks, "Model City USA: The Environmental Cost of Victory in World War II and the Cold War," *Environmental History* 12 (2007): 553; Richard Newman, "From Love's Canal to Love Canal: Reckoning with the Environmental Legacy of an Industrial Dream," in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* eds. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca, 2003), 112–38.
9. Samuel S. Epstein, *Hazardous Waste in America* (New York, 1983), 92–93.
10. *Ibid.*, 97–98.
11. New York State Department of Health, "Love Canal Studies by the New York State Department of Health," June 1980, MS 65, Box 177, Folder 14, Ecumenical Task Force of the Niagara Frontier Records, 1946–1995 (1978–1990 bulk), University Archives, The State University of New York at Buffalo; Nicholas Vianna to Doctor Greenwald, "Love Canal Investigations Conducted by the Bureau of Environmental Epidemiology and Occupational Health," June 19, 1980, Box 4, Folder 19, Adeline Levine Papers, Part 1 (22/3F/634), University Archives, The State University of New York at Buffalo.
12. Barbara Blum to Barbara Quimby, May 16, 1980, Box 1, Folder 11, Adeline Levine Papers, Part 1; Environmental Protection Agency, "Report on Chemicals Found in the Blood of Love Canal Residents," 1980, Box 106, Folder 1, ETF Papers; Beverly Paigen to Lois Gibbs and Elena Thornton, "Miscarriages in Love Canal Residents," December 19, 1978, Box 4, Folder 1, Adeline Levine Papers Part 1; Courtney Riordan, "To the Citizens of Love Canal," February 11, 1981, Box 178, Folder 14, ETF Papers; Nicholas Vianna et al., "Adverse Pregnancy Outcomes in the Love Canal Area," July 19, 1980, Box 4, Folder 9, Adeline Levine Papers Part 2.
13. Eileen Matsulavage, "Love Canal Testimony," April 5, 1979, Box 183, Folder 3, ETF Papers.
14. Love Canal Homeowners Association Inc., "Love Canal Chronological Report, April 1978 to January 1980," Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.
15. *Ibid.*
16. EPA scientists, governed by the 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act, were burdened with a "complicated and cumbersome set of mandates" that put the burden of proving a chemical's toxicity with the Agency, thereby radically limiting its ability to identify and regulate carcinogens. Eileen McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice* (New Brunswick, 2007), 27. For discussion of the uncertainty of environmental epidemiology in the 1970s, see Sylvia Noble Tesh, *Uncertain Hazards: Environmental Activists and Scientific Proof* (Ithaca, 2000), 30–39. On the EPA in the 1970s, see Edmund P. Russell, III, "Lost Amongst the Parts per Billion: Ecological Protection at the United States Environmental Protection Agency, 1970–1993," *Environmental History* 2 (1997): 29–51.
17. Regulators, at the EPA most particularly, faced their own crisis. In the mid-1970s conservative politicians and business lobbyists lambasted the EPA, alongside other regulatory agencies, as paradigmatic of a "second managerial revolution" through which government bureaucrats were attempting to use regulations to control the economy. Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 176. The Agency was also a favorite target for advocates of "regulatory reform." Robert R. Gioielli, *Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis: Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago* (Philadelphia, 2014), 169–70; Waterhouse, *Lobbying America*, 186–91.

18. In a post-mortem of the scientific controversy at Love Canal, New York State Department of Health scientist Beverly Paigen raised the possibility that New York state was concerned that taking action at Love Canal would set a precedent for state action at the more than six hundred other toxic waste sites in the state. The state was thus defining risk as inherently economic, whereas the residents calculated risk in terms of their health. Beverly Paigen, "Controversy at Love Canal," *The Hastings Center Report* 12 (1982): 32.

19. Mrak to Carter, June 1980, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.

20. Eileen McGurty, "From NIMBY to Civil Rights: The Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement," *Environmental History* 2 (1997): 308.

