A long-standing practice

Shunning is both universal and historical. One well-known example dates back to 1693, when Jakob Ammann became a leader in the Swiss Anabaptist Church and divided this group in two, creating what we now know as the Amish. Ammann advocated for shunning excommunicated members of the church, who he perceived were not upholding his idea of the faith.

Members of some present-day Amish communities can be shunned for owning modern technology or practicing “deviant” behavior, such as listening to music or having non-Amish friends. Shunning is seen as a way to protect the rest of the community won’t eat with them and may even avoid all possible transactions with them. They may even be completely ex-communicated from the community.

Today, LGBTQ people suffer similar treatment. They may be turned away by business owners, like the Colorado baker who refused to create a wedding cake for a same-sex couple in July 2012. They may be rejected as potential adoptive parents, as what happened in Michigan in 2017, when faith-based adoption agencies were screening couples based on sexual orientation. Such incidents signal that LGBTQ people don’t deserve the same rights and freedoms as heterosexual, cisgendered people. These incidents allow ostracism, shunning and discrimination to continue.

“When we have these social structures saying that these people are fundamentally different, then the treatment of these populations seems to be sanctioned,” says Anna Muraco, Ph.D., associate professor of sociology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. “When people learn in their religious organizations that members of the LGBTQ are unholy or sinners, it really sanctions them to treat people differently.”

Path of silence

Many family dynamics rely on a shared historical bond, such as being part of a certain religion or cultural background. But when their children are LGBTQ, some parents can’t accept their differences or desire to change them because they are unable to understand why they can’t be straight like the rest of the family.

“I think this is a manifestation of will to power,” M says. “Everyone wants the world to be in their own image and according to their own desires. When they see someone who does not conform to their ideal, it threatens the idea that they are the sovereign of the world around them.”

Shunning may start with microaggressions, such as deliberately using the wrong pronoun or refusing to let a child bring partners home. These, too, can have damaging effects, contributing to depression and feelings of alienation. “It can be really damaging to figure out who you are, find your truth and share that with people, and the people that society tells us are supposed to love and support us no matter what tell us that we are wrong, that we’re harming them in some way by being true to ourselves,” says Ashley Molin, Psy.D., from the behavioral health program at the Center on Halsted.

M is still in contact with most of her family, but not with her father. She hasn’t ruled out trying again, but is in no hurry to do so. “Nowadays, I feel more confident and willing to reconnect, but it’s a certain inertia I’ve built up, moving my own way, not really seeing any reason to reach backwards into the past for anything,” she says. “But perhaps there will come a time when I do desire a connection, even one of conflict, and I’m sure I will rise to the occasion.”

Dear East Side

After decades of pollution, my neighborhood is fighting back

By Maria Maynez

Dear East Side,

You are known for alphabet streets, steel bridges and jagged sidewalks. You are made up of Latino, Polish and Italian families who live in your working-class neighborhoods of small, one-and two-story frame houses bordered by the Calumet River and the state of Indiana. I was raised on your land, played soccer in your parks, and rode my bike on your streets well into the night.

But pollutants permeate your land. My family and community rooted ourselves to our lead-contaminated soil and breathed your manganese-polluted air. Our lungs are stained from the pet coke dust that blew through on windy days.

The Calumet River separates our industrial community from the rest of Chicago. Four bridges connect us to the rest of the city. Far away from the towering skyscrapers of the Loop, we lay low to the ground, unknown to many Chicagoans. We always felt safe here, protected by the river that separates us from the rest of the city.

Before 1870s, you were known as a place for hunting and fishing. Then railroads criss-crossed you. You seemed fit for development, so industrialists took advantage of your hospitality. Your unsuspecting residents kindly welcomed them, unaware of how greedily industrialization would engulf you, and what it would do to you and to them.

The rise and fall of steel

By the mid-19th century, steel mills lined the Calumet River and opened up job opportunities for your residents. They also filled the air with smog. But by the 1970s, the steel industry was in decline. Wisconsin Steel closed in 1980. Not long after that, U.S. Steel South Works, LTV and Acme Steel closed their South Side facilities as well. Many residents were now unemployed. Yet there was a glimmer of hope that the community could transform itself in a new direction filled with clean air, clean jobs and a better neighborhood.

“We when the steel mill closed we were devastated initially because we didn’t see it coming. Once we got over that initial disappointment, I actually thought it was a good thing because I thought, they’re not going to leave an area the size of the steel mill just lay there,” says Peggy Salazar, director of the Southeast Environmental Task Force (SETF). “We didn’t realize that the neighborhood would just languish and decline even more.”

“Everyone wants the world to be in their own image and according to their own desires. When they see someone who does not conform to their ideal, it threatens the idea that they are the sovereign of the world around them.”

— Anna Muraco, Ph.D.
Residents recall the towering piles of black, sooty material—a byproduct of the Indiana oil refineries— that blew dust into their yards and homes on windy days. “Petcoke was there. Petcoke was always there because we always had the BP refinery across the border,” Salazar says.

For years we didn’t complain about the dunes of petcoke, the common term for petroleum coke, because we had faith in you as a safe place to grow up and to raise a family. “I never questioned it because they were always there my whole life,” says Annamarie Garza, a mother and resident of the East Side. “It was just kind of part of the landscape.”

But over time, that part of the landscape began to expand. Growing up, I watched the piles rise at the Koch Brothers’ KCBX Terminals company—a petcoke, salt, coal, slag, cement and clinkers processing facility. As a kid living only a few blocks away, I assumed they were salt mounds. Adults spoke about them in hushed tones, and all we could do was shrug our shoulders and hope that they posed no risk.

“I know for a fact that when I was growing up, the mountains of black petcoke were right there on 106th,” recalls Luis Cabrales, president of Southeast Youth Alliance (SYA). “I honestly didn’t know what it was. Me and my cousin, we just [thought] that’s just a bunch of dirt, and it would blow up in the air and blow us in the face and we never thought anything about it.”

The mountains continued to grow and parents began to worry when their children developed small coughs on hot, windy summer days; when black dust clung to our bodies after a day of playing outside; when that dust stuck to the walls of homes, sidewalks and cars. It made the air heavier and harder to breathe.

“I would get these alerts that would tell me the area I lived in was one of the most contaminated in the city of Chicago. His bedside table is piled with inhalers containing medications of various strengths. Finally, in 2016 the petcoke piles were removed and the material was placed in a closed facility. The community’s outrage had been effective, but the damage had been done.

“Children on the East Side had more than three times the rate of asthma hospitalizations set by the Healthy People 2020 Objectives, a goal set by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

According to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), “The Southeast Side is amongst the city areas most cumulatively burdened by environmental and social stressors.” These areas are known for being filled with “diesel trucks, dusty materials, noxious odors and other environmental hazards,” according to NRDC. What makes the presence of this dangerous is how near they are to your parks, neighborhoods and schools.

Adults, too, were getting sick. My father, Oscar Maynez, a lifelong resident, developed respiratory problems. “They conducted tests to find out what was wrong with my lungs. I couldn’t breathe,” he says.

“In one of my visits to the doctor, they told me the area I lived in was one of the most contaminated in the city of Chicago,” Garza says. “I kept thinking, ‘What are we doing to my family?’”

The Home Issue

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Cumulative Burden of Environmental Exposures & Population Vulnerability in Chicago

Dumping grounds

East Side, it took some time for us to understand what has been done to you and how it has affected us. The Southeast Environmental Task Force, created by Marian Byrnes in 1989, has been informing and rallying residents in a battle against industrial pollutants for 30 years, and we’re still fighting.

“You know, the Southeast Side has always been a dumping grounds,” Salazar says. “There was always something coming up here. There were so many issues to attack or work on. So that’s how it started, organizing the community with a direct purpose.”

Their efforts are evident in the now empty lot where petcoke used to be. But meanwhile, another monster reared its head: manganese, an element used in steel production that can cause neurological problems in children, as well as lung irritation and reproductive problems. In August, 2014, the EPA detected elevated quantities of manganese in the air around S.H. Bell Co. at 100th Street and South Avenue O.

Norma Jimenez is raising five children across the street from S.H. Bell Co., where she has lived for 16 years. She was used to the grime, the rumbles of diesel trucks and the smells from the facility. She has lived on your land for as long as she can remember. Leaving is impossible—emotionally and economically.

“When the wind is strong is when I feel the dirt, and if I sit outside, I feel like I am bathed in the dirt that blows over here,” Jimenez says. “When it’s like that we try not to sit out front. We keep our windows closed, and when I clean, it usually picks up dust that’s black and grey.”

She has adapted, but she can’t get used to the smells. “You go outside and it smells podrido, rotten, like buried garbage, like rotten meat,” she says. “I don’t know how to describe the smell, but it forces you to cover your mouth.”

East Side, the community’s efforts to make you a livable and breathable home eventually forced S.H. Bell Co. to add new air pollution control equipment, and the EPA announced that it would remediate the top six inches of the contaminated soil, which some local activists consider insufficient.

But while gathering samples, the agency found levels of lead higher than EPA removal management levels. They thought they were addressing one monster, but they discovered another.

Lead can be toxic to humans and animals. High levels cause damage to the nervous system, including behavioral problems and learning problems. Lead puts pregnant women at risk for miscarriage, adults at risk for low blood pressure and decreased kidney function. The toxicity of lead is why gasoline is now unleaded and paints no longer contain the metal. But it’s still in your soil.

“Lead is all over the place because we had the steel mills here,” Salazar says. “They can’t ignore the fact that they’re finding high levels of lead. So what are they going to do about it?”

The EPA urges residents to take precautions. It’s how we have learned to live on your land, East Side—with precautions. But lead in the ground gets tracked into homes on the soles of shoes. Lead in the ground becomes lead in vegetables raised in home gardens.

“I worry for the families,” Cabrales says. “I mean, you want to be able to garden, you want to be able to grow vegetables that you can eat healthily.”

They’ve told us that it’s “fine” to grow on your land, but how can we when they tell us to use raised beds and to wash off every vegetable. Can we trust that the lead is deep enough that it won’t touch the roots of our plants? How can they be sure when the roots of my plants run as deep as my roots in you?

“When I heard about this it kind of made me paranoid. I kept thinking, ‘Am I feeding toxins to my family?’” says Guerra, who grows vegetables in the summer. “Just knowing that, I couldn’t bring myself to eat what I had sown. At the end of the [summer] season, I ended up just ripping the plants out and throwing them away with my vegetables on them.”

It seems that despite our efforts, you are easy to manipulate and take over. The community fought pet coke. We are fighting manganese and lead. But right when we feel like we have the upper hand, we are attacked in a new way. In the eyes of the city, we are nothing but a dumping ground.
Adding to the outrage

The latest assault is a proposed recycling facility expected to move by 2020. General Iron Mills, a recycling center in north Chicago, was receiving too many complaints about smells and danger from residents in its current location. So in 2018, it announced it would move to the East Side. There it would join the five existing recycling centers within the East Side. What is one more facility in an over-contaminated neighborhood?

“Why?” Salazar asks. “Because they’re building up Chicago. But are they going to build up here? No, we’re here to accommodate Chicago. They’re not going to revitalize [this] area because they need to keep us this way so they have somewhere to dump all that stuff. So knowing that, what are we going to do about it?”

Corona shares Salazar’s outrage. “We do not want to be infected by your product or waste product as we call it,” he says. “Just because you can sell it, make money off of it, you call it a product. To us, it’s just marketable poison. It’s marketable death. Every time another company comes down here, it’s another nail in our coffin.”

This new facility will be located just a few steps from a high school, an elementary school and a park. General Iron Mills has been on the EPA’s radar since 2006 and in July 2018, it was cited for excessive air emissions of zinc, mercury and lead; for failing to install air pollution controls; and for failing to obtain the adequate air pollution permit.

“It promises jobs in exchange, but Salazar isn’t buying it. “Taking something that’s ugly, nasty, dirty, nothing,” she says. “You might be lucky if you get a handful of jobs out of it, [but] nothing produces enough jobs to make it worth it to you.”

East Side, your residents are increasingly aware of how you’ve been mistreated and what it means for them and their children. “You know sometimes you’re angered by it and then hurt because this only happens in neighborhoods where there are people of color, people who don’t speak out,” Garza says. “It just felt like there’s always people looking for someone that they can step on and they wouldn’t want this filth in their neighborhood. Why does it have to be on ours?”

You have been used and disrespected for years by the city. But you are not a pit stop to Indiana, and you are more than roads and buildings. You are our home. We are rooted to you and to the land you have provided us.

Many ask why we don’t leave, but how can we leave the place we call home? How could we leave you to rot? The answer is, we can’t. We can’t leave the problem to be solved by someone else. We have to take it into our hands and shape a place that future generations can enjoy. A place without the skeletons of our past. A place where pet coke, steel mills, lead and manganese are nothing but old tales of bad times long in the past.

Sincerely,

-Peggy Salazar