Fight or Flight: The Altgeld Gardens Conflict

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Introduction:

Many Americans awake in the morning to the warm aroma of coffee brewing in their newly purchased Keurig machines. They get up, pour themselves a cup, and go about their day without a second thought. Many Americans never consider how different their lives would be if they were viewed as disposable as the K-cups in their machines, if they had been born as lower class. Many Americans do not consider the ugly truths of this country—they turn their cheek to the oppression occurring right in front of them. While many wake up in the morning to the aroma of coffee, the people of Altgeld Gardens wake up to the inescapable stench of dried sludge from the local sewage-treatment plant, garbage burning in the nearby incinerator, air pollution from the surrounding steel mills, and the scent of petroleum coke stored in facilities near the neighborhood.

Altgeld Gardens serves as a searing example of what occurs to a community of specific demographics when the population at large needs a place to store their garbage as well as industrial waste and pollution. This community is isolated from the rest of Chicago by various sites such as a waste incinerator, a sewage-treatment facility, multiple retired and functioning landfills, and several petcoke storage facilities. The existence of these waste and pollution sites has not only led to health impacts for locals, but also a concern for the mistreatment of the community as a whole by means of environmental injustice and environmental racism. The community of Altgeld Gardens in particular has seen countless examples of injustice, but many individuals have also been working to combat these issues along the way.

Altgeld Gardens Profile:

Commonly referred to as the toxic doughnut because of the enveloping ring of land frosted with polluting industry, Altgeld Gardens was built in an industrial area of Chicago atop landfill that contained both human and industrial waste. The purpose of building this community was initially to house Black World War II veterans in 1945, which already sets the scene for segregation (Merchant & Moore). When the community was first built, many neighboring steel mills offered the community of Altgeld a place of employment; Altgeld Gardens was considered a destination for those in desperate need of a job (Murray, 2013). At the same time, the placement of this all-black neighborhood resulted in a disproportionate exposure to pollution of these steel mills and other surrounding industries. In 1962, the neighborhood became a public housing development overseen by the Chicago Housing Authority. Still, the neighborhood’s residents were predominantly low-income minorities (Merchant & Moore).

An end to the promising jobs in the steel industry was inevitable, as with all good things. This quickly led to the community uncovering the negative effects of the industry. In 1979, Hazel
Johnson founded **People for Community Recovery** (PCR), a group dedicated to “press for serious and long overdue repair work in Altgeld Gardens, a Chicago Housing Authority development located on the South Side of Chicago.” Johnson began this endeavor after her husband passed away due to lung cancer, as she believed the pollution in Altgeld Gardens contributed to her husband’s cancer and subsequent death (Bullard, 2011). Additionally, Johnson was concerned about the rate of cancer in her community overall. She contacted health officials about environmental issues in Altgeld as well as industrial pollution. After conducting her own research, Johnson found that a majority of the industries surrounding the community emitted thousands of pounds of pollutants into the surrounding environment.

Since this discovery, the late Hazel Johnson and PCR have worked to hold the government and corporations accountable for the pollution and health affects the various industries have had on the population (Fuerst, Hunt & Franklin, 2005; “People for community”). In the 1980s, Barack Obama began his career as a public servant by attempting to clean up the destruction left behind by the steel mills. Obama’s efforts focused primarily on community organizing and campaign efforts to rid the community of health risks (Burke, 2012).

Unfortunately, the damage had already been done, and the land under the long-abandoned steel mills had been contaminated with many toxic chemicals common to the industry. Data gathered by the **Environmental Protection Agency** shows that the soil in Altgeld contains high concentrations of arsenic, barium, chromium, lead, mercury, pesticides, and a myriad of other harmful chemicals (“Lake calumet cluster,” 2011). In addition to steel mills, Altgeld Gardens has been encircled by both municipal and hazardous waste landfills, toxic waste incinerators, sewage-water treatment facilities, and several other polluting industries. All of these have had an affect on the local environment and health of community members (Merchant & Moore). Finally, as if the lack of jobs and pollution weren’t bad enough, Altgeld Gardens became associated with violence and gangs (Murray, 2013).

