**Environ M30: Assignment 3**

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Chavez and Shulevitz

Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” (1962) inspired many environmentalists and led to the inception of the environmental justice movement as we know it today. Similarly, Cesar Chavez’s address “Peril of Pesticide” (1989) was one of the most important speeches to draw mainstream attention to the ideas Carson bolstered by speaking out against the corrupt agribusiness and agrichemical industries and their unethical use of pesticides on grape farms in California. Almost antithetically, Judith Shulevitz’s “The Toxicity Panic” (2011), published in *The New Republic,* discusses the plastic disaster and its effects on children and congenital diseases in the modern day amid widespread naivety and viral “health rituals.” Yet, both pieces share common ground as they reinforce the ever-pervasive toxicity “masterplot” by perpetuating images of a world ravaged by contamination, the reckless endangerment of family, and the tension between scientific and spiritual perspectives of toxicity.

Both Chavez and Shulevitz depict a world ravaged by toxicity and contamination but differ in the expanse and method of contamination. As president of the United Farm Workers labor union, Chavez protests the use of unregulated pesticides and the corrupt business practices of growers (corporate and wealthy owners of the farms laborers tend). Chavez describes the status of mono-crop farms in California as “in the fields and around the towns.” In an emotional anecdote to open his address, Chavez retells the death of a five-year-old boy Johnnie Rodriguez who suffered from cancer due to the poisonous pesticides his parents worked with daily. Although the parents "cannot say for certain if pesticides caused their son’s cancer,” Chavez emphasizes the discovery of pesticide run-off as “neuroblastoma is one of the cancers found in McFarland, a small farm town only a few miles from Delano, where the Rodriguezes live.” Chavez continues with three more situations in which pesticides caused deaths, congenital diseases, and deformities in children. Although it may seem anecdotal, the manner in which Chavez discusses the expansive contamination benefits the audience. Chavez’s characterization of the ravaged world is limited to the surrounding farms and speaks to the emotions of Congressmen and lawmakers from the countryside. The many anecdotal references to children afflicted by pesticide-borne diseases serve to elicit activism from the impoverished farm workers whose voices had been so far shut down by agribusiness and prompt a mainstream change in the way Americans view agriculture and chemical use.

On the other hand, Shulevitz illustrates a world devastated by plastics through scientific studies and consensus. For example, Shulevitz references a study where “the CDC stated that nearly *everyone* it tested had detectable amounts of BPA (a plastic stiffener)” to promote the narrative that everyone, regardless of socioeconomic standing or any other differentiator, is afflicted by large-scale plastic use. Shulevitz portrays the gravity of it all through the dangers of everyday plastics, which may contain “phthalates added as a softener, … styrene, a neurotoxin,... and BPA.” Shulevitz drives home this point with another metric detailing that “childhood cancers are up 20 percent since 1975” due to carcinogens from home-use plastics. As shared with Chavez's speech, the intended audience is the fundamental reason for the focus on scientific studies. Shulevitz’s article serves as a blog post for the cabal of upper-middle-class mothers investigating the dangers present in their very households. The time period only enhances this. From the early 2000s to 2011, the Bush administration made significant efforts to increase FDA and EPA funding to protect Americans from the widespread use of unregulated chemicals in manufactured goods and produce. That being said, many middle-class mothers of the time found themselves searching through peer-edited scientific journals and “took to the Internet… [and] logged onto the Natural Resources Defense Council’s ‘Simple Steps’ site” for answers to the fears they held. It was mass hysteria. So, Shulevitz tailored her article specifically to please these information-hungry mothers by appealing to their sense of security by authority (as Shulevitz had done extensive due diligence). In doing so, the inevitable truth both she and Chavez shared was the boundless contamination stemming from carcinogens, neurotoxins, and BPAs – “a world ravaged by toxicity.”

Yet in this blighted world, Chavez and Shulevitz underscore that the danger these toxins pose is not in their inherent toxicity but in how they affect American families – drawing from the toxicity materplot’s focus on family as a core value. Chavez appeals to the core American value of family, dear to many, as he responds to agribusiness claiming their pesticides are not dangerous with the question: “Ask the family of Felipe Franco.” Chavez answers the question with the story of Felipe, “a bright seven-year-old… born without arms and legs” due to a congenital disease caused by his mother working “in the grapes near Delano until… her eighth month of pregnancy.” Once again, Chavez identifies the anecdotal evidence to appeal directly to the many farmers who had remained silent under the influence of agribusiness and negligent growers. Shulevtiz, on the other hand, focuses her entire thesis on the concept of family by highlighting the effects of plastics on newborns. Aside from the overarching increase in cancer rates, Shulevtiz lists the multitude of baby products now using non-biodegradable plastics such as “baby bottles and… sippy cups,... plastic spoons on bright melamine trays,... bath books and rubber ducks”. Reinforcing this, Shulevitz emphasizes the certainty that even if children don’t use “these [products] at your house, they’ll [use] them at someone else’s or at school.” And it’s in this inevitability that Chavez and Shulevitz share common ground. They both realize that it’s not those who can escape pesticide-based pollution and plastic products, but instead, their families and children who cannot take action. Instead, Chavez and Shulevitz realize they must promote stronger regulation and government participation to answer the critical problems in their respective “worlds.” Despite their differences in time period, audience, and socioeconomic standing, Chavez and Shulevitz establish that the world has fallen to widespread intoxication, and it’s up to them and those alike to prevent their families from succumbing to this polluted landscape.