

# CASE STUDY 4

## PUBLIC MEMORY OF TOXIC DISPLACEMENT: HEAVY METAL CONTAMINATION AND SUPERFUND REMEDICATION IN FEDERALLY ASSISTED HOUSING COMMUNITIES

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In 2017, the US Environmental Protection Agency and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that 70% of Superfund sites sit within one mile of a public housing or HUD multifamily housing complex. Across the span of multiple generations, low-income individuals residing in federally assisted housing have disproportionately faced environmental inequities born of exposures to environmental contamination (HUD 2021). This case study considers the slow violence that has unraveled within two public housing communities located in Superfund sites, inflicting not only physical traumas of contamination but also collective disturbances stemming from the erasure of social networks (Nixon 2011). What meanings does toxic heritage evoke for public housing communities displaced by remediation, and how might it contribute to a dynamic framing of public memory for Superfund sites, where cleanup processes have largely advanced narratives of disremembering?

In March 1994, NAACP leaders convened at the 160-unit Washington Park Public Housing Project (WPPHP) in Portsmouth, Virginia, to launch a national environmental justice campaign. Built in 1962 and located within the Abex Corporation Superfund Site, WPPHP drew NAACP's attention because of tenant Helen Person's advocacy for the relocation of the predominantly African American community due to the site's lead contamination (Whitt 1994).

Throughout the 1980s government officials gathered evidence of severe contamination resulting from the 50-year operation of a nearby foundry, but it was not until 1992 that EPA informed residents about their exposure. EPA's initial remediation plan called for the permanent relocation and compensation of affected private homeowners, with all residential properties – except WPPHP – rezoned for commercial or industrial usage.

In 1998 Person's coalition filed a class action federal lawsuit claiming that WPPHP was part of "a system of segregation" that exposed Black residents to disproportionate

environmental harms. The resulting settlement marked the first time the EPA modified an ongoing Superfund waste cleanup due to charges of racial discrimination. Portsmouth officials completed the settlement's mandated demolition in 2003, and eventually converted the vacant land into an extension of the PortCentre Commerce Park (Coffey et al. 2020).

Fifteen years after WPPHP's demolition, a similar episode of slow violence unfolded in East Chicago, Indiana, at the 346-unit West Calumet Housing Complex (WCHC), built in 1972 and located in the USS Lead Superfund Site. Similar to the EPA's actions at Washington Park, officials first discovered evidence of lead contamination at WCHC in the 1980s but did not inform residents until several decades later.

After conducting a feasibility study for cleanup options, EPA proposed returning WCHC to residential standards by removing the top two feet of soil, reasoning that "digging deeper is not meaningfully more protective of residential users and does not justify the additional cost" (USEPA 2018a). Local advocacy groups disagreed. In its 2018 public comment on EPA's proposed plan, the East Chicago Calumet Coalition Community Advisory Group (CAG) noted that the sub-24" contamination would endanger future generations due to ecosystem dynamics of flooding and erosion, projected to worsen with climate change. "Who wins if USEPA selects the less protective option?" CAG asked. "The companies, who profited off the land for decades, will pay less to address their pollution. Meanwhile, families whose lives have been permanently altered, at great economic and emotional cost, will remain in harm's way" (USEPA 2018b).

Despite WCHC residents' protests, EPA proceeded with demolition in 2018. Due to limited housing stock, the East Chicago Housing Authority relocated families to public housing sites in other contaminated northwest Indiana and Chicago areas. In 2020 the East Chicago City Council rezoned the former housing site to light industrial use, with plans to build a distribution center (Browning 2021) (Figure 1).

As the Superfund cleanup process coheres around erasure (defined here as a transformation of the landscape so as to prompt a forgetting of former contamination, but also, collaterally, the rupturing of community), what might toxic heritage mean for the memorialization of relocated public housing communities? Although Washington Park and West Calumet residents both fought for a more thorough remediation process, they had contradictory perspectives about the best way to fulfill this goal. Helen Person pushed for the demolition of WPPHP and residents' relocation, whereas many WCHC residents supported a comprehensive cleanup that would ensure the safety and longevity of the housing complex. Despite these different approaches, toxic heritage endures in both episodes of slow violence in two ways: first, through the poisonous bioaccumulated remnants of lead contamination within affected children and adolescents as they continue to encounter unforeseen health challenges from their exposure; and second, through the cascading social and emotional "root shock" effects resulting from this experience (Fullilove 2004). Toxic heritage, in these Superfund cases then, signifies forgotten heritage – with virtually all but the former residents

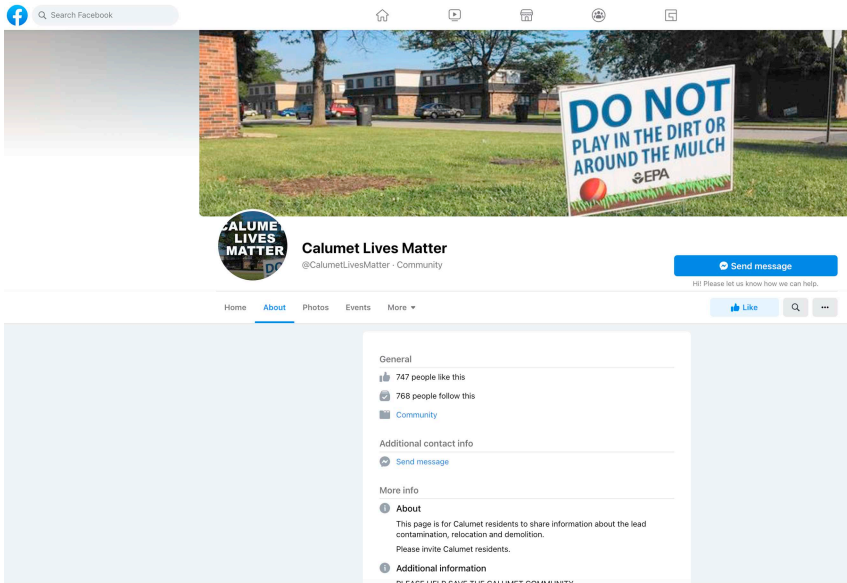


**FIGURE 1** Former West Calumet Housing Complex resident Akeesha Daniels discussed the ongoing lead contamination crisis with the media in 2017 during a protest outside of East Chicago Mayor Anthony Copeland’s office. (photograph by Alyssa Schukar).

themselves losing sight of the complex corporeal and social manifestations of this discrimination – as well as the uncertainty that persists beyond Superfund’s containment efforts and follows former residents via health disparities and recurring patterns of social and emotional distress (Wollentz et al. 2020). As the Superfund remediation process effaced toxic heritage within the “reclaimed” physical landscapes of Portsmouth and East Chicago, so too did the process efface toxic heritage in official narratives that emphasized the transformed, capitalist-oriented nature of the sites – with both sites transitioning from residential to commercial and industrial purposes.

However, toxic heritage has persisted – not in the physical landscape itself, but through the migratory flows of the bodies of former residents and their long-term, embodied contamination. So too have former residents and their allies actively resisted the devastation of the communities’ social networks and environmental health, by perpetuating creative expressions of toxic heritage through social media’s virtual discourse in dedicated groups, such as the Calumet Lives Matter Facebook group, and through commemorative and advocacy-oriented activities such as toxic tours, public protests, digital mapping, and public art (Figure 2).

These forms of resistance and remembrance serve as memorializations of what Stacy Alaimo has called “trans-corporeality” – which foregrounds “the material



**FIGURE 2** Members of the Calumet Lives Matter advocacy group, led by Sherry Hunter, formed a Facebook group in 2016 to organize protests and foster community-wide conversations about the Superfund remediation process at the West Calumet Housing Complex.

interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world,” and thus raises new questions about an ethics that is not just social, but material – “the emergent, ultimately unmappable landscapes of interacting biological, climatic, economic, and political forces” (Alaimo 2010, 2). Toxic heritage in fact makes some components of Alaimo’s “unmappable landscapes” legible, by establishing informal archives that both foster resilience for those who lend their voices to the documentation of this toxic heritage and help ensure that future histories account for the complex, intertwined social and environmental histories behind long-standing environmental inequities.

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