**Figure 1: Hazel Johnson and Barack Obama**

![Young Barack Obama working with community activist Hazel Johnson to draw attention to environmental issues in Altgeld Gardens in 1989 (Burke, 2012)](image-url)
In response to the increased crime rates, the Chicago Housing Authority started an effort to rehabilitate (rather than evacuate) the community. The department has since renovated apartment buildings, built a new library, and brought in a new charter school. However, about six hundred apartment units still remain empty, and Altgeld is still a community faced with the challenges of segregation and environmental racism (Murray, 2013).

Today, Altgeld Gardens is mostly a self-contained, predominantly (95%) black population on the far south side of Chicago (Dunn, 2012). In addition to the pollution of the industries surrounding the area, the people of Altgeld have had to deal with the lack of jobs, which has perpetuated the community’s low-income status. Additionally, the distance from the rest of the city has kept the residents of Altgeld from easily accessing a way out. Furthermore, many citizens living in other areas of Chicago do not know of the Altgeld community because it is so far separated from the rest of the city. While some leaders of the community like Hazel Johnson and her daughter, Cheryl, have fought for equality for their community, many have accepted their position and see no point in fighting it. Unfortunately, the industries have taken advantage of the population’s position, resulting in persisting inequality and pollution.

Steel Mills:

Although the Chicago Steel Mills have all closed their doors, the industry has had a great impact on the environment and health of the citizens in Altgeld Gardens (Lydersen, 2004). During their decades of operation, the steel mills spewed copious amounts of polluting particles into the air. For example, iron oxide particles from open-hearth ovens caused a glowing red night sky (Hurley, 2005). This type of pollutant can lead to respiratory health issues in exposed individuals, as these particles can build up in the lungs and cause difficulty breathing. Another by-product of the steel mills was slag, which is a glass-like substance that remains once the desired metal has been obtained its iron-ore. Slag produced by blast furnaces was used to fill in land and extend the shoreline of Lake Michigan. Not only that, but slag waste eventually ended up on beaches and affected the amount of fish that were harvested from the lake (Hurley, 2005). Therefore, slag not only impacts the landscape of the environment by extending the lakeshore, but also impacts the availability of food resources, as harvested fish were no longer easily accessible.

Even after the closing of the steel mills, there is still ongoing pollution as a result of their existence. Specifically, many companies often left the nearby communities, such as Altgeld, with their abandoned and contaminated buildings of industry. Before closing, mills were to follow federal regulations to trap pollutants to reduce the company’s contribution to air, land, and water pollution. While these companies technically complied with these regulations, they were able to dispose of the captured waste in poorly regulated landfills. These, too, were left for the impacted communities to confront after the companies had left the area (Hurley, 2005). These toxic waste sites also had harmful impacts on the environment and public health. At the same time, little has been done to address this issue. The companies took advantage of a low-income population, with little political standing, and left them only with respiratory health issues and toxic land to show for it.
Landfills:

As previously mentioned, Altgeld was built on top of what was once a landfill. This is already a questionable decision of those responsible for building a community with only black WWII veterans in mind. It suggests that these people were undeserving of clean land, that it was acceptable to subject these citizens to the leachate leaking from the unreliable landfill, acceptable to associate a whole group of people with garbage. Additionally, Altgeld has been disproportionately exposed to several other landfills over time, again reinforcing the idea that the citizens of this community mean nothing more than the waste of others (Dunn, J). This type of treatment has the potential to infiltrate the minds of those exposed, resulting in a lowered self-esteem and feelings of helplessness. Surrounding this community with landfills keeps the citizens who live there from fighting the mistreatment because they begin to believe the message it sends as well.

In addition to polluting the thoughts of the citizens of Altgeld, the landfills both under and around the community pollute the resources that the community could potentially use. No matter the quality of the landfill, there is always the possibility that leachate, or liquid that oozes through the landfill and picks up contaminants, will leak into surrounding soil and groundwater (Leonard, 2011). This contaminates the freshwater sources, leaving them undrinkable and likely harmful with all the chemicals that can be found in leachate. Moreover, rehabilitating land that has been home to landfills and pollution requires resources that a struggling community such as Altgeld Gardens does not have. This has allowed the very presence of landfills to hold power over the individuals who live in the lower class community.

Incinerators:

Not only is waste brought to neighboring areas of Altgeld to lie in a landfill for the rest of time, but also, at one point, waste was brought to this area to burn to ash in an incinerator (Merchant & Moore). Hazel Johnson was a key advocate in the eventual closing of the toxic waste incinerators of the South Side, but the past combustion of toxic waste does have associated health risks that cannot be ignored, even if the facilities are now closed.

According to the (EPA), one of the main uses of an incinerator is to reduce the volume of waste being put into landfills (“Wastes--hazardous”). However, this also suggests that incinerators do not eliminate the need for a landfill, and the ashes being put into the landfill are more toxic than before because elements in the objects being burned cannot be destroyed and become concentrated in the ash being landfilled (Leonard, 2011). Additionally, the use of incinerators results in pollution in the air.

While the EPA claims these emissions are regulated, incinerators pollute the air regardless of the regulations (“Wastes--hazardous”). Instead of keeping all of the toxins in solid waste in a landfill, incinerators allow these toxins to escape into the air when the waste is burned. This could either be toxic material directly from the waste, or toxins created by the combustion that breaks apart and recombines different chemicals in the waste, such as dioxin (Leonard, 2011). Either way, these toxins may also contaminate water sources, affecting drinking water and water
used to grow food. The chemicals found in these toxins are those that may cause damage to organs, neurological and circulatory damage, reproductive problems, and may lead to cancer (Leonard, 2011; EPA, “Wastes-hazardous”). These are all symptoms that led Ms. Johnson to create PCR, and it is possible that the cause of these symptoms were the incinerators.

As with the landfills, the incinerator was just another way for corporations to get away with loosely regulated processes. The community of Altgeld is a low-income population of minority individuals, which are largely politically marginalized and often mistreated by large corporations. Without people like Hazel Johnson to raise awareness about environmental injustice, much of the maltreatment would go undocumented because neither the government nor the media would hear of it. Consequently, citizens living outside the area of concern would never know of the challenges faced by fellow Chicagoans.

**Sewage Treatment Facilities:**

Another form of waste that Altgeld Gardens has the luxury of being in contact with is the natural waste of other humans. The Calumet Water Reclamation Plant treats wastewater from both Chicago and several south suburbs. The plant removes about 90% of contaminants in the water by primary and secondary treatment, which consists of using screens to physically remove organic solids as well as using microorganisms to help break down organic material into easily removable products (“Calumet WRP”). Then, the products removed from the wastewater are taken to a sanitary landfill.

While there is some evidence that wastewater treatment does pollute the air, what is equally concerning is the fact that this adds another layer to the industrial waste and pollution that Altgeld Gardens is already subject to (“Municipal wastewater treatment.”). Not only that, but also, the number of examples of waste and pollution surrounding Altgeld point to the idea that these citizens are exposed to these things at a higher rate than the average citizen of Chicago. In Altgeld, eleven of the eighteen miles of water surrounding the community are unfit for human consumption (Merchant & Moore). Disproportionate exposure to waste and pollution is a recurring theme of environmental racism/injustice, and the Calumet Water Reclamation Plant serves as another facility to oppress the poor minorities living in Altgeld Gardens.

**Figure 2: Calumet Water Reclamation Plant**

Water from the Calumet River being processed at the Calumet Water Reclamation Plant just north of Altgeld Gardens (“Calumet water reclamation”)
Instead of moving the residents out of Altgeld Gardens due to high concentrations of poor minorities and crime rates, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) opted to rehabilitate the community of Altgeld Gardens. Meanwhile, it evacuated other public housing communities to integrate different types of people into different types of neighborhoods. While this may have resulted in refurbished apartment complexes for Altgeld, it did not change the demographics of the area, and it is likely that the Chicago Housing Authority knowingly encouraged this. Wastewater needs to be treated, and the Calumet Water Reclamation Plant was already built; therefore, instead of trying to integrate the people of Altgeld into new neighborhoods with less pollution and less crime, CHA kept the residents where they were so the treatment facility would not become a problem for potentially higher class individuals with political power. Again, environmental injustice is a direct result of the issues within a class-based system.

**Petroleum Coke Profile:**

One final type of pollution to consider for Altgeld Gardens is one they are currently fighting against. That is, petroleum coke (pet coke) storage facilities. As it currently stands, there are three pet coke storage facilities surrounding Altgeld Gardens (Merchant & Moore). Unfortunately, it has been found that the pet coke industry is not likely to slow down anytime soon. Concerns regarding environmental and health impacts now will likely worsen in the future (“Study predicts lower”). Pet coke is a carbon material byproduct of oil refining, and the particulate matter associated storage and handling of this material does have serious health risks, according to the EPA (“Health effects”).

Particulate matter, simply put, is “a complex mixture of extremely small particles and liquid droplets” (“Health effects of,”). It is the case that with any particulate matter, there are health risks associated regarding the heart and lungs, which are vital organs for one to sustain a healthy life. Fortunately, a study done on rats did not show any link to carcinogenicity, even though small amounts of toxic chemicals were found in pet coke particles. At the same time, the EPA does affirm that pet coke storage sites do increase the amount of particulate matter found in the air, which does have associated health risks (“Health effects of,”). Not only that, further examination of the particulate matter may find that there is some correlation with cancer rates or birth defects. Either way, the pet coke storage facilities around Altgeld Gardens are contributing to the higher rates of air pollution and toxicity, which is reason enough to remove them from the area.

It is also important to note that the burning of pet coke to create electricity is not legal in the United States (Austen, 2013). However, it is legal to produce as an oil refinery byproduct, and then sell to countries that have legalized its use. This suggests that the product is too harmful to the health of individuals for the United States to consider using as an energy source. The question remains, then, why produce it in the first place, and why produce it near Altgeld Gardens? The answer is sad and simple—Altgeld Gardens is a poor public housing neighborhood with a high rate of minorities who, compared to upper class individuals, do not have a voice in environmental issues and politics. Therefore, corporations are able to reap the benefits of nearly unregulated production because minorities are continuously pushed down until they feel they have no power, no rights.
Fortunately for Altgeld Gardens, Hazel Johnson paved the way to fight these corporations. She and PCR fought every day to bring environmental justice to the citizens of Altgeld. Today, the fight is continued by her daughter, Cheryl Johnson, backed by PCR. Although this community is exposed to much higher amounts of land, air, and water pollution than the general population, the individuals fighting for justice never lose hope that they will one day be able to reverse the damage that has been done.

**Conclusion:**

In researching this community and the challenges it has faced in the past, I have grown disgusted with the selfishness of humans. In general, we are always after new things—always in search of bigger and better. What we do not consider is the people like those in Altgeld, who suffer through pollution and the associated health risks every day for the rest of the world to continue to live the way it does. Additionally, this project has caused me to consider the many undocumented sites similar to Altgeld Gardens, those that do not have someone like Hazel or Cheryl Johnson to fight the environmental racism they are faced with. In other words, this project has made me increasingly aware of how privileged I am, and how I need to take a stand against the injustice that others experience based on their income level or color of their skin.

The residents of Altgeld Gardens still currently face many hazardous sites such as 50 documented landfills, remnants of steel mills and incinera tors, pet coke storage facilities, and the sewage-treatment facility. However, this community is gaining momentum to close down much of the polluting industry surrounding the area by persevering through adversity. Cheryl Johnson currently heads PCR, and the organization’s fight against environmental racism and injustice will not cease until Altgeld Gardens is free from the massive amount of exposure to polluting industries.
Bibliography:


