INEQUALITY IN INCREMENTS:
RISK NORMALIZATION AND MOBILIZATION
AROUND A TOXIC WATERFRONT IN SOUTH PROVIDENCE

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Abstract

Increasingly across the United States, communities are mobilizing against the construction of environmentally hazardous facilities in their neighborhoods. A disproportionate number of these communities host a majority of people of color and/or families earning low incomes. This study examines one such community in South Providence, Rhode Island, an area that also contains a cluster of facilities that pose environmental and health-based risk to surrounding residents. In analyzing this community’s movement against the addition of a new natural gas liquefaction facility proposed by National Grid, I argue that the community faces a unique set of challenges posed by an ongoing cycle of risk normalization. This is a process in which National Grid and state and local governments work to routinize the risk posed by the new liquefaction facility and posed by the pre-existing cluster of hazardous facilities, all in order to push the liquefaction facility through the permitting process quickly and without deliberation. I take a qualitative, ethnographic approach to examine this issue, synthesizing findings from fieldwork and secondary resources and selectively applying a social movement theory perspective. I also use a case study from a parallel environmental movement in Burrillville, RI as a point of comparison for the case in South Providence. I conclude that risk normalization poses significant barriers to mobilization in South Providence in addition to the mobilization challenges the community already faces due to its vulnerability as a low-income, largely linguistically-isolated minority community. This has important implications for future environmental policymaking and scholarly analysis of environmental justice cases.
On a windy spring day in 2017, the “No LNG in PVD Coalition” led a special tour around the Port of Providence in Rhode Island. Our muraled, vegetable oil-powered tour bus reached a building owned by National Grid, the state’s largest power utility. One person said, “look, they’re watching us!” and the few other tour-goers stretched their necks out the windows to see what she meant. Two National Grid security guards stood behind a fence staring at our brightly-colored bus, whose engine kept cutting out as the tour guide gave commentary (“a work in progress,” he credited the bus).

The tour was special because it was a “Toxic Tour,” intended to educate community members about the many hazardous, polluting facilities that surrounded the neighborhoods of Washington Park and Lower South Providence: a major interstate highway and an industrial railroad snaking through both neighborhoods, and to their east, buffering between the houses and the Providence River, a port filled with chemical storage and processing facilities. A new facility was now slotted to join the rest—a year previously, National Grid had announced its intentions to build a liquefaction facility on the port which would convert natural gas into its space-saving, liquid form (see fig. 10). The No LNG in PVD Coalition formed soon after this announcement in opposition to the facility, and was hosting the tour as part of their campaign. According to No LNG’s coordinator, Sophia, National Grid had heard that the tour would be coming through that day.¹ She’d been told that with that knowledge, National Grid had postponed the excavation of some contaminated soil.

The bus pulled away from National Grid’s property and drove along the river’s edge, passing squat white storage tanks, smoke stacks, and the bullet-shaped cars of an ethanol train that had derailed—miraculously without damage or leakage—just weeks before. Along the way,

¹ Names have been changed.
the tour guide discussed how the port had always had a “toxic” history in its interactions with people of color. Having served in the slave trade until the 19th century, the now industrialized port still puts the adjacent community of color at disproportionate risk for chronic health effects and even chemical disasters that could involve magnified chain reactions among the closely-packed facilities. “See that? That used to be in East Providence, and they moved it here,” he said, pointing to giant piles of scrap metal. Our next destination was in the direction of East Providence, on the other side of the river in a neighborhood that had been gentrified in the late 20th century (Valk et al. 2011:139). A green park stretches across the waterfront there, and when the bus stopped in its shady parking lot, the tour guide said “this is what we want for our port in south Providence.” One of Sophia’s children hopped out of the bus, approached an elderly white woman reading a newspaper on a park bench, and handed her a brochure about the campaign against National Grid’s proposed facility.

This paper examines the mechanisms that are perpetuating environmental inequality present in the port in South Providence. In particular, I focus on the “normalization of risk” that evolves through interactions between National Grid, the City of Providence, the RIDEM, and community groups such as No LNG in the conflict over the proposed liquefaction facility. In South Providence, one such interaction emerges consistently and prominently. I show that in South Providence, throughout the process of determining the fate of the liquefaction facility, actions by National Grid and local and state governments reinforce the normalcy of risk along the Port—a risk-laden landscape lined with other industrial facilities and home to some of the city’s poorest and most vulnerable residents. I show how National Grid and local governments use their authority to assert the relative inconsequence of one more “simple” addition to the landscape.
These actors normalize the risk of this facility and its surroundings both explicitly, through the language they use in public communications, and implicitly, through their actions. For example, National Grid has been able to take advantage of an expedited process to get its liquefaction facility permitted quickly and quietly, all while local governments use delay tactics to avoid addressing the local community’s concerns about the project. The technical nature of this normalization process serves to shield National Grid from responsibility for adding new environmental burdens to the community. Groups like No LNG that oppose the siting do not have the technical capacity to make a similar type of claims. Their concerns often cannot be expressed in the same technical language and thus are not given the same priority by authorities.

In this way, the routinization of risk actively removes platforms in which the public can debate the knowledge relevant to the facility, and has profound effects on the community’s ability to fight the project overall. Thus, the already-burdened South Providence community must adapt by using mobilization tactics that are not often accounted for in traditional social movement theory. Since a large part of social movement literature builds off of communities that have greater resources and face fewer demographic challenges and less environmental risk, South Providence offers a valuable alternative case study. Overall, I argue that the interaction between risk normalization processes and community vulnerability poses unique barriers to technical deliberation and mobilization for the South Providence community, and serves to maintain and contribute to the landscape of risk that surrounds it.

I present the study in five main parts. The first part offers an overview of social movement theory and risk normalization concepts, outlining the specific ideas that will be either supported or disputed by the conflict in South Providence. Next I describe the methods used to
gather this evidence and use statistics from the US Census and Environmental Protection Agency to paint a broad picture of the South Providence community. I give a brief introduction to the South Providence community in the third part outlining the demographic and environmental characteristics that carry the greatest impact for the community’s mobilization challenges. The fourth part examines the emergence of a community movement against the liquefaction facility, National Grid’s interactions to the movement and its normalizing tactics, and the apparent “passivity” or non-response by state and local governments in response to community concerns.

To add support for my claims, in the fifth part I offer a brief comparison, using the movement that has emerged in Burrillville, RI against a new power plant. In contrast to the situation in South Providence, Burrillville’s local movement enjoys greater material resources and support. The movement have been successful at resisting the normalization of risk, largely by focusing widespread social and political attention on the “abnormality” of placing a power plant in the middle of a forested town. Burrillville is able to build a movement of great magnitude and influence, and thus its residents are better able to insert themselves platforms where knowledge is deliberated, spaces the South Providence movement has seldom been able to touch. The comparison to Burrillville throws into sharp relief the unique challenges faced by South Providence and the reasons these obstacles might exist in the first place. I conclude by discussing the reasons why “normal” risk became a dominant framework in South Providence, and argue that it may take more than just new environmental policy to disrupt established cycles of risk normalization.
Social Movement Theory and Risk Normalization

Collective Identity and Resource Mobilization

Social movement theory first emerged as an academic field in the early 20th century. This paper employs a number of its different frameworks in order to build a balanced, comprehensive picture of the movement against the liquefaction facility in South Providence. Together, these frameworks serve to illuminate the uniqueness of this particular movement—situated in a low-income community of color, the movement here tends to face momentum barriers that sometimes reinforce common social movement theories, and often challenge them.

An important framework within social movement theory is the concept of collective identity: “an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution,” and by extension, the social network that results from these connections (Polletta and Jasper 2001:285). Sociologists Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper argue that collective identity is often expressed in cultural materials such as symbols, verbal styles, or names (285). This paper finds yet another type of expression to be present in South Providence. Rather than using cultural materials, this movement uses the more abstract and culture-devoid concept of vulnerability as a unifying identity. By doing so, the South Providence movement also strays from common perceptions of how a collective identity should function: capturing the “pleasures and obligations” that encourage people to rise up and carrying with it “positive feelings for other members of the group” (284).