21. Nelson, *Body and Soul*, 12–15; Starr, *Social Transformation*, 379–419.

22. On national health care debates see Berkowitz, *Something Happened*, 84–87; Starr, *Social Transformation*, 388–93. Throughout his administration, President Carter's discussions of national health care legislation prioritized arguments about economics and efficiency, and reflected his concern with limited and efficient governance rather than the previous decade's concerns with healthcare as a right. "National Health Insurance: What Carter Will Push," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 17, 1978; Milan Korcok, "Carter, Kennedy Voice Differences on Health Insurance," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 122 (1980): 342–47. On the history of employment-based benefits see Marie Gottschalk, *The Shadow Welfare State: Labor, Business, and the Politics of Health-Care in the United States* (Ithaca, 2000), 1–12 and 79–80.

23. On popular anti-authoritarianism and skepticism toward the federal government in the 1970s see Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, 2012), 12–13; James T. Patterson, "The Rise of Rights and Rights Consciousness: 1930–1980," in *Contesting Democracy: Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775–2000*, eds. Byron E. Shafer and Anthony J. Badger (Lawrence, 2001), 201–24; Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, 2011), 71–72; Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York, 2001), 144–58.

24. The revelation in 1972 of the Public Health Service's four-decades-long Tuskegee syphilis study crystallized existing suspicions held by African Americans toward the medical establishment. Their suspicions were echoed by many women, who decried medical paternalism and formed feminist clinics around the country. The early 1970s witnessed an emergence of a "therapeutic counterculture," which called for a "democratization of medical knowledge." Starr, *Social Transformation*, 389–92. This cultural skepticism was not limited to government and science, but encompassed assertions about objective knowledge more generally. As Daniel Rodgers documents, there were striking parallels between the developing ideas of thinkers like Michel Foucault and conservative critiques of the state and science. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 77–110.

25. The LCHA was the largest but not the only resident organization. On the various residents' associations, see Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*.

26. Membership estimates and organizational mission taken from Lois M. Gibbs, "Testimony Presented to the House Sub-Committee on Oversight and Investigations," March 21, 1979, ETF Papers.

27. Mrs. Walters, "Statement," 1978, Box 12, Folder 16, ETF Papers. Unfortunately, there is no biographical information available regarding Mrs. Walters.

28. Joann Hale, "Testimony to the Joint Public Hearing on the Need for Community Health Information on Toxic Substances and Hazardous Waste," November 15, 1983, Box 16, Folder 16, ETF Papers.

29. Walters, "Statement," 1978, ETF Papers.

30. On Gibbs' biography and specifically her entrance into politics see Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*, 26–29; Lois Marie Gibbs, *Love Canal: My Story* (New York, 1982); Adeline Gordon Levine, *Love Canal: Science, Politics, and People* (Lexington, 1982), 30–37.

31. Lois Gibbs to David Axelrod, July 12, 1979, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice. Gibbs's emphasis.

32. Following the boycott, the LCHA petitioned other organizations and scientists to continue studying the effects of the chemicals on the residents. The Association worked with cancer research scientist Dr. Beverly Paigen of the Roswell Memorial Institute in Buffalo and Joseph Highland, head of the Toxic Chemicals Program at the Environmental Defense Fund. Gibbs, *Love Canal*, 132; Joseph Highland, Interview by author, Skype, October 23, 2011; Levine, *Love Canal*, 115–35. It should be noted that the boycott was not universally approved. "Editorial: Test Boycott Is Foolish," *Courier Express*, June 13, 1980: 22.

33. Walters, "Statement," 1978, ETF Papers; Matsulavage, "Testimony," April 1979, ETF Papers; Luella Kenny, "Testimony Submitted to the House Sub-Committee on Oversight and Investigations," April 2, 1979, ETF Papers.

34. Lois Gibbs to David Axelrod, January 2, 1980, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.

35. Although residents continued to make demands on the city and state governments, they directed citizenship claims exclusively at the federal government.

36. Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 21, 1981," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1981* (Washington, DC, 1982), 1. On Ronald Reagan's campaign against big government see Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York, 2010), 309–10; Waterhouse, *Lobbying America*, 169 and 192–96.

37. Jefferson Cowie, "Vigorously Left, Right, and Center," in *America in the Seventies*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, 2004), 75–106; Jefferson Cowie, "Nixon's Class Struggle: Romancing the New Right Worker, 1969–1973," *Labor History* 43 (2002): 257–83.

38. On the rights revolution and the increased importance of citizenship discourses in the 1960s and 1970s, see James Longhurst, *Citizen Environmentalists* (Medford, 2010), xii–xx; Patterson, "The Rise of Rights and Rights Consciousness." On Nixon's successful appeal to the white working class see Cowie, "Vigorously Left, Right, and Center"; Cowie, "Nixon's Class Struggle"; Thomas J. Sugrue and John D. Skrentny, "The White Ethnic Strategy," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, eds. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, 2008), 171–92. On tax revolts, anti-busing, and homeowners associations, see Formisano, *Boston against Busing*; Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005); Schulman, *The Seventies*, 205–17. For a thoroughgoing analysis of the relationship between the conservative refashioning of citizenship and the protection of the nuclear family from moral degeneration, see Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York, 2012), 335–36.

39. Self, *All in the Family*, 369. On the changing meanings of citizenship in the twentieth-century United States, see Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2004), 229–30; Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley, 2003), 253–73.

40. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*, 66–70.

41. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*, 33–37. On homeownership as a pillar of white working class identity in the post-WWII period see David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago, 2007), 10; Kruse, *White Flight*, 44 and 127; Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, 1996), 59–63.

42. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*, 31–33. Residents' activism and political discourse was deeply gendered, with women playing the most active public roles over the duration of the crisis. Other scholars have written extensive treatments of gender at Love Canal. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*; Hay, "Recipe for Disaster"; Newman, "Making Environmental Politics."

43. This combination of racial resentment, white American entitlement, and active female citizenship is writ large in Gibbs' autobiographical account of her appearance at a Head Start Parents meeting. As Gibbs explained, "the issue turned into a racial one" as she attempted to defend the Health Department against low-income African American residents of Griffon Manor. Gibbs, *Love Canal*, 58.

44. Anonymous flier, Winter 1978, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.

45. Grace McCoulf, "Testimony to the Senate Subcommittee on Toxic Substances and Chemical Wastes," April 5, 1979, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice; PEOPLE for Permanent Relocation, "Petition to the Government of Canada," October 17, 1979, Box 12, Folder 8, ETF Papers.

46. Lois Gibbs, "Declaration of Independence," Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.

47. Marie Pozniak, "Testimony to Senate Subcommittee on Toxic Substances & Chemical Wastes," May 3, 1979, ETF Papers.

48. Ann Hillis to Senator George Mitchell, June 1, 1980, Box 178, Folder 19, ETF Papers.

49. Joe McCoulf to Governor Carey, March 16, 1979, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.

50. Grace McCoulf, "Testimony," April 5, 1979, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.

51. The McCoulf's insistence on the primacy of their nuclear family's survival reflects the ideology of what Robert Self has described as the "breadwinner liberalism" of the 1960s. Self, *All in the Family*, 4 and 17–46.

52. Jimmy Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1979 Book 2* (Washington, D.C., 1980), 1235–47.

53. Lois Gibbs, "The Love Canal and Confidence in Government," Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.

54. PEOPLE, "Petition to the Government of Canada," ETF Papers.

55. Grace McCoulf, "Testimony," April 5, 1979, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice. On governmental policy and public debate regarding refugees in the 1970s and 1980s, see Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, 2008), 133–196; Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945–Present* (New York, 1986), 170–208.

56. Elizabeth Blum connects residents' references to refugees to the release of the results of the EPA's chromosome study in May of 1980, arguing that the residents' self-description as

"Boat People" was a calculated effort to remain in the news cycle. Alternately, this article asserts that the refugee concept formed a more constitutive and long-lasting imaginary around which Love Canal residents articulated claims about citizenship. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*, 49.

57. Lois Gibbs, "Dear Senators and Assemblymen," October 14, 1979, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice; Mrak to Carter, June 22, 1980, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.

58. Opposition to Indochinese refugee admissions was widespread in the American public, fueled and sustained by nativism, racism, and a "sluggish economy marked by unemployment problems." Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 162–65; Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness*, 114–17. The image of the degenerate and disorderly Cuban refugee who would inevitably drain American social services was reinforced by both the Cuban and American press, which gave disproportionate attention to the prisoners, drug addicts, and homosexuals whom Castro had forcibly added to the exodus. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 181–82; Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness*, 185.

59. Eva Lynch to Commissioner Hennessy, August 2, 1979, ETF Papers. Lynch's formulation unwittingly reversed Martin Luther King, Jr.'s claim at Riverside Church in 1967 that President Johnson was taking money away from social programs to kill Vietnamese people. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam," *King Encyclopedia*, accessed June 16, 2015, http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/.

60. Patricia Pino, "Letter to the Editor," May 19, 1980, ETF Papers.

61. Of these same documents, Elizabeth Blum concludes that the women's citizenship concerns were "auxiliary" to the maternalism that governed their politics. Alternately, this article argues that the identity of citizen was central to the residents' activism throughout the crisis. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*, 51.

62. On discourse which cast African Americans and Puerto Ricans as undeserving populations straining the social fabric of the United States, see Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley, 2002), 4–9; Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, 2010), 35–87; Self, *All in the Family*, 39 and 413. Although Ronald Reagan never directly used the epithet, his unsuccessful 1976 presidential bid inserted "welfare queen" into the American political lexicon. "'Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign," *New York Times*, February 15, 1976: 51.

63. On the rhetorical connection of pollution with the movement of people of color see Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* (Berkeley, 2006), 116–57; Park and Pellow, *The Slums of Aspen*, 7–12; Sylvia Hood Washington, *Packing Them In: An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865–1954* (Lanham, 2005), 129–57.

64. During the 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan criticized Carter for not having helped the Mariel refugees sooner: "If the building is burning and you're getting people out of the upper windows, do you worry about whether they're going to take somebody's job or not?" Howell Raines, "Reagan Says Carter's Effort to Halt Cuban Refugee Boats is Inhumane," *New York Times*, May 17, 1980, 10.

65. PEOPLE, "Petition to the Government of Canada," ETF Papers.

66. Luella N. Kenny, "Occidental Petroleum Share Holders Corporate Responsibility Resolution," May 21, 1980, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.

67. Luella Kenny, "Future Uses of the Love Canal Hazardous Waste Site and Adjacent Property," February 17, 1983, Box 16, Folder 12, ETF Papers.

68. David Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* (New York, 2007), 65.

69. The role of whites and anti-government sentiments at Warren County, NC, also challenges the simple equation of environmental justice with progressive politics. As Eileen McGurty demonstrated, the white residents who reached out to civil rights activists in the 1980s had initially contacted Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms for support. Moreover, blacks and whites in the Warren County struggle framed it in opposition to regulatory bureaucrats, suggesting these themes cut across the political spectrum at the time. McGurty, "From NIMBY to Civil Rights": 310.

70. Edwards, "With Liberty and Environmental Justice for All," 39; Fletcher, *From Love Canal to Environmental Justice*, 46; Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 247.

71. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited*; Hay, "Recipe for Disaster"; Giovanna di Chiro, "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York, 1996), 298–320; Dolores Greenberg, "Reconstructing Race and Protest: Environmental Justice in New York City," *Environmental History* 5 (2000): 223–50; Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, 2000), 4. In his introduction to *Confronting Environmental Racism*, Bullard explicitly defines environmental justice as a movement of people of color. Robert D. Bullard, "Introduction," in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Boston, 1993), 7–14.

72. Many key scholarly works characterize environmental justice as a resuscitation of the civil rights movement. See Robert D. Bullard and Beverly H. Wright, "The Quest for Environmental Equity: Mobilizing the African-American Community for Change," in *American Environmentalism: The U.S. Environmental Movement*, eds. Riley E. Dunlap and Angela G. Mertig (Philadelphia, 1992), 39–50; McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism*, 111–41; Washington, *Packing Them In*, 45–74. For a critique of this "mythic history," see Melosi, "Environmental Justice."

73. Robert Gioielli has demonstrated how national environmental groups abandoned their support for urban environmental causes in the face of the privatization and deregulation pursued by the Reagan administration; as a result, the emergence of environmental justice in the early 1990s was indelibly marked by the environmental establishment's response to neoliberalism. Gioielli, *Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis*, 167–74.