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"Earth Mommas": The Impact of Mothers on the American Environmental Justice Movement

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Earth Mommas:
The Impact of Mothers on the American Environmental Justice Movement

Marie Gabrielle Buendia
ENV 489: Senior Independent Study
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Introduction

When Lois Gibbs began knocking on her neighbors' doors in Niagara Falls, New York, in the 1970s, she had no intention of becoming a lifetime activist.¹ While she was looking for answers to and accountability for the health issues she was noticing in her son, she soon realized that she and her community were facing an issue that went beyond individual families. She eventually felt moved to organize her community and voice their concerns to a national audience through the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA) in 1978.² With the LCHA, Gibbs put pressure on the federal government to give her community answers and provide solutions.³ Through it all, she recognized and leveraged her identity as a mother, continuously reflecting on her experiences with her family and highlighting the undeniable motivation sparked by her son.⁴ Gibbs' faithful determination and compelling calls to action drew fellow community members together in campaigns and protests that eventually pressured President Jimmy Carter to relocate the Love Canal community in an unprecedented victory for environmental activism.⁵ The success of local activism in Love Canal stands as an iconic example and source of inspiration for communities and families facing environmental injustices and exemplifies just one of many pathways that women, and mothers in particular, have taken to confront environmental ills.

Since the movement's roots in the mid-twentieth century, mothers have been at the forefront in the pursuit of environmental justice in the United States. Raising their voices while

1. Lois Gibbs, "Love Canal; Flint, Michigan; and Struggles of the Environmental Health and Justice Movement." (presentation, Rollins College, Winter Park, FL, March 22, 2017).

2. Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. (New York, Routledge, 1996), 157.

3. Lois Gibbs, *Love Canal and the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*. (Washington, Island Press, 2011), 13.

4. Gibbs, "Love Canal; Flint."

5. Jacqueline V. Switzer, *Environmental Activism: A Reference Handbook*, (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2003), 150.

raising their children and the community, they present a strong, effective and formidable force in the landscape of activism and advocacy. A mismanaged environment, years of political disenfranchisement, and persistent gender stratification have interacted throughout the country's history to specifically position women and mothers – sometimes through force and always out of necessity – as the foundation of the environmental justice movement. For better or for worse, with the skills acquired through mothering, they unapologetically confront this complicated history while securing the future for themselves, their families, and the planet.

Through personal interviews and a history of both environmental justice and motherhood in the United States, this work will examine motherhood's unique and foundational role in environmental justice activism. The work begins with a brief history of how the environmental justice movement emerged and the values and methods upon which it relies. This includes the influence of the Civil Rights movement and other social movements of the 1960s. From there, it will explore environmental justice's trajectory into the 1980s and 1990s as it simultaneously differentiated itself and tried to unify with the mainstream environmental movement. Finally, it will assess the current state of the movement as it employs strategies across the grassroots, judicial, and legislative spheres. An assessment of values in the movement defines what environmental justice is and stands as a comparison to the values of mothering, highlighting how the two synergize. Analysis of the methods used in environmental justice work reveals why the field has been appealing and accessible to women in their roles as mothers. Throughout this historical review of the movement, the prominence and leadership of women will be the central focus.

Understanding the movement also requires an understanding of the relationship between women, mothering, and the environment. Dissecting the age-old imagery of "Mother Nature"

demonstrates how mothers became the perfect candidates for leading the environmental justice movement, as will be illustrated with examples and ideas from prominent individuals and established organizations in the movement. Through these examples, and definitions of motherhood provided by both feminist scholars and interviews, the definition of motherhood itself will be clarified. As will become evident, the changing landscape of gender has greatly influenced the perceptions and reality of motherhood. For this reason, a number of different terms will be defined and utilized throughout the work to describe the women of both past and present that contribute to the environmental justice movement.

The remaining four chapters will detail case studies and feature stories from women and mothers facing issues of water contamination, pesticide exposure, impaired air quality, chemically contaminated sites, and gentrification. Stories from the water crisis in Flint, Michigan; the farm working community in Apopka, Florida; the Fenholloway River in Perry, Florida; and the Parramore neighborhood in downtown Orlando, Florida will be featured. These case studies connect to broader issues within the environmental justice movement that relate to families, mothers, and children.

Even before Lois Gibbs put Niagara Falls in headlines, and ever since then, women and mothers across the United States have envisioned better futures for themselves, their families, and their communities. As the women in this paper will show, the role of motherhood has been integral in the environmental justice crusade. As the movement becomes more visible and the role of women as mothers transforms, investigating these connections is important for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the movement and what its future will be.

Chapter One: What is Environmental Justice?

Throughout the United States, millions of Americans are threatened by the negative impacts of environmental pollution, natural disaster, and resource scarcity. An estimated nine million people, or roughly three percent, of the American population lives within three kilometers of a hazardous waste facility.¹ While these environmental ills may strike any community, they are most likely to impact communities that have experienced political disenfranchisement and marginalization – ethnic minorities, the poor, immigrants, and indigenous peoples, to name a few. Though people of color only represent about one-third of the American population, they account for more than half of the nine million living in close proximity to polluting facilities.²

The links between a degraded environment and these populations have been proven time and time again to reflect more than just a coincidence. As multiple studies since the 1970s have shown, this connection reflects a national trend of policies and practices that concentrate environmental ills and limit environmental benefits in communities with the least political power. When activists and researchers began exposing this trend, the term “environmental justice” emerged, along with a corresponding grassroots movement. Continuing throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, environmental justice built national attention and headlines after the incidents at Warren County, North Carolina served as a prime example of the new term and provided a precedent for combatting the legacies of inequality that it represented. When residents of the predominantly poor and African-American community caught wind that developers hoped

1. Robert Bullard, Paul Mohai, Robin Saha, and Beverly Wright. *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty 1987-2007*. (Ohio, United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries, 2007), 10.

2. *Ibid.*, 10.

to place a dump site for the known carcinogen, polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), in their neighborhood, they took direct action through protests and calls to action towards an unresponsive government.³ Though their protests went unheeded and the dump was eventually developed, the story of Warren County served as inspiration for and marked the beginning of a broad-based, international grassroots movement.

Throughout the movement's history, women – many of them mothers – have maintained their presence and influence on the front lines. In order to understand why women and mothers have been and continue to be impactful to the movement, one must understand the movement's origins, methods, values, and future potential. As this chapter explores the question, "What is environmental justice?," it will answer questions about its connection to and dependence on the work and passion of women and mothers.

Paths to Environmental Justice

The three most common methods to respond to environmental injustice are grassroots activism, legislative regulation, and academic study. All of these pathways serve a specific purpose in building the strength, legitimacy, and reach of the movement. Grassroots activism serves as the basis and origin of the movement. From protests to petitions to community and capacity building, such activism offers a lot of flexibility and generates wide-spread visibility from the bottom-up.

This aspect of the movement is also what likely makes it effective for women and mothers. Although grassroots activism is time-consuming, it does not require any training or particular expertise, making it accessible to any community member that voices a concern and

3. Ibid., 16.

can generate attention towards that concern. Joy Towles Ezell, a native of Perry, Florida, and advocate for the Fenholloway River found herself in this position when her son expressed his dissatisfaction with the condition of the local river.

“Every time I would take my son to school, when we crossed the river, he’d say ‘Momma, you need to make them clean that up’ ... He thought that I could just make a phone call and fix it, you know. You know how kids are, they think momma can do anything. So I said, ‘Well, I’ll start on that right after supper tonight.’”⁴

Although Ezell’s response to her son was intended simply to reassure him, his comments struck her and eventually inspired her to devote the rest of her life to cleaning up the river. Traditionally trained in agriculture and a long-term employee for a variety of chemical companies, Ezell was an unlikely but adamant activist.

It is a double-edged sword, however, and the accessibility of the movement to informally trained community members can be perceived as a lack of credibility and can pose a barrier. With a background in finance, Lawanna Gelzer’s calls for help regarding her community’s health and safety were disregarded as uninformed and even fictitious. Gelzer was raised and now works in the Parramore community on the west side of Orlando, Florida. In 2017, the community received some long-awaited national attention when the *Huffington Post* news site featured its struggles with air quality, gentrification, and brownfields. This recognition came, however, after years of denial and dismissal of Gelzer’s concerns.

“People dying because you didn’t care to acknowledge that there might be some concerns that they need to be made aware of. Instead, you would do a PR saying people lying, they don’t know what they’re talking about ... So all of a sudden now, ‘Oh, maybe Lawanna’s telling -’ No! I was never lying in the first place. I was so angry about it. I wasted four damn years of my life trying to get you to acknowledge that we had a problem and how we can work together to fix it.”⁵

4. Joy Towles Ezell (Fenholloway River advocate) interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia, Winter Park, FL, November 2018.

5. Lawanna Gelzer (Parramore resident) interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia, Orlando, FL, November 2018.

This experience is common for environmental justice activists, especially for women in mothering roles who are curiously entrusted with raising communities while simultaneously met with indifference at their observations of their communities.

While grassroots activism builds the strength of the movement, academia and legislation formalize the field. Although the stories and complaints of grassroots activists often go unheeded, tested data and trends are needed to convince many people that such issues do exist and to obligate regulatory bodies to take action. Unfortunately, access to the resources needed to achieve this is limited. Academia fills this gap, and in addition to putting data and numbers behind the stories that people tell, it tracks progress towards the ideals of environmental justice. This research also brings validity to the stories that people tell and, for example, is what made people finally believe women like Gibbs. Finally, legislative bodies take part in environmental justice by making and enforcing guidelines for creating safe environments. The extent and efficiency with which legislative bodies currently carry out this function is inconsistent and inadequate. For this reason, the other two paths to environmental justice remain the primary force of the movement.

History and Timeline

Although the environment, human health, and marginalized communities have undoubtedly interacted with each other all throughout human history, the emergence of environmental justice as a concerted movement in America is best marked by its formation in relation to the Civil Rights movement and other social movements of the 1960s.⁶

6. Edward Lao Rhodes, *Environmental Justice in America: A New Paradigm*. (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003), 56.

Inspiration from Other Social Movements

Even before environmental justice came to be understood as an international phenomenon or was given meaning as a term, trends tying environmental degradation to vulnerable populations were evident. America's working class and labor movement preceded the Civil Rights movement, promoting environmental health in the home and workplace in addition to the revered landscapes that others were primarily concerned about at the time.⁷ The miners, farm workers, and other industrial laborers that were calling for these changes recognized their disadvantaged positions and utilized grassroots strategies similar to those used in environmental justice activism today.⁸ Miners in particular felt disregarded by judicial and legislative processes and turned instead to other working-class people in their area to form a broad-based, multi-issue alliance.⁹ Meanwhile, migrant farm laborers from Mexico started their own grassroots network after mainstream environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the Environmental Defense Fund appeared disinterested in their concerns.¹⁰ From these early examples, the idea of a holistic environment as one where people "live, work, and play" is represented, just as it is in environmental justice.

More direct connections between environmental quality and social status were made as America entered a period of social unrest in the 1960s. Contrary to popular belief, environmental quality has always been an important value of racial minorities and demands for a better environment were present and deeply intertwined with the other demands of the Civil Rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. himself advocated for environmental justice through his

7. Chad Montrie. *A People's History of Environmentalism in the United States*. (New York, Continuum, 2011), 6.

8. *Ibid.*, 11.

9. *Ibid.*, 117.

10. *Ibid.*, 121.

advocacy for Black garbage employees and his words in a sermon made in 1967.¹¹ He recognized the ecological principle of interconnectedness and related it not just to environmental systems, but to the strength of communities and the capacity to find peace.

“It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly ... This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on Earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.”¹²

Although King was directly addressing the effects of international war as it related to Vietnam, his goal of camaraderie towards the goal of civil rights is reflected in the direction, language, and structure of the environmental justice movement. The Civil Rights movement is just one of many “tributaries,” as Cole and Foster conceptualized it, of environmental justice.¹³ Although the Civil Rights movement was a major influence, the environmental justice movement developed with the confluence of additional movements including the Native American rights movement, the feminist movement, the labor movement, mainstream environmentalism, academic investigation, a growing animosity towards toxins, the rise of the concept of ecology, and a number of other factors.¹⁴ These movements and their corresponding ideas interacted with each other closely throughout the era, sharing foundations of community, autonomy, and liberation from oppression and violence.

11. Martin Luther King Jr., “A Christmas Sermon on Peace” (lecture, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA, December 24, 1967). ; Bullard et. al., *Toxic Wastes and Race*, 17-18.

12. *Ibid.*, 7:11.

13. Luke Cole and Sheila Foster. *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. (New York, New York University Press, 2001), 2.

14. *Ibid.*, 20-31.

The Rise of the Mainstream Environmental Movement

These movements, especially mainstream environmentalism, continued to gain strength throughout the 1970s. The inaugural Earth Day celebration of 1970 propelled environmentalism into hyper-visibility and triggered a shift in the resource capacity and strategies of the movement.¹⁵ After quickly gaining a national following, the most prominent environmental groups were able to secure significant financial capital. This new relationship with donors drew them away from protest-oriented or other direct activism practices and more towards an image as a public interest group. As a collection of public interest groups, they worked most diligently to influence environmental health through national legislation. In the process, they not only excluded urban environments from their focus, but they neglected to recognize the inefficiency of legislation for many disadvantaged communities.

This divergence was especially harmful to women of various marginalized identities who were largely absent from decision-making spaces at all levels of government. Though women were always present in and contributing their labor to environmental movements, their incommensurate representation in leadership steered the mainstream environmental movement away from community-based organizing.¹⁶ The devaluation of women's experiences and expertise contributed to the schism between environmental justice and mainstream environmentalism and left women dominating the former.¹⁷ Today, women comprise less than thirty percent of top leadership positions in mainstream environmental groups.¹⁸ This percentage

15. Deohn Ferris and David Hahn Baker, "Environmentalists and Environmental Justice Policy," in *Environmental Justice: Issues, Policies, and Solutions*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1995), 70.

16. Ronald D. Sandler and Phaedra C. Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement*. (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007), 9.

17. *Ibid.*, 9.

18. Taylor, Dorceta E. "The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations." *Green 2.0*, 2014, 3.

is even less for women of color, as the percentage of people of color in such positions overall plateaus at sixteen percent.¹⁹

Making a Space for Environmental Justice

As America transitioned from an era of newfound environmental awareness into the 1980s and 1990s, environmental justice as a term and a movement became concrete.²⁰ A few landmark cases prompted environmental justice leaders to carve out a new space to speak to the intersecting issues of social inequality and environmental degradation. The stories of Love Canal and Warren County, North Carolina, represent two of the most notable cases marking the beginning of consciousness about this issue.

The impactful and unlikely victory of Love Canal in 1981 showcased the power of grassroots activism to inspire legislative action. After the community of Niagara Falls, New York, garnered significant attention to the issue of chemical contamination in its local elementary schools, and later in its homes, the federal government agreed to relocate and compensate the entire community—the first time this had ever occurred in the nation.²¹ Although the story of Lois Gibbs and the Love Canal Homeowners Association represented the struggles of a working-class community, the victory showed the power of grassroots activism and it exemplified a pathway for demanding reparations for environmental damage. The events at Love Canal prompted the establishment of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA/Superfund), which tasks the Environmental

19. *Ibid.*, 4.

20. Deohn Ferris and David Hahn-Baker, “Environmentalists and Environmental Justice Policy,” in *Environmental Justice: Issues, Policies, and Solutions*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1995), 67.

21. Lois Gibbs, *Love Canal and the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*. (Washington, Island Press, 2011), 194.

Protection Agency with creating a list of hazardous waste sites to be prioritized for cleanup.²² CERCLA also gathers funds to conduct these cleanups from the companies and other parties that were responsible for the initial contamination.²³ This policy, however, struggles today with proper implementation.

Soon after Love Canal, connections were made between environment and race and the first community to discuss “environmental racism” – and eventually “environmental justice” – was Warren County, North Carolina. The health and safety of the African-American community was threatened by a proposed dump designed to dispose of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).²⁴ PCB is a known carcinogen and a chemical waste product that persists both in soil and water systems throughout the environment and within the human body.²⁵ Equipped with the precedents set by Love Canal and empowered by a growing awareness of environmental inequalities, the residents of Warren County engaged in relentless protests, resulting in up to 500 arrests, to prevent the siting of the toxic dump.²⁶ Unfortunately, the dump site was built, but the efforts of the community drew enough attention and interest to promote investigation from non-profit groups and the government alike.²⁷

Warren County and other communities that rose to fight environmental injustice made such problems a valid national concern. As more communities spoke out with similar issues, the

22. Lois Gibbs, “Love Canal; Flint, Michigan; and Struggles of the Environmental Health and Justice Movement.” (presentation, Rollins College, Winter Park, FL, March 22, 2017). ; “Superfund: CERCLA Overview,” Environmental Protection Agency, June 4, 2018, <https://www.epa.gov/superfund/superfund-cercla-overview>

23. *Ibid.*

24. Gibbs, *Love Canal*, 7.

25. “Learn About Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs),” Environmental Protection Agency, April 13, 2018, <https://www.epa.gov/pcbs/learn-about-polychlorinated-biphenyls-pcbs>

26. *National Environmental Justice Advisory Council 20-Year Retrospective Report (1994-2014)*. Environmental Protection Agency, (Washington D.C., 2016), 10. ; Bullard et. al., *Toxic Wastes and Race*, 16.

27. Bunyan Bryant, *Environmental Justice: Issues, Policies, and Solutions*. (Washington D.C., Island Press, 1995), 4. ; *Ibid.*, 10.

idea that the environment could be a source of fear and uncertainty rather than peace and renewal greatly countered past narratives and sent ripples of discomfort throughout the nation. Historian Melissa Checker notes this sentiment in her observations of Hyde Park, an Augusta, Georgia, community with nine polluting industries that surrounded and suffocated the neighborhood.²⁸

“For the residents of Hyde Park and for the activists of HAPIC, the environment was not something to be protected from human intervention and conserved for the preservation of wildlife. Rather, their environment was poisonous, and they needed to be protected from it.”²⁹

Residents of communities like Hyde Park understood that their environmental experience varied greatly from that which mainstream environmentalists idealized. They resisted the notion that environmentalism was fair and adequate simply because it addressed impacts on humans as a whole. They felt that this rhetoric neglected to recognize the difference that social identities, including gender and motherhood, make on environmental experiences.³⁰

Rise in Academia and Governmental Bodies

The persistence of the residents of Warren County inspired the United Church of Christ to investigate and publish the *Toxic Wastes and Race* report in 1987 with the help of leading experts on environment, race, and health.³¹ This report was revolutionary in defining environmental justice and sparked a new interest in the issue as an academic area of study. Academic and federal investigations arose around the country and introduced a more institutional component to the environmental justice movement. Academia and the government had certain

28. Melissa Checker, *Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town*. (New York, New York University Press, 2005), 86.

29. *Ibid.*, 87-88.

30. Rhodes, *Environmental Justice*, 11.

31. Bullard et. al., *Toxic Wastes and Race*, 8.

resources that grassroots movements did not, and their involvement in environmental justice elicited mixed reactions.

Academia also got involved in the issue throughout the late 1980s and 1990s with research papers and conferences that investigated the extent of environmental justice in America and proposed best practices for the future. Meanwhile, throughout the 1990s, the government defined and established policies to work towards environmental justice.³² This came in the formation of the Office of Environmental Equity in 1992, the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council in 1993, the Office of Environmental Justice in 1995, and much more.³³ Working together with grassroots organizations, these federal offices influenced many local policies and national trends to deter the disproportionate implementation of environmental burdens in vulnerable communities.

Defining Environmental Justice

Considering the varying paths towards and “tributaries” of environmental justice, the definition of the term remains contested. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental law, regulations and policies.”³⁴ This definition focuses on pursuing environmental justice through legislative and judicial processes. Other definitions are oriented more towards envisioning the kind of future society that needs to be crafted in order for environmental justice to emerge. Dr. Bunyan Bryant of the University of

32. Rhodes, *Environmental Justice*, 63.

33. *Ibid.*, 88.

34. “Learn About Environmental Justice,” Environmental Protection Agency, April 5, 2018, <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justice>

Michigan's School for Environment and Sustainability pieced together such an image when he defined environmental justice as "the cultural norms and values, rules, regulations, behaviors, policies, and decisions to support sustainable communities, where people can interact with confidence that their environment is safe, nurturing, and productive."³⁵ For Rhodes, a future of environmental justice demands that "all individuals have equal access to environmental protection and ... the absence of unequal impediments to protection."³⁶ Building off of the definition given by the EPA, former EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy described environmental justice as, "the opportunity to live, work and play in a clean and healthy environment."³⁷ Such future-oriented definitions are useful for giving optimism and meaning to activists.

While these definitions envision what a future of environmental justice looks like, other definitions outline what processes can be useful in getting there, including the EPA definition. Similarly, Walker advocates for "a process perspective" of environmental justice that recognizes that "environmental justice is an objective but also a process of 'working towards'" that "will be continually open to reasoning, revision, and challenge."³⁸ Process-oriented definitions help contribute to the construction of the movement by suggesting points and pathways at which those seeking environmental justice can begin. Societal structures are continuously shifting, however, and the processes suggested may not be effective for groups of various needs and capacities. For example, the EPA suggests that environmental justice is to be achieved through enforcement of

35. Bryant, *Environmental Justice*, 6.

36. Rhodes, *Environmental Justice*, 18.

37. "Plan EJ 2014: Progress Report," Environmental Protection Agency, February 2014.
<https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-02/documents/plan-ej-progress-report-2014.pdf>

38. Gordon Walker, *Environmental Justice: Concepts, Evidence, and Politics*. (New York, Abingdon, 2012), 220-221.

law and regulation; however, for many communities, this is an ambitious promise that has yet to be fulfilled.

Still, others have defined environmental justice by outlining central focus points that distinguish it from mainstream environmentalism or emphasizes the social aspects of sustainability. Krauss notes that environmental justice is marked by redefining what knowledge is and where it comes from, placing a higher value on community knowledge and storytelling, rather than data analysis.³⁹ Switzer echoes this distinction by characterizing environmental justice as having “evolved from the ecocentric perspective of mainstream organizations to one that has been termed homocentric, or human centered.”⁴⁰ Making these distinctions and calling for a re-orientation of environmentalism enabled the movement to gain a lot of recognition in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴¹ In the 1990s, these distinctions were highlighted to criticize the “Group of Ten” environmental conservation groups and their “ignorance, ambivalence, and complicity with the environmental exploitation of communities of color.”⁴² Since then, these prominent conservation groups have moved towards adapting values of social equity to their originally ecocentric missions. The Nature Conservancy offers one example of this shift, listing “respect for people, communities, and cultures” and a “commitment to diversity” as guiding values.⁴³ As this example shows, these definitions have been efficient in calling for change from potential allies in mainstream environmentalism.

39. Celene Krauss, “Women of Color on the Front Line,” in *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994), 256-271.

40. Jacqueline V. Switzer, *Environmental Activism: A Reference Handbook*. (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2003), 13.

41. Sandler and Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism*, 3.

42. *Ibid.*, 4.

43. “Our Mission, Vision, and Values,” The Nature Conservancy, Accessed December 1, 2018, <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/who-we-are/our-mission-vision-and-values/>

Themes and Values

Throughout these definitions, images of community and transformation emerge as strong themes. Heavy value is placed on understanding and trusting the community as well as transforming current processes and perceptions of the environment in vulnerable communities. These themes are echoed throughout the interviews later presented and confirm the magnitude of the environmental justice issue in America. Visible throughout the past and predicted to last into the future, these themes also maintain a strong connection to women and the construction of their role in society. This connection will be further explored in the following chapter and will reveal why, as a group, women and mothers are such prominent and effective leaders in this field.

These two themes also speak true to the 17 Principles of Environmental Justice put forth by representatives at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington D.C. in 1991.⁴⁴ It produces a list of fundamental rights that are needed in order for people of color to “re-establish [their] spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth.”⁴⁵ The principles suggest that the path to this restored connection must come from the restoration of many other aspects of life and society, ranging from self-determination to peace and safety from war. Again, this document provides further evidence of how far-reaching environmental justice work is, and how accessible and connected it is to the pursuit of freedom.

Conclusion

All of the definitions above provide something valuable and worth considering as connections between the environment and social equity become more evident. They offer insight into what constitutes an environmental injustice, what people aspire an environmentally just

44. “17 Principles of Environmental Justice,” ejnet.org, Accessed December 1, 2018, <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>

45. Ibid.

society to look like, and how society can move towards that future vision. From these definitions, then, it is clear to see that environmental justice has a broad scope. It can be confined to one community or span an entire population group, it can be bound to one location or found to be a trend across an entire nation.

Throughout the rise of the movement, attention from institutional powers brought both optimism and conflict to the grassroots foundations and practices of environmental justice. While scientific and quantitative research promoted the visibility and reaffirmed the validity of the movement, these institutions introduced a vertical aspect into a structure that had been dominated by a more horizontal network of grassroots.⁴⁶ A vertical structure introduced policies and definitions that were at times out of touch with the lived reality of environmental injustices. Though the governmental groups and their corresponding policies listed above intended to put forth equitable policy, they did so with relatively homogeneous experiences, little training in social sensitivity, and without representation from affected communities.⁴⁷ Academia sometimes acts as a mediating force that has greater credibility with the government, but more empathy towards grassroots organizations. These three areas in which environmental justice is examined and practiced continue to conflict and collaborate with one another in various ways. Each leg has a strength and a role in promoting an environmentally just future, and an obligation to create that future with the realities of affected communities in mind.

46. Allan, Kim; Daro, Vinci and Holland, Dorothy C., "Becoming an Environmental Justice Activist," in *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism*, ed. Ronald Sandler and Phaedra C. Pezzullo (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 107.

47. Rhodes, *Environmental Justice*, 86.

Chapter Two: Women as Mothers, Mothers as Environmental Justice Activists

Definitions and Limitations of “Motherhood”

The word “mother” carries many connotations that function both as an advantage and as a potential barrier to the women that are designated with the varied and broad expectations and duties of mothering. The idea of “Mother Nature,” from which many aspects of human understanding and environmental ethics are based, suggests the presence of essential characteristics of motherhood. From pregnancy to child-rearing, however, experiences of motherhood vary greatly, revealing the problematic nature of collectively grouping and characterizing women that care for children. In order to optimally observe how ideas and experiences of motherhood influence the