Bodies Exposed: Reframing the Geopolitics of Dilution in Canada’s Chemical Valley

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I didn’t Know!

Poem by Ada Lockridge
Aamjiwnaang First Nation

I didn’t Know that we had
a say on what goes on in the plants
I didn’t Know what was being released or how
much or the Known health effects from it.
I didn’t Know to call MOE Spills Action Hotline to report any
unusual smells or happenings
and to ask for a copy of the
incident report.
I didn’t Know that when
there is a evacuation that
I should check the wind
direction and Know which
plant it is so I can take
the safest route away.
(Do not drive with wind blowing
At you.)
I didn’t Know that it wasn’t safe to swim or play in the St. Clair river or the ponds here, or ditches
I didn’t Know it wasn’t safe to eat the fish or the deer or rabbits here.
I didn’t Know that I should keep my windows closed at night since the plants mostly burn from the stacks at night so as to not bother so many or something like that.
I didn’t Know which government is responsible for what, still a bit ify on that too.
I didn’t Know that those flares should only be burning when there is a problem.
I didn’t Know that workers get some kind of a slip when they have been exposed to chemicals?
I didn’t Know how hard it is to collect pensions? for the widows or disabled workers.
I didn’t Know that when there is a power outage why we get our power back on so fast. (we are in more danger when the plants don’t have power)
I didn’t Know that the colors burning off the flares mean different substances are burning off.
I didn’t Know that those beautiful colors of our sunrise and sunsets are due to pollution & chemicals.
I didn’t Know that it is best to take water samples after the cities routine flushing. (And make sure they are testing for heavy metals)
I didn’t Know that the watermain on S. Vidal is ours but the city maintains it. It is over 60 yrs old and made out of cast iron.

I didn’t know that when Suncor was building their 1st flarestack that they were digging up human remains. (I don’t Know What they did with them)

I didn’t Know that these Chemicals are used to make plastics, tubes in hospitals, make up, batteries, carpets, cooking pans, nonstick cleaning products.

I didn’t Know the same companies here make the medicine for cancers and other ailments.

I didn’t Know that there were noise and vibration laws for these plants

I didn’t Know that some plants have a native hiring policy

I didn’t know the plants Had native liaison reps.

I didn’t Know they (plants) can do pollution credits sharing or selling (since they are allowed to release so much into the air?)

I didn’t Know we sold the land so that industry could come, so that people would come to the area and create jobs (what was Known about chemicals then?)

I didn’t Know that when the gov. had Indian Agents here supposedly taking care of us, that we were not allowed to have legal representation.

I didn’t Know that there was a statistic that there should be 51% boys to 49% girl ratio worldwide.

I didn’t Know anything about accumulative effects (I couldn’t even say it till now, 2010)

I didn’t Know that these Chemicals here can be passed on through generations.
I didn’t Know that existing air monitors aren’t set up to collect all samples that could be out there.

I didn’t Know that when there is a release that you need to know what it is first so they know what kind of reading instrument to use.

I didn’t Know that the workers are scared to report things fearing loss of job.

I didn’t Know that workers have reported maintenance problems and they don’t get fixed until they blow.

I didn’t Know that routine maintenance checks on holding tanks are only every 10 yrs.

I didn’t Know that the riveted holding tanks are out of date.

I didn’t know that these industries are still using some machinery from when they first came.

I didn’t Know that there is a new law about pipelines being too close to homes.

I didn’t Know when the plants get fined that it goes to the municipalities.

I didn’t Know that the plants have to give out 1% of its profits to the surrounding communities.

I didn’t Know that people in a 1 mile radius of Clean Harbours receive a yrly “fee”

I didn’t Know there was such a thing as a long term health based standard.

I didn’t Know that there is no standards here for some of these known carcinogens (these will cause cancers).

I didn’t Know that Lanexss supplies the rubber that is in gum (I thought rubber tires)
I didn’t Know that the city of Sarnia police don’t have money in the budget to buy the proper gear for when there is road blocks due to chemical releases.

I didn’t Know that when Industry wants to change any of their operations or to add to it, they have to post it on the EBR website (Environmental Bill of Rights) and anyone has 30 days to comment on it.

I didn’t Know that the gov. works by the four D’s Deny, Delay, Divide, Discredit oh and maybe throw in a “study”

I didn’t Know that medical doctors are not trained on how these chemicals react to the human body

I didn’t Know that we probably need: oncologist, Epidemiologist, toxicologist, Meteorologist, pathologist.

Dirty Stories, Toxic Bodies

Along the St. Clair River at the southern tip of Lake Huron, in the heart of the Great Lakes, Canada’s ‘Chemical Valley’ – a toxic petrochemical complex – occupies Aamjiwnaang Indigenous territory. Approximately 2,000 Anishinabek people call this their home, which is now reduced to a small reserve due to land dealings enabled by public officials at multiple levels of government over the years. Stretching over 30 km, their territory houses the largest concentration of petroleum and chemical industry sites in Canada.

This toxic geography did not emerge by accident. Resource extraction in these territories began in the mid-19th century and in 1858, oil was first discovered in this region. From the discovery of gum beds in the Enniskillen Township in 1851, to the birth of the Chemical Valley in the 1940s with the expansion of Polymer Corporation following the Second World War, the power of industrial development has deep roots. Aamjiwnaang is entangled in wider processes of ongoing colonialism and neoliberalism. To this day, the extraction industry continues to envelop the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve.

In 2005, Ada Lockridge – an Indigenous mother, activist and citizen of the Band and former Council member – teamed up with researchers and discovered that for every two female births in her community, only one male was being born. This study triggered alarm across
multiple scales of government: local, provincial and federal. While the 2005 study could not conclusively attribute the community’s toxic exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals, the federal ministry of Health Canada encouraged the formation of the Lambton Community Health Study. The Lambton County health department produced their own reproductive health report in 2007, which showed no abnormal birth patterns when scaled away from the Aamjiwnaang reserve to the county, a wider population of approximately 120,000 residents.

In addition to the abnormal birth ratio, over the years, Aamjiwnaang residents also expressed concern about high levels of autism, asthma, cardiovascular disease, miscarriages and cancer. These unique, site-specific concerns were not documented or addressed by the Lambton Community Health Study, which dilutes the Indigenous community’s lived-experience and eclipses the colonial and neoliberal processes that constitute Aamjiwnaang as a toxic space. Official representations of the community, apparent in media accounts and public statements from external decision-makers, further obscure the ways in which the community actively contests these processes. Our main focus is not to simply problematize this limited representation but to instead call for a more multi-dimensional, prismatic account of Aamjiwnaang’s everyday exposure to toxins and practices of resistance. Such a prismatic lens draws into focus multiple angles: academic, artistic, photo-journalistic and poetic.

**Reframing the Geopolitics of Pollution: A Prismatic Lens**

To glean insight into, and shed light on the complexities of Aamjiwnaang’s lived-experiences, we offer a close reading of this site through Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. A heterotopic analysis examines ‘other than’ spaces through multiple lenses to understand complex spaces and processes, and prompts viewers to look beyond the state to understand the inner workings of power, written onto the bodies of affected parties. The heterotopia rejects simplified dualisms and narrow narratives of victimhood. Instead, it offers a useful lens to deepen an understanding of multiplicity and contradiction. Such a prismatic approach allows us to trace the ways in which certain sites are simultaneously cloaked in darkness and left exposed. A prism serves to cast light upon the political ramifications that emerge due to this political spectrum of exposure.

While Foucault’s approach is helpful, we argue that it is inadequate in illuminating the fulsome ways in which toxicity is intimately experienced, felt, and resisted. Drawing on Indigenous academics and activists, such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Ada Lockridge, as well as feminist geographers, such as Rachel Pain, we argue that it is vital to dig deeper to unearth the lived realities of places rendered exposed, such as Chemical Valley. To do so, it is vital to become attuned to the everyday environmental injustices that constitute life in Aamjiwnaang which are too often invisibilized. Such an approach requires paying greater attention to the knowledges and situated stories articulated by community members which reveal various forms of, often slow, violence and also sustained acts of resistance. These knowledges are not confined to policy documents or even written accounts but range from documentary films, to rap music, dance and poetry. It is in the spirit of making greater space for these dynamic poetic knowledges that we begin this piece with the stirring words of Indigenous activist and poet, Ada Lockridge. For this poetic
work refuses to let us forget the smells, tastes, and sights that comprise a toxic body politics. It refuses for us to put aside, for instance, the polluted fish and sunsets that give rise to alarming cancer rates. Instead, Lockridge’s work emplaces the reader squarely, and somewhat uncomfortably, in a toxic environment where — for a change — forms of colonial ‘care’ are made palpable and left exposed.

Additional Resources


Photos from the series Our Grandfathers Were Chiefs (2010-2018) by Laurence Butet-Roch
01 Kids play with glow in the dark beach balls while waiting for the Solidarity day fireworks to start. The community’s baseball field is located across from the Arlanxeo plant, which manufactures synthetic rubber. The products using their materials range from tires, to pharmaceutical injection vials and chewing gum. June 2016.

02 Ada with her bird Smee in her living room. Over the years, she has sent some of her pet’s feathers to be tested by health professionals. It’s one of many initiatives, along with toxic tours, bucket brigades and body mapping, keeping a spill calendar and overseeing a community health study, that she’s undertaken to demonstrate the impacts of the surrounding industries on her peers’ health. September 2018.
03 The siren at the corner of Tashmoo Avenue and Christopher Road is meant to alert residents in case of a major leak or release of chemicals. When the siren sounds, residents have to listen to the radio in order to know whether to establish a shelter in place (stay home, close the doors and windows) or evacuate. August 2014

04 Jake Rogers on the shores of Lake Huron. August 2014.

06 Sadie Redmond closes the blinds as night falls. August 2014.
06 Sets of postcards from Sarnia. From top to bottom: Imperial Oil Works published by W.J Proctor, circa 1900-1910; Aerial View Imperial Oil Refinery published by Jack H. Bain, circa 1945; The Polymer Corporation Plant at Night published by Jack H. Bain, circa 1945; Night View along Chemical Valley by Len Leiffer, date unknown.