In addition, this paper relies heavily on environmental justice theory, but doesn’t not examine explicitly the environmental justice aspects of the South Providence case. An excellent lineup of studies has endeavored to dig into the minute technicalities, bureaucratic systems, and social and political relations that drive localized cases of environmental racism and influence the movements that are built in response (see, for instance, Crowder and Downey 2010, Ottinger 2013, Lora-Wainwright 2013). South Providence serves as a poignant example of this type of environmental inequality and the mobilization challenges that come with it. It is my hope that through my examination of risk normalization, this paper will add to the literature dissecting the smaller mechanisms that drive larger cycles of environmental inequality. I discuss this paper’s implications for environmental justice further in the conclusion.
Another crucial branch in the study of social movements is resource mobilization theory. Sociologists John McCarthy and Mayer Zald first introduced this theory as a way of filling gaps in the social psychology frameworks that had previously dominated social movement theory. Developed in the 1970s, the resource mobilization perspective argues for the central importance of resources in determining the size and success of social movements. This theory refers to a variety of resource types, from financial resources to a movement’s relationships to the media and political authorities (McCarthy and Zald 1977:1212). I show that in South Providence, a lack of these resources indeed proves to be a prominent barrier to mobilization. However, by placing equal emphasis on movement representation and building community leadership, this movement’s leaders also push against the assumption that simply increasing resource levels is always the foremost concern of a movement.

Normalization Theory

Theories of risk normalization developed more recently than social movement theory. In 1996, Diane Vaughan introduced the “normalization of deviance” as one potential factor in a major NASA accident (Vaughan 1997). The “normalization of deviance” and other risk normalization perspectives have since been employed and critiqued by a number of STS authors (see Pinto 2014, Tinsley et al. 2011, Rosness 2009). With the normalization of deviance, authorities accept deviations as significantly risk-filled, but assert the normalcy of technological anomalies and the importance of accepting them as part of the process of technological advancement.

In South Providence, National Grid and local governments normalize not anomalies, but the presence of ongoing and apparently low-level, improbable risk. Here, diverging from
Vaughan’s case studies, “normalization of risk” encompasses two types of risk. One is the risk of chronic health effects as a result of ongoing emissions from the port’s facilities, polluting the surrounding air, water and soil. The other is the risk that these facilities could have accidents—possibly accidents that are magnified by the contamination of the environment as well as by the reactions of other facilities in the surrounding area. In South Providence, the potential for these kinds of accidents, as well as the potential for chronic low-exposure health effects, becomes “normal” through the narratives pushed by local governments, National Grid, and the political system used to permit its proposed facility.

The system by which the “normalization of deviance” occurs in Vaughan’s case studies is very similar to the system by which risk is normalized in South Providence. Examining NASA accidents, Vaughan writes:

The process and mechanisms behind the normalization of deviance make incremental change hard to detect until it’s too late. Change occurs gradually, the signs of a new and possibly harmful direction occurring one at a time, injected into daily routines that obfuscate the developing pattern...Making organizational change that contradicts [cultures of production] is difficult to implement, but in the face of continuing and consistent institutional forces even more difficult to sustain as time passes (Vaughan 2005:56).

This type of system is prominent in South Providence. In South Providence, the “incremental changes” are additions to an already industrialized, polluting, and risky port. National Grid and local governments take advantage of this invisible evolution, actively working to “obfuscate the developing pattern” of increased and unjust environmental risk in the port in order to get the new liquefaction facility permitted.
Methodological Strategy

This project involved research within the community of South Providence, RI as well as within the town of Burrillville in northern RI. This research spanned from May 2016 to April 2017, a period of time that started after each natural gas project had been proposed and ended before any decisions about their fates were made (both these cases are ongoing and undecided at the time of writing). Research was conducted, whenever possible, through informal and semi-structured interviews with various movement leaders and residents from each area.

I also employed participant observation as a research strategy, attending numerous open government hearings, coalition meetings, and protests in South Providence as well as in Burrillville. Due to the unpredictable pace of the political decision processes and movement building agendas for both these cases, I sometimes found opportunities for participant observation to be few and far between. For this reason, I have heavily supplemented my evidence in this paper with secondary material, such as videos of speakers testifying at hearings, quotes from local newspapers, and letters and official documents between the communities, National Grid, Invenergy, and involved government bodies. By pulling from these types of secondary materials, I was also able to examine events and conversations that occurred before my research period began.

Industry and Inequality in South Providence

The Port

The port on which National Grid’s liquefaction facility would sit is already covered in other industrial facilities and chemical storage. As New England’s second-largest deepwater
seaport, the area is a center for both domestic and international trade. Besides handling dry commodities (cement, coal, salt, scrap metal, to name a few), the port is also a major center of trade for chemical and energy companies (ProvPort, Inc. 2007). Univar, Motiva, Global Partners LP, Sprague Energy, New England Petroleum, and Enterprise Products, and National Grid all own facilities on the port (Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island 2016b). The import and export of their products often entails the constant presence of ships and trucks in the area. A major interstate highway to the west of the port adds to this traffic. In addition, these neighborhoods also host a railroad on which ethanol trains travel. Every week, these trains and other vehicles travel the area carrying two million gallons of denatured ethanol, which is highly volatile, flammable, and water soluble (Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management 2011:10). The Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island (EJLRI) points to concerns about chain reactions among the whole cluster of industrial facilities if just one of these facilities or vehicles were to have a leak or an accident (Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island 2016b).

In addition to the potential for major chain accidents, this kind of clustering can lead to chronic health risks for residents living nearby. The EPA’s “EJScreen” tool shows that the people living within a one-mile radius of National Grid’s proposed facility are already facing health risks based on their location. Compared to the rest of the state, these residents are in the 90th percentile or higher for their proximity to high traffic, hazardous waste, facilities that discharge into water, and facilities that require a Risk Management Plan (see fig. 1 in Figure Appendix) (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2017). They are in the 78th and 73rd percentiles for cancer risk and respiratory health risk, respectively. The area is also a “hot spot” for asthma rates in children and asthma-related hospitalizations, according to the Rhode
Island Department of Health (Rhode Island Department of Health 2015:2). Environmental justice theory argues that many of these environmental and health hazards are present in South Providence due to discrimination based on racial and financial demographics of the community.

*Demographic Risk and Environmental Justice*

Compared to the rest of the state, the neighborhoods of Washington Park and Lower South Providence contain a very high percentage of non-white residents (see fig. 2). The EJScreen tool uses select demographic characteristics, such as racial makeup, that can make certain communities more vulnerable to environmental inequality and the health risks that come with it. It considers minority population in the area, low income population, those linguistically isolated, those with less than a high school education, and age-based vulnerability. The area around the proposed site for the liquefaction facility ranks very highly for all of these characteristics compared to the rest of the state (except in elderly population) (see fig. 3). The neighborhoods surrounding the port are also very dense—Lower South Providence contains an average of 13,144 people per square mile (see fig. 4).

When these demographic vulnerabilities are considered alongside baseline health risks, such as hazardous waste proximity, these risks can increase and become even more detrimental. This is reflected in Figure 5, in which the vulnerable demographics of the South Providence neighborhoods have been compounded with the environmental health risks these residents face daily. Considering the demographics of these neighborhoods causes the risks associated with the industrial port to become much higher.

For over three decades, studies have shown that race and income, in that order, are the strongest predictors of a community’s proximity to harmful sources of pollution (Bullard 1994).
Environmental justice has come to serve as the umbrella theory under which this inequitable distribution of environmental health risk is studied. “Environmental justice communities” often become trapped in a cycle in which chemical and energy companies place hazardous facilities in neighborhoods that are already vulnerable and disadvantaged because of their racial and financial demographics, with or without undertones of race or class-based discrimination. In turn, the placement of these facilities in these neighborhoods, through adverse impacts on physical and psychological health, disadvantages these communities even further. The statistics above demonstrate that South Providence neighborhoods have characteristics that make them susceptible to such a cycle. Environmental justice theory asserts both that South Providence’s demographics cause the increase in environmental risks the community faces due to systematic discrimination and that its demographics also continuously magnify the level of risk residents face.

Risk Normalization and Mobilization in South Providence

A “Vulnerable” Community: Forming Collective Identity

The No LNG in PVD Coalition, a group of local residents and organizations opposed to the liquefaction facility, held an open community meeting in October 2016. At the start of the meeting, once refreshments had been taken and Spanish translation had been offered to each person who walked through the door, leaders had the attendees on their feet for the first agenda item: “theatre of the oppressed.” On a small stage, the attendees used imaginative gestures to become the parts and places of the South Providence community surrounding the proposed facility: some people took on the roles of the numerous schools in the area, and others were the hospitals and the densely-packed houses. Yet more people were sent up to the stage to “become”
the ethanol train running through, the major highway and its trucks, and the many chemical facilities that currently dot the water’s edge.³

Eventually, the remaining people were sent up and told to navigate the space, which had become crowded and chaotic. These people later explained how difficult it was to move through the stage and constantly have to dodge and block out the sounds of the “highway” and the “industrial port” actors. They remarked that the space had made them feel “uncomfortable” and “vulnerable.” Through this activity, and especially through its use as an opening icebreaker, the leaders of the No LNG in PVD Coalition established vulnerability as a unifying identity for the community surrounding the proposed facility.³ This “vulnerable community” framework is frequently used by the movement against the facility, and serves to expose how the facility’s risks would be exacerbated and compounded if it is built among already overburdened people. With an identity of vulnerability, the movement framed the community as inherently incompatible with even a small and (apparently) routine increase in environmental risk.

Vulnerability emerged as a collective identity partly because other, more categorical identities were varied in the area. For example, the community surrounding the proposed liquefaction facility is made up of multiple neighborhoods—the facility’s site rests near the border between Washington Park and Lower South Providence, so a neighborhood-based collective identity would have been hard to agree upon. In addition, four other small neighborhoods border these two on the west, north, and south. Leaders of the opposition movement often debated with National Grid about which neighborhoods to include as “impacted” and about the size of the radius that should outline the facility’s potential impact zone (“RE: National Grid LNG LLC Fields Point Liquefaction Project…” 2016). Even at the

³ From author field notes: “No LNG in PVD” Coalition Community Meeting, October 29, 2016
community meeting described above, attendees puzzled over similar questions of geography, with one person concluding that “it’s hard to know who will be impacted.” Social movement theorist Sidney Tarrow explains that categorical identities like geography are often too overlapping and pluralistic “around which to mobilize a challenge to powerful enemies” (Tarrow 2011:151). On the other hand, vulnerability offered an identity that encompassed any resident whose demographics or whose proximity to the site, in any combination, increased their risk of injury by the facility or by the port’s other industry.

Vulnerability was established as a unifying identity framework early in the movement against the liquefaction facility. Prior to No LNG’s community meeting in 2016, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) held its own public hearing. FERC will eventually decide the ultimate fate of the facility, and when FERC asked for public comments in the hearing, vulnerability was a consistent theme among the Providence and Rhode Island residents who got up and spoke against it. While a few people explicitly characterized the surrounding community as “vulnerable,” many others attempted to paint a picture similar to the theatrical scene above, explaining that the uniquely high number of schools and hospitals in the area meant that the facility would put children, pregnant women, and sick people disproportionately at risk. About half the speakers mentioned the high proportion of people of color in the community, and some of these people directly characterized National Grid’s actions as “environmental racism” (Ahlquist 2015a). A few people also discussed the high rates of asthma in the community, as well as the disproportionate asthma rates among communities of color across the country.

Others at the hearing discussed the surrounding community’s low-income majority and the ethical implications of “putting a low-income community of color at risk.” A speaker with the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island questioned how the facility would bring any
benefit to the already vulnerable community, especially since they would have to contribute to its funding through their taxes: “most of us are struggling to pay our heating bills anyway” (Ahlquist 2015b). At No LNG’s community meeting mentioned above, a resident living close to the proposed facility, Sophia, described these conditions more palpably. She said that in her social work, she would often go into her neighbors’ apartments in the winter to find children huddled on their couch with their coats on—the heating had been shut off because the families couldn’t afford the bills. The conversation then turned to National Grid and its claims that the facility would ensure heating for RI residents during the 9 coldest days of winter. “This community? They won’t get those 9 days,” said Sophia, referring to the shutoffs National Grid would inevitably impose on her neighbors. In this way, Sophia situated her neighborhood’s vulnerability as partly perpetuated and aggravated by National Grid itself, strengthening the idea that the community’s identity is firmly incompatible with the company’s project.

It is important to note that the vulnerability identity, while used by some South Providence residents, is also often perpetuated by movement leaders from outside the community. For instance, at FERC’s public hearing, only 7 out of 35 speakers claimed to live in the neighborhoods surrounding the proposed facility, but most speakers still somehow identified the surrounding community as “vulnerable” or “at risk” (Ahlquist 2015a). In addition, the “theatre of the oppressed” activity mentioned above was planned in collaboration between a few community leaders, leaders of the No LNG in PVD Coalition, and some members of the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island (EJLRI).³ People from the latter two groups tend to live in a variety of communities: some from other parts of the city of Providence, and others from outside the city entirely. Thus, due to the relatively low (yet powerful) presence of
community members within the movement, it is hard to know whether the vulnerability identity is fully endorsed by the community at large.

It is also noteworthy that when residents from the impacted neighborhoods do use vulnerability as a unifying identity, they often modify its connotations. At FERC’s hearing, one community member repeated a line she’d heard that night and liked. “We don’t have the money, but we have people,” she said, naming some fellow community members who were active in the movement (Ahlquist 2015d). Another community resident at the hearing, who was actively involved in the movement, similarly began her speech by discussing National Grid’s frequent heating shutoffs in the area and how the community also “is already bearing the brunt of far too many environmentally-toxic sites.” After establishing this, she expressed her concern that National Grid thinks the community is “not paying attention” or “not educated enough to fight back,” ending her speech with a message to FERC: “we [the community] will regulate you” (Ahlquist 2015c). The surrounding residents who identify their communities as “vulnerable” also recognize a need to balance this label with sub-identities of strength and power that are born of facing such risks daily and that will allow the community to stop National Grid’s project in the end.

**Challenges in Resources and Capacity**

Leaders of the No LNG in PVD Coalition and its supporters often point to a lack of resources and capacity as being one of the biggest challenges of the campaign. At No LNG’s community meeting in October 2016, one Providence resident complained of a lack of outside support: “Where are all the environmental organizations?” The resident noted that many local and state organizations were “helping Burrillville [RI] full time,” and while some of these groups
had “supportive” of the South Providence movement, there were others that “we just haven’t seen.” I discuss external support networks further in a later section.

Sophia compared the movement’s internal capacity with Burrillville’s. She joked dryly, “if we could just get a bus of all the Burrillville people down here, we’d be set...we just need to generate that [kind of support] here.” She explained that most of her neighbors in the area, many of whom work multiple jobs or are single parents, simply don’t have the time to participate in a movement like this one. It was especially difficult to encourage participation from these residents when the movement’s next steps felt nebulous. There needed to be a strong “sticking point” and clear “call to action” to justify asking these residents to take valuable time out of their day to contribute to the movement.

Months after this community meeting when I spoke with Daniel, another core organizer of the No LNG in PVD movement, the verdict was the same. One of the biggest obstacles they needed to overcome, as he saw it, was still a lack of capacity—there simply weren’t enough people yet to keep the movement growing as fast as it needed to, or to make the movement’s voice loud enough to be heard by state or federal agencies. To this coalition leader, however, merely adding more bodies to the effort wasn’t enough. He asserted that the movement must be placed under the leadership of the residents that would be most directly impacted by the liquefaction facility. Shear capacity-building, while important, was not always the central concern of movement initiators like Daniel.

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4 From author field notes: personal communication with Daniel, February 22, 2017
Who is the Movement?

At the FERC public hearing mentioned above, a resident living close to the proposed facility, Maria, got up to speak. The first thing she noted was that she was surprised to look around the room and not see anybody from the impacted community. One woman called out, “I’m here!” to which Maria replied kindly, “yes, but very little [community members here], that’s what I mean” (Ahlquist 2015d). She then questioned aloud whether FERC did enough to let community members know about this hearing. Out of 35 people who spoke at the FERC hearing, only 7 claimed to be from the immediate, impacted community.

Ratios were similar at the No LNG in PVD Coalition community meeting held a year later—although some community members were present, more attendees were from the wealthier east side of Providence, local universities, or other parts of Rhode Island entirely. This fact was mentioned in multiple group discussions. The community members that did attend pointed to this as a significant flaw in the movement that required solutions. During a small group breakout session, a local college student suggested that she could recruit some of her college friends to go door-knocking in the community to speak about the campaign with residents. A South Providence resident in the group thanked her for the suggestion and acknowledged that the human capacity could be helpful. This resident went on to explain that ultimately, however, this kind of help might do more harm than good. Having college students become a major liaison between the campaign and impacted residents could dissuade them from becoming active in the movement, she explained. She argued that while it’s helpful to include “other people” in the movement, it’s important that the movement “keep true to the community.”3
This view, shared by several other residents at the meeting, firmly rejects some of the movement-building procedures laid out by John McCarthy and Mayer Zald’s resource mobilization perspective. This theory argues that for movements to be successful, their support bases might necessarily contain outside supporters that have “no commitment to the values that underlie specific movements,” but can provide “money, facilities, and even labor” (McCarthy and Zald 1977:1216). But leaders from South Providence, faced with an offer of this type of support, had already decided that solely focusing on resource mobilization was potentially harmful.

Daniel, one of the leaders of the No LNG, similarly prioritized movement representation over resource attainment. In fact, he stated that if the movement didn’t create new sustainable community leadership in the process of getting the liquefaction facility denied, he would question whether they really “won” anything at all. A year into the campaign, one of No LNG’s goals was to gather enough funding to pay a South Providence resident to become an official coordinator and leader for No LNG. Daniel asserted that it was important for community residents to become leaders of No LNG and the face of the movement. “The process” it would take to make that happen was more important, in many ways, than the movement’s ability to get National Grid’s project denied in the end.4

Sidney Tarrow explains that the “diffusion of conflict” is a natural process in the growth of social movements—initially, a smaller group of “early risers” demonstrates the potential effectiveness of collective action, which encourages secondary groups, who are normally “more quiescent and have fewer resources to engage in collective action,” to “rise” too (Tarrow 2011:205). To an extent, the initial No LNG in PVD leaders took this pattern and attempted to direct it manually. Unlike with many social movement, which diffuse passively according to
Tarrow, Daniel and other core members of the Coalition identified the need to actively induce this type of diffusion. They realized that in order for the movement to build community leadership in addition to resisting the liquefaction facility, it had to spread with purpose and reach the most impacted residents. People living near the port knew their community best, of course, and were the ones who could most effectively begin to disrupt the risk-normalizing narrative that corporations and local governments had been advancing in the area for decades.

*Building on What’s “Already” There: National Grid Normalizing Risk*

In the documents it released to the public, National Grid rarely mentions the specific pollutants the new liquefaction facility will produce or how these pollutants might be emitted. According to outside sources, this kind of facility can emit greenhouse gases during its liquefaction and storage processes—its power generators, fired heaters, and flaring and venting from storage tanks can all become direct sources of emissions, while LNG pumps and compressors could accidentally leak emissions as well (The LEVON Group, LLC 2015:16).

National Grid acknowledges that methane will be released during flares, but otherwise, it states, the facility “isn’t expected” to emit pollutants during its regular operations (Faulker 2015). If National Grid ever addressed the other pollutants I discussed above, the public would not know, since the company’s “extensive analysis” on air quality impacts was not released to the public. National Grid stated that there would be no “significant” impact on local air quality or public health with the new facility—most of the air quality impacts will result from its construction and therefore be temporary (National Grid 2015a). Traffic levels as a result of the facility will remain the same as before, with a slight decrease to 2,346 truck trips per year as opposed to the former 2,586 (although if National Grid uses this new facility to export liquefied
natural gas, as some think it will, truck traffic may increase) (National Grid 2015a). National Grid also analyzed the cumulative impacts of the liquefaction facility when it is added to the other industrial facilities already covering the port on the water. After examining the current impacts of these other facilities within a small radius, National Grid determined that the “contribution of this project to the cumulative impacts of all other projects would be temporary and minimal” (National Grid 2015a).

National Grid justified the proposed physical location for the facility in similar language. On the website for the facility, National Grid bullets the main reasons for choosing the location on the port in South Providence:

1. [The site] is already used for LNG storage, so no additional storage needs to be built at the site.

2. It has an existing natural gas supply infrastructure that can be used for liquefaction. No new gas pipelines or expansion of the delivery systems to the site is needed.

3. There is sufficient space within the existing plant to construct the new facility without the need to expand its footprint.

4. The location provides quick and easy access to major highways. (National Grid 2015e)

Farther down the webpage, a few more justifications are provided, such as “the new equipment is consistent in appearance with what already exists on-site,” and “there are no trees or natural growth in the area…[therefore] no vegetation or trees will be removed” (National Grid 2015e). These justifications dangerously normalize the risk already faced by the surrounding community.
In a position essay, EJLRI argued that “ongoing background pollution and risks in this area should be seen as a public health crisis.” The group refers to the fact that “the area is one of the state’s largest asthma hot spots…the neighborhood next to I95 and the Port [where the liquefaction facility will be built] has the highest levels in the state at 10.4 - 15.4 percent” (Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island 2016c). This area also has the highest asthma-related hospital visits for children in the entire city of Providence. Thus, EJLRI argued that “business as usual” and emphasis on technical convenience can become a “state of disaster for marginalized communities” (Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island 2016a). Here, risk normalization is not the neutral act it strives to seem; on the contrary, the movement urges that the tendency is dangerous.

An Expedited Process

As part of the risk normalization process, National Grid established itself early on as a non-collaborator. National Grid’s pointed tendency not to involve the community in its processes has, in many ways, situated it as the most visible, consistent, and cohesive enemy to the movement fighting the liquefaction facility. In first proposing its liquefaction facility, National Grid requested something called a “pre-filing review process.” It presented this request to FERC, the commission that would eventually permit or reject the liquefaction facility, and FERC granted it. With this type of review, National Grid is required to host only minimal opportunities for public input: in this case, there would only be one open house hosted by National Grid, one public scoping meeting hosted by FERC, and a period in which the public can submit written comments on environmental impacts (all of these steps were taken in 2015 and are described in greater detail below) (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission 2010). In requesting this type of
process, National Grid was explicit about its desire to get permits for the project as soon as possible—its justifications for requesting this type of review were that it would “provide the necessary environmental information...for review at the earliest practicable time in order to expedite the processing of NGLNG’s certificate application” (National Grid and Anthony LaRusso 2015:2).

It was clear in their request that National Grid was not trying to expedite the decision for the benefit of the surrounding community or even individual stakeholders. Although they mentioned the “stakeholder participation” as a positive of this type of review process, National Grid primarily wanted to expedite their process in order to have the facility up and running by November 2018, meeting “the needs of the customers” (2). Although “customers” gives the impression that National Grid was considering Rhode Island residents, National Grid explains much later in the document that these “customers” were actually two other companies. Both of these companies, the Narragansett Electric Company and the Boston Gas Company, are subsidiaries of National Grid, and they “requested” the liquefaction facility in the first place (National Grid 2015b:6).

Then, in its official application to build the liquefaction facility, National Grid included a “Request for Shortened Procedure and Waivers” (“RE: National Grid LNG LLC Fields Point Liquefaction Project...” 2016). Here they took advantage of two rules under FERC’s regulations, which would allow National Grid to ask FERC to waive hearings and dispose of certain proceedings under certain conditions (“385.801 Waiver of hearing (Rule 801),” “385.802 Noncontested proceedings (Rule 802)”). In making these requests, National Grid made its intentions even clearer: it wanted the approval for the liquefaction facility to come quickly and without contention or even deliberation. With these early requests, National Grid began
normalizing the construction of such a facility, justifying its riskiness with nothing more than the fact that National Grid’s subsidiaries apparently wanted the facility in place quickly.

**National Grid’s Open House**

Sticking to procedure, National Grid held its only open house in August of 2015. This open house provided some of the first red flags that National Grid was not willing to make their process any more collaborative than required. In their position paper regarding the liquefaction facility, EJLRI pointed out that this open house was not well-advertised beforehand, and required people to email the company for the specific time and date of the event (Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island 2016b). At the meeting, despite the fact that the community has a significant portion of residents who only speak Spanish, National Grid didn’t provide any Spanish translation.

Police presence was also disproportionately high, according to a report by a progressive local newspaper, RIFuture. It reports that the level of police presence changed as different groups entered the open house:

> Inside, [an hour before it started], the event was being watched over by two additional officers, one a lieutenant. There were some members of the community present, but most of those who attended seemed to be with the RI Sierra Club or Fossil Free Rhode Island and opposed to National Grid’s plan….When the young people representing PrYSM, PSU and EJLRI entered the room, they were followed in by the [five] police officers from outside, three of whom were wearing their motorcycle helmets...it was hard not to see the sudden explosion of police on the scene occurring precisely when people of color arrived as anything
other than an expression of the kind of institutionalized environmental and economic racism that the groups were protesting. (Ahlquist 2015e)

At a FERC public hearing a month later, a mother from the community cited this fact as a sign of environmental racism (Ahlquist 2015a). This high police presence was something National Grid had ordered beforehand, apparently in response to a power plant protest-related arrest in Burrillville, Rhode Island the same morning.

*National Grid’s “Public Participation Plan”*

This open house was not regarded as a forum in which community voices were heard, and nor, it seems, was that ever National Grid’s intention for the meeting. In its “public participation plan,” National Grid listed goals of the open meeting, most of which focused on “educating” the public, “providing information” on the project, and “addressing” questions and concerns. Out of nine goals for the open house, only one suggested that the meeting would be anything but one-sided: it was supposed to be “a forum in which project stakeholders and the community may express their views.” In the actual open house, five people from the community were provided a microphone and given the chance to hurriedly cover a wide range of arguments against the facility. But aside from this, National Grid had not planned for any sort of reciprocal, balanced dialogue between the company and local stakeholders (National Grid 2015c:9-10).

Even before this meeting was held, inconsistencies in National Grid’s “public participation” plan suggested that community collaboration was not a priority for the company. In the plan, National Grid provided a list of stakeholders it would involve in its participation procedures: mostly regulatory government bodies, and a few Rhode Island-based institutions. National Grid only listed two groups from within the affected community: “South Providence
Neighborhood Association” and the “Washington Park Neighborhood Association” (National Grid 2015c:12). However, as EJLRI pointed out later, neither of the groups existed (Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island 2016b). A National Grid representative rebutted that “the stakeholder list was first developed when both of these groups were active in the neighborhood,” but EJLRI said the groups had never existed at any point. EJLRI even released a meme with a snapshot of National Grid’s stakeholder list, jokingly explaining the inconsistency (see fig. 6)(Ahlquist 2015f).

Whether or not it was an innocent mistake on National Grid’s part, the oversight was an introduction to the company’s disdain for meaningful public collaboration that characterized its relationship with the community thereafter. Although some real community groups did attend National Grid’s open house, such as the Providence Student Youth Movement, the Providence Student Union, and EJLRI, these groups were never added to National Grid’s apparently “evolving” list of stakeholders (National Grid 2015d, Ahlquist 2015f). When National Grid released a new version of the list, however, the names of the false neighborhood groups mentioned above were removed.

*Quietly Rejecting Requests for Involvement*

National Grid began to actively evade public collaboration when the community requested more opportunities for involvement the following year. In August 2016, some Providence residents (not all of whom lived in South Providence) signed a petition to have National Grid carry out a Public Involvement Plan. Different from National Grid’s abovementioned plan, the Public Involvement Plan is much more comprehensive and can be
mandated by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) at the request of stakeholders ("Public Involvement Plan Process Initiation Letter" 2016).

When National Grid was officially notified that it would have to implement a Public Involvement Plan, because of the petition, it was unclear how or whether they responded. After a month of silence, National Grid’s attorney stated that the company would not carry out the Public Involvement Plan. Its memorandum argued that since the liquefaction facility would be federally permitted, federal law preempted a state regulation like the Public Involvement Plan, especially if it “threatens to delay or burden a FERC approved project” ("Re: Liquefaction Project…” 2016). National Grid did not officially notify the community, the DEM, or FERC of their intentions not to carry out the Public Involvement Plan (“No LNG in PVD Open Letter to the RI Department of Environmental Management” 2016). In this instance, National Grid blatantly prioritized the expediting of its permitting process over comprehensiveness and community involvement, which likely would have brought issues of vulnerability and health risk to the table. Thus, National Grid took advantage of a subjective and arguably broken piece of bureaucracy in order to pass off their new facility as business-as-usual, normal and benign enough to deserve freedom from the burden of deliberation.

*Creating Space for Involvement*

Shortly afterward, National Grid began construction in an area close to the facility. Although the company’s spokesperson denied that the construction was related to the liquefaction facility, National Grid’s contractor erected a sign suggesting that the construction was, indeed, related to the liquefaction facility. National Grid told their contractor to replace the
sign, but not before opponents took notice. No LNG quickly released a sharp statement on the incident:

This is another glaring example of why we cannot trust the process at National Grid’s word...National Grid and their contractor Kiewit do know what they are doing, they are forcing unneeded and dangerous fossil fuel infrastructure on a community of color that has raised many environmental justice concerns. They know this, and they think they can get away with it. We’re going to make sure they don’t. (Ahlquist 2016a).

Throughout their application process, National Grid’s actions remained decisively discreet and uncommunicated, in hopes of a quick, streamlined permitting process for the project. When these expectations became apparent to project opponents, the movement adapted to National Grid’s normalizing tendencies, countering National Grid’s silence and expedience with noise and calls for deliberation and caution within the decision process. EJLRI, for instance, asked FERC to “deny [National Grid’s] requests and conduct a thorough, rather than an expedited review” (“RE: National Grid…” 2016). As adaptation to National Grid’s strategies, the movement often strove to simply secure thoroughness and comprehensiveness within the process rather than aim to get the project or its components denied outright. For example, the community-requested Public Involvement Plan would have simply regulated soil remediation at the construction site, and wouldn’t have necessarily blocked the liquefaction project entirely. However, this plan could have substantially slowed the review process relative to the quick pace National Grid is imposing.

Community members have also pushed back against National Grid’s unwillingness to involve residents by frequently calling out the company and, in some cases, creating their own
spaces for deliberation. The community speakers at FERC’s public hearing in 2015 provided poignant examples of this. Maria, who’d lived in the neighborhood for 24 years, said that she was “very surprised to look around this room and not see anyone from the community,” to which she got a few cheers. Speaking to FERC members, she said “I wanted to ask you what you guys did to let the community know about this meeting?” (Ahlquist 2015c). Hannah, who lives very close to the facility, said she first wanted to speak directly to National Grid. She turned to face their representatives and said “you could have notified us [the community], in any way, that this meeting was happening.” She then informed National Grid that she was a healthcare professional, and that she had personally gone and notified “every community leader around here that I’m affiliated with” about the project (Ahlquist 2015g).

Finally Camila, a board member of EJLRI, got up and spoke in Spanish. Quickly, a FERC member interrupted in English, saying “I think we have a translator, because this will not help us, if you…so...” and trailing off. She shrugged and explained in English, “This is for the community, not for you,” to which she got loud applause. The FERC member said that she would need to use the English translator if she wanted her comments to be “on the record,” but an audience member yelled “Just keep going [in Spanish],” and she did. She then focused on the project’s disproportionate impacts on the Latino community and the fact that they have their own solutions in mind. She ended by saying that they, the community, should deport National Grid, which got laughs and cheers from the audience (Ahlquist 2015h). By defying the FERC member and continuing building this space in the presence of these two groups, who apparently could not use the views that came out of the speech, Camila and the community exposed National Grid and FERC for their antipathy towards marginalized views. Here, Camila assertively built a 3-minute space in which she and the Spanish-speaking community could finally hold a small conversation...
and discuss solutions on their own terms, something that neither National Grid nor FERC had provided.

Searching for State Support

National Grid was consistently averse to any sort of participatory process; thus, in National Grid, the movement had an antagonist whose stance was strong and whose body was cohesive enough to necessitate clearly-defined counter arguments and protests. Since no other group had as strong a positive stake in the project as National Grid, stances of other groups, especially government agencies close to the project, were often internally diverse and less transparent. The movement found this to be true of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM). As discussed, RIDEM initially requested a Public Involvement Plan from National Grid on behalf of the community. However, after this, RIDEM then did not do anything to break National Grid’s silence surrounding the Public Involvement Plan. RIDEM also did not reassure the community that the Public Involvement Plan was going to happen at all. Once National Grid began arguing that federal law preempted that sort of the Public Involvement Plan, RIDEM did not give any public rebuttal, nor did RIDEM communicate what would happen next. The No LNG in PVD Coalition took note of this and wrote in a letter to RIDEM:

The signatories on the Public Involvement Plan petition have not received any follow up communication from either RIDEM or National Grid about the PIP in the two months since the petition was submitted on August 31st, yet construction at the site is ongoing...There is an urgent need for RIDEM to be proactive with community engagement, posted notices, information sharing, public meetings,
technical assistance, and ensuring meaningful involvement of community participation in decision-making. ("No LNG in PVD Open Letter to the RI Department of Environmental Management" 2016:2-3)

Months after this letter was sent, RIDEM still had not given a public response. In a public statement, No LNG made their irritation more explicit, complaining that RIDEM “refuses to hold National Grid accountable and enforce the legally petitioned for Public Involvement Plan,” and even claiming that National Grid is “pulling the strings of our public officials” (Ahlquist 2016a).

The movement against the liquefaction facility recognized RIDEM’s silence and made it known. During the No LNG in PVD Coalition’s community meeting in 2016, in a role playing scenario, an embodied “RIDEM” literally threw his hands in the air, muttered nervously, “not my problem!” and turned towards the FERC to tell him what to do next. The person representing the FERC faced to the RIDEM actor in turn, doing the same.

Since the liquefaction facility was first proposed, strategies of the opposition movement shifted. In earlier interactions between the movement and the state government, opponents often focused on convincing state bodies to oppose or deny the project entirely. Increasingly, as seen above, opponents then began to urge state agencies like RIDEM to simply come out of silence, give the community answers, and exercise at least the specific authorities they had. Opponents had to shift their language from the informational and the emotional to the political and the technical, from urges against a risky project, to urging that neutrality and inactivity could, in themselves, become dangerous. And all the while, the movement had to ensure that its interactions with the state were uncritical enough that the state might later become an ally and offer the resources required to fight a federally-regulated project.
Searching for City Support

Unlike the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission or DEM, the Providence City Council has no prescribed role in deciding whether the liquefaction facility should be built. But even without ties to the official decision process, the Providence City Council was slow to take sides. In the spring of 2016, the Providence City Council passed a resolution promising that the city would perform a “thorough” review of the proposed project, but months later, the councillor who passed the resolution noted that “unfortunately, here we are in the summer and no such meetings have been held…” (Ahlquist 2016b, “Journal of Proceedings…” 2016a). As a solution, he introduced another, stronger resolution in autumn for the council to oppose the project entirely, but it unexpectedly did not pass. Instead, the council scheduled a meeting to hear public testimony on the resolution (“Journal of Proceedings…” 2016b). However, this meeting was cancelled with barely an hour’s notice because, as the committee chair explained,

“We [the council] have not heard sufficient testimony from the energy developers on the plan itself—the productive results, the environmental impact—what is good versus bad….we need discussions in an open forum from those proposing the LNG and receive any counter testimony on the plan or proposal.” (Ahlquist 2016c)

A report by local newspaper RIFuture pointed out that National Grid had just as much time to prepare for this open meeting as opponents, if not more, considering that it hires a full-time legal staff. According to this same report, it seemed that the councillor who had drafted the opposition resolution had not been made aware that the open meeting was cancelled, or been told why (Ahlquist 2016c).
Two months later, the council rescheduled a meeting for public comment, because Providence residents had petitioned for it under the Home Rule Charter (“Home Rule Charter” 1980:411). Although the council claimed to have been waiting for National Grid join in and give their testimony, still no representatives showed up. 18 speakers (3 stating they were from the community) showed up, and all spoke against the facility and in favor of the council’s resolution to oppose it. Many of the speakers appeared baffled as to why the council had evaded the resolution for so long and not shown the community any support. One of the first speakers, a woman from the city, opened by saying “this is your opportunity to clear ourselves as supporters of the citizens who elected you” (Ahlquist 2016d). A mother of two living close to the proposed facility implored “I know you care about Washington Park, I know you care about South Providence, because you wouldn’t be city council folks if you didn’t want to be, right?” (Ahlquist 2016e). A man from Providence accused the council: “I’d say that you’re complicit. You had a chance to hold a public hearing on this and you didn’t do so until you were forced by public petition. That is shameful.” Referring to the cancelled hearing from a few months before, he argued “I think these people here were probably inconvenienced by coming here at 5pm on a Tuesday [and seeing the hearing cancelled]. A 50 billion dollar corporation with teams of lawyers is the reason that you can’t hold a public hearing?” (Ahlquist 2016f). Almost half of the speakers at the hearing asked the city council, in various phrasings, to “join us,” or “represent your citizens.”

Although all public speakers argued against the liquefaction facility, the council again delayed their decision to oppose it “for a week or two”—they were not required to actually vote on the issue yet (“Proceedings of Committee on Ordinances Public Hearing” 2016). At the time of writing, four months after this meeting, the Providence City Council still has yet to vote on
whether it officially opposes the facility. According to a report by RIFuture, some were “convinced that there were some backroom shenanigans involved” when the city council suddenly cancelled that first public hearing. When the reporter questioned the council about this, he received no comment (Ahlquist 2016c). Whether or not evidence eventually supports this suspicion, the opaqueness and inconsistency of the council’s decision process fell in line with RIDEM’s similarly vague timelines for enforcing proper regulations on National Grid.

In Power in Movement, Sidney Tarrow argues that these kinds of delays are often revealed as conscious tactics to produce “exhaustion” in members of a social movement. He notes that usually, delay-induced exhaustion causes members “on the periphery” of a movement to drop out first; this group often includes members “lacking strong motivation” and possessing less resources than the core leaders (Tarrow 2011:205-206). The Providence City Council’s actions began to induce this process early on: when the hearing mentioned above was abruptly cancelled, several residents reported to RI Future that they had made financial investments in attending the hearing, such as purchasing extended parking passes or taking unpaid time off of work. For many of the attendees, these resource investments were not trivial, as some were on “a very limited budget” (Ahlquist 2016c). Thus, by refusing to hear and by disadvantaging people that may disrupt the narrative of routine surrounding risk on the port, the Providence City Council directly contributes to the risk-normalizing cycle initiated by National Grid.

**Searching for Outside Alliance**

The movement opposing the project does have some official sources of support, mostly from various individual state politicians. When the No LNG in PVD Coalition sent a mass letter to elected officials, 11 state representatives (out of 75) and 5 state senators (out of 38) signed on
to nominally join the coalition and show their support for the movement. Importantly, the mayor of Providence also showed his support for the opposition movement, and even argued that “the proposed location for this project is surrounded by dense, low-income neighborhoods and should not be subjected to the environmental and health burdens associated with the proposed facility” (Elorza 2016).

By the time of writing, however, the liquefaction facility debate had not reached the councils of other Rhode Island cities and towns; no outside councils have yet considered resolutions to oppose or support the project. Thus, opponents of the project do not enjoy alliance from other local governments, and residents of other towns do not have the chance to voice their concerns or officially offer resources to the South Providence community.

Potential reasons for this lack of outside support are many: these towns may have assumed that their opposition would not have influence on a federally-regulated project, or nearby they could have supported the project, trusting National Grid’s well-advertised word that the facility would reduce heat shutoffs for their residents during winter shortages, or that it made sense to site the facility on an already-industrial port. One of the main purposes of such risk normalization is to silence word of risk and subdue critique surrounding it; thus, it could be argued that this normalization succeeded in preventing the facility from catching the attention of other municipalities. In addition, the movement in South Providence has not directly sought the support of any outside towns—a tactic that, as we’ll later see, became central to the fight in Burrillville.

The opposition movement also had a support base from local and national nonprofits, with 33 signing on to join the No LNG in PVD Coalition—14 locally-based, 7 statewide, and 12

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5 Information obtained from private internal No LNG documents
Generally, the organizations’ missions included topics like toxics (water, air, and soil), social or environmental justice, racism, community development, human rights, fossil fuels, and climate change. A few local businesses and two churches also signed on. Save the Bay, a Narragansett Bay conservation organization with offices nearly adjacent to the proposed site, have not expressed their opposition to the liquefaction facility. Their lack of response was well-noticed by opponents—during the No LNG in PVD community meeting, the organization’s name was met with scoffs from the people attending. Some explained that they’d heard that the organization is currently being funded by National Grid for a major project. Others suggested that Save the Bay was simply a very “safe” group, and thus would not support a movement this like one.³

Most conservation groups in the area were similarly silent. Although the opposition movement never made conservation-based arguments against the facility, it is not always the case that conservation groups limit their support to purely conservation-based issues. In their arguments against the Burrillville power plant, for example, Save the Bay, the Nature Conservancy, the Conservation Law Foundation, and the Audubon Society sometimes stray from conservation-based reasoning. Some of these groups point to the dangerous perpetuation of fossil fuel reliance as a major reason to deny the power plant (Audubon Society of Rhode Island 2016, The Nature Conservancy of Rhode Island 2016). None of those organizations took an official stance on the liquefaction facility proposed for South Providence, even though the facility would similarly perpetuate a fossil fuel-based infrastructure. Since the facility would be placed among a cluster of other industry, these groups may have felt that—as the narratives of National Grid’s and local governments argue—the location for the facility was simply “routine” and to be expected.
The Fight Against the Power Plant in Burrillville, RI

About 25 miles northwest of South Providence, another environmental battle unfolds in parallel—here, the Burrillville community is fighting against the siting of a new natural gas power plant proposed by the energy company, Invenergy. The town of Burrillville is large and fills the northwest corner of Rhode Island (see fig. 9). In the town’s west side rests the plot of land on which energy company Invenergy is proposing to build a new natural gas power plant. The plot of land is currently forest, as is most of Burrillville with the exception of some spiraling residential development in the town’s center. Invenergy proposed the power plant in late 2015, and as of the time of writing, its fate won’t be decided until Fall of 2017 or later (Invenergy Thermal Development LLC 2015).

Because of its rural nature, Burrillville is much denser than South Providence, with the area surrounding the proposed power plant site containing about 131 people per square mile. The town of Burrillville is also very different from South Providence demographically (“Estimated population density between 2011-2015” 2015). Unlike South Providence, which contains many people of color, only roughly 3% of Burrillville residents are non-white (“Estimated percent of all people who were of a race other than White between 2011-2015” 2015). Compared to the rest of the state, Burrillville is in the 40th and 44th percentiles for its number of low-income and linguistically-isolated populations, respectively (see fig. 7) (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2017).

Generally, the Burrillville community faces slightly less environmental risk than most communities in the state. The houses immediately around the power plant site are in the 57th

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6 Demographic samples taken from 1-mile radius around site of proposed power plant
percentile for small particulate matter pollution, which is likely due to a compressor station nearby. For most other environmental hazards, though, the town of Burrillville does not experience high levels of risk compared to the rest of the state and especially compared to South Providence.

Community Identity in Burrillville

The strongest opponents of Invenergy’s proposed power plant have a unifying identity in the town’s name; they belong to Burrillville. Unlike in South Providence, where National Grid’s facility would rest near the border of multiple city neighborhoods, Invenergy’s proposed power plant would be surrounded by nothing but official Burrillville territory for miles. Thus, small organizations like Keep Burrillville Beautiful were formed in response to the power plant proposal, and signs reading “Save Burrillville: No New Power Plant” were created and distributed. The movement against the power plant was able to use a geographic space and its name as a collective identity.

Burrillville’s rural nature was possibly a more important aspect of the movement’s collective identity, though. This identity proved especially powerful in that it made Burrillville feel inherently incompatible with a new power plant, and argued the power plant’s abnormality in the context of Burrillville’s landscape. While the South Providence movement employed a collective identity that focused on people and pointed to the community’s population density, the Burrillville movement emphasized an opposite point. Protecting Burrillville’s rural, forested terrain from industrial development is a popular argument against the power plant within the movement, and it led to the need to emphasize the town’s sparse population and scenic identity. At the top of their website, Keep Burrillville Beautiful argued that the plant would “result in the
unnecessary industrialization of our rural region and neighborhoods. It would destroy hundreds of acres of pristine interior forest right next to beautiful recreational and conservation areas…” (see fig. 8)(“What’s the deal with this power plant?” 2016). This “rural character” is continuously echoed and prioritized by Burrillville residents speaking against the power plant at open hearings and meetings. As one resident summed it up, “whenever someone moves into town, they say ‘I like Burrillville because it is out in the country’...why should we be forced to compromise that?” (Ahlquist 2016g).

Resources and Movement Makeup

Human capacity and financial resources proved much less of a barrier for the Burrillville movement than for the movement in South Providence. Seas of yellow and white printed signs would hover above the audiences for most open hearings and meetings, and occasionally, groups wait outside the venues lending out extra signs.7 Sometimes, organizations like Keep Burrillville Beautiful created signs specific to whatever sub-issue was being debated—even if that smaller issue would only be discussed at a few hearings.7

Elizabeth, a movement leader who was active in some smaller Burrillville environmental movements before the plant was proposed, said that the plant in particular had “brought the people of Burrillville together.” Once her neighbors “woke up” to the dangers of what Invenergy was proposing, she said, the people of Burrillville quickly joined forces to fight the plant.8 Elizabeth’s words are evidenced by high levels of attendance at any and all power plant-related hearings. Whether the host of the meeting is Invenergy, the Energy Facility Siting Board, or the

7 From author field notes: Burrillville Town Council Hearing on Tax Treaty with Invenergy, October 26, 2016
8 From author field notes: Personal communication with Elizabeth, March 16, 2017
Burrillville Town Council, residents of Burrillville (especially, it seems, retirees) often pack the venue to its full capacity. When I first attended one of these hearings as a newcomer, a woman greeted me by saying that she and her neighbors had been “at this for over a year,” and a group of residents around her nodded in agreement. The movement’s geography-based identity was directly reflected in the human makeup of the movement. Unlike in South Providence, the makeup of the movement and the amount of local residents involved was never a major point of concern or a barrier for the core movement leaders.

**Interactions with the State**

Invenergy’s proposed power plant is state regulated, and its fate will be decided by Rhode Island’s Energy Facility Siting Board (EFSB). The EFSB is made up of three board members, one of whom is the director of RIDEM, and they conduct all deliberation and decision making in public (“Rules of Practice and Procedure” 1995). Thus, the EFSB held numerous open hearings and meetings since Invenergy first proposed the power plant to the board. Most of these meetings are streamed live online, recorded, and transcribed into publicly-accessible documents. In addition, most of these documents and videos, as well as EFSB meeting notices and Invenergy’s applications, are organized onto a single government-run web page (“SB 2015-06…” 2015). This is not the case in South Providence. There, FERC has provided no such database and the opposition movement has had to collect and organize documents internally.

In Burrillville, the EFSB has held at least 13 open meetings hearings related to the power plant since early 2016. At least 6 of these hearings accepted public comment from the audience (“SB 2015-06…” 2015). Although the EFSB is not required to take advisory opinions or public comments into account in making their decision, the number of open hearings they held with
citizens gave residents space to deliberate and build among their neighbors’ opinions, express the emotional aspects of their arguments to government decision makers, and gauge the board’s responses (“Frequently Asked Question - General” 2016). With only one open house from National Grid and one open hearing from FERC, South Providence residents were severely limited in such opportunities—a symptom of a political process that has been absorbed by risk-normalizing tendencies from corporations like National Grid.

It should be noted that space and time for deliberation doesn’t always equate to equal consideration of different types of knowledge, though. In Gwen Ottinger’s work in New Sarpy, Louisiana, she found that in some spaces, “the presumption of equality among participants gave experts opportunities to advance their understandings of these technical issues in ways that neither disrupted the reasoned, civil, egalitarian tone of discussions nor allowed for meaningful dissent” (Ottinger 2013:113). In Burrillville, hearings were mostly between the community and the state, rather than experts, but some residents noted a similarly shrouded inequality between them and the board in hearings. Residents called attention to this when a board member said that advisory opinions were “obviously important to the process,” and audience members shouted out their distrust of the “process” and their impressions that the process was built to work against them.9 Regardless, the South Providence movement contrasted in how relatively few platforms it was given in the first place—there was little space or time for community-authority discussions, equal or not.

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9 Author field notes: EFSB Open Meeting to discuss and rule on separate motions to dismiss filed by the Town of Burrillville and by Conservation Law Foundation, February 16, 2017
Support from the Town

The Burrillville Town Council did not take a stance on the power plant for months to avoid disturbing relations with Invenergy in the case that the town could establish a tax treaty with the company, and to avoid tainting the objectivity of some advisory opinions being written by different town boards (Ahlquist 2016h). However, the town council eventually decided to officially oppose the power plant—the council president explained to a local news channel that the “extensive reports we have received from our consultants” and the “strong concern expressed by residents,” had convinced the council to stand with the majority of residents who opposed the plant (Towne 2016). Throughout the council’s neutrality and even after they voted to oppose the plant, some Burrillville residents remained wary of the council’s intentions, especially after the town entered a tax agreement with Invenergy against the will of an auditorium packed with residents. However, the town council’s support of the opposition movement did offer the movement new resources. For example, after the town voted to officially oppose the plant, the town’s attorney frequently testified against it at most EFSB meetings and hearings. It could be argued that this extra support is a direct result of the town being given more opportunities for open debate, since the proposed power plant was not normalized by Invenergy and local governments in the way that the South Providence facility was.

Outside Support

When the town council voted to oppose the power plant alongside residents, one council member also made a spontaneous promise: Burrillville would send letters to the councils of other towns and cities in Rhode Island asking them to stand with Burrillville against the plant. After

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10 From author field notes: Personal Communication with anonymous movement leader, March 15, 2017
a few towns began expressing their opposition to the power plant, an group of Burrillville residents formed to whose job it was to keep the momentum up—according to a leader of the movement, this group travels to the council hearings of towns that were on the fence and speaks against the power plant on behalf of Burrillville. Eventually, the group Keep RI Beautiful was sharing colorful fliers online donning the number of towns that had officially opposed the power plant. At the time of writing, 34 towns and cities in Rhode Island had done so (somewhere around this time, Keep Burrillville changed their name to “Keep Rhode Island Beautiful.” A commenter on the group’s Facebook page responded to this news: “We are not just fighting for Burrillville, we are fighting for every single person in our state and region that will bear the costs of hosting this proposed facility.”) (“Facts & Resources” 2017, “Keep Rhode Island Beautiful” 2016).

Providence was one of the outside cities that voted to officially oppose the Burrillville power plant, even though it still has yet to oppose the liquefaction facility proposed within its own borders. And the Providence City Council contributed more than just a formal statement of support for the Burrillville movement—it also voted to investigate whether it was legal for a neighboring town to resell Providence water to Invenergy for the power plant (City Council of Providence 2017).

Over 40 organizations from within Rhode Island have shown support for the movement against the power plant. Because the power plant is being proposed for a population-sparse, rural area, this movement has the support of multiple conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy of Rhode Island, Save the Bay, and The Last Green Valley (“Facts & Resources” 2017). Most notably, the Conservation Law Foundation has contributed highly to the movement.
A lawyer from the organization regularly testifies against the power plant at EFSB hearings, alongside Burrillville’s town attorney.

Conclusions: Disrupting the Normal

Near the end of the Toxic Tour through South Providence, a former resident of the area concluded, “There should be no people living near this port. It should be quarantined; it should be in the middle of nowhere.” I immediately thought of the location slotted for the Burrillville power plant: numerous families that will be definitively impacted, and miles of untouched forest. If anything, this location is much closer to fulfilling the definition of “the middle of nowhere” than South Providence was, with old rental houses tightly packed onto gridded street blocks and hugging an industrial port. Why, then, was the Burrillville power plant so successfully branded as a transgression, as “abnormal,” while National Grid seemed to have convinced everyone from passersby to its regulators that they were “simply proposing to change the way we fill the existing [LNG storage] tank” (“Frequently Asked Question About Fields Point” 2015).

The evidence in this paper offers a variety of reasons, reflecting the complexity of the South Providence conflict itself and the challenges the movement is trying to overcome. Certainly, National Grid not only fuels the normalizing of environmental risk in this case, but also use it as a tactic in marketing, communications with the public, and even in official correspondence with its regulators. At the same time, the federal regulatory systems in place, at least those regulating liquefied natural gas, offer National Grid a smooth path by which to carry out this routinization of risk and push their project through quickly, quietly, and without public deliberation. State and local governments, in their delays in responses to their constituents and their passivity in committing to the community, serve to reinforce the routinization of projects
like this one. And finally, public perception, possibly shaped by the normalization tendencies of authorities and National Grid, also plays a significant role in determining the momentum against the liquefaction facility.

These patterns of normalization, along with South Providence’s demographic vulnerability and relative lack of resources, pose a unique set of challenges for mobilization. Unlike many environmental justice cases that have been studied, this case gives insight into what happens when the construction of a new facility threatens to become, in the eyes of many, an addition rather than a full-on change, a slight increase to an already-high and apparently unavoidable presence of risk rather than the introduction of risk where there was none at all. It is possible, then, that the movement against the facility adopted an identity of vulnerability on behalf of the community as a way of disrupting this assumption. If authorities and other residents could not be convinced of the proposed facility’s gravity relative to the rest of the port, maybe they could be convinced of the community’s vulnerability relative to the facility, and how this vulnerability would aggravate any seemingly inconsequential risk the facility might pose. In this way, in a sense, the movement in south Providence pushes against not just National Grid’s newest proposal, but against the hazardous port as a whole and the injustices that created it. In all, normalization cannot, in fact, be employed “in the middle of nowhere.” This tactic must ride on the shoulders of something that is already the status quo; in the case of South Providence, National Grid and its regulators are able to normalize risk only because of the countless other companies that slowly, throughout the 20th century, made a routine out of risk in the Port of Providence. Here, the normalization of risk was enabled by a history of race and class-based discrimination, and by the symptoms of that history that continue to disadvantage the community today.
During the Toxic Tour, recent scares on the port became a major talking point. The tour guide mentioned how in 2015, a small earthquake had struck the port, its epicenter right where the new liquefaction facility was to be built. A bit farther north, we collectively determined where one of the ethanol trains had derailed in the middle of the night a month previously—thankfully, there hadn’t been any cars in front of it to crash into, and the train wasn’t damaged enough to leak any ethanol (“No spills after train carrying ethanol derails in Providence” 2017). Finally, we pulled up to the site of the major natural gas leak that had occurred just a week before. Tour-goers now discussed this incident with a sense of urgency— the pipeline that leaked was operated by National Grid and would feed the new liquefaction facility, and its leak had caused major highways to be shut down and ambulances to be diverted to other hospitals. If there had been any source of ignition within a wide area at the time, there could have been a major explosion (Naylor and Reynolds 2017).

In their study of a town in Argentina facing similar risks, Javier Auyero and Debora Swistun conclude, “what we witness….is durable inequality in the making: an inequality that is being created not by wage inequity...but by the relationship between environment and health…” (Auyero and Swistun 2009:158). The concept of “durable inequality” is well illuminated by the case in South Providence—the area is held by an inequality so durable, apparently, that not even a series of mildly-to-moderately threatening accidents seems able to disrupt it against the normalizing tactics used by industry. Of the most recent accident, a National Grid representative stated, “It's not unusual, with natural gas infrastructure in New England, to experience leaks” (“National Grid Responds to…” 2017).

The accumulated, normalized risk in South Providence, and the systems that make it difficult for the community to even discuss that risk in the presence of political authorities, show
that we may need to look beyond environmental policy in searching for solutions. Rhode Island’s Department of Environmental Management had environmental justice regulations in place that it is now making excuses not to use, and the Providence City Council passed a resolution to “thoroughly” review the risks of National Grid’s proposal, which it never upheld. The normalization of accumulated risk and, by extension, inequality, seems to be bigger than something piecemeal environmental regulations can account for. It may require an overhaul of the kind of scientific language and deliberation that excludes issues of environmental justice but allows normalization tactics to flow freely, veiled in narratives of technical convenience. Most of all, it requires us to ask how we can best empower communities like South Providence to interrupt narratives of normalcy surrounding long-accumulated risky landscapes, and eventually, on their own terms, begin to dismantle them and the toxic systems by which they grew.
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§ 385.801 Waiver of hearing (Rule 801), § Title 18, Chapter I, Subchapter X, Part 385, Subpart H.

§ 385.802 Noncontested proceedings (Rule 802), § Title 18, Chapter I, Subchapter X, Part 385, Subpart H.
Figures Appendix

**Fig. 1**
South Providence Environmental Indicators
Statistics from 1 mile Ring Centered at 41.798686,-71.394224, RHODE ISLAND, EPA Region 1 (Population: 13,053)

**Fig. 2**
Providence city (census tracts): Estimated percent of all people who were of a race other than White between 2011-2015. PolicyMap.
Fig. 3
South Providence Demographic Indicators
Statistics from 1 mile Ring Centered at 41.798686,-71.394224, RHODE ISLAND, EPA Region 1 (Population: 13,053)

Fig. 4
http://policymap.com/maps/?i=9869029&btd=6&period=2015&cx=71.36762532147591&cy=41.79790393098422&cz=10
Fig. 5
South Providence Environmental Justice Indicators
Statistics from 1 mile Ring Centered at 41.798686,-71.394224, RHODE ISLAND, EPA Region 1 (Population: 13,053)

Fig. 6
https://www.facebook.com/EJLRI/photos/a.386733948049434.86493.174135965975901/950653071657516/?type=3&theater
Fig. 7
Burrillville Demographic Indicators
Statistics from 1 mile Ring Centered at 41.968622,-71.752984, RHODE ISLAND, EPA Region 1 (Population: 318)
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Fig. 8
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Fig. 9
Burrillville, Rhode Island
“Rhode Island - Single Color by FreeVectorMaps.com”
(edited by author)
Fig. 10
Map of Providence, RI and city neighborhoods
(compiled by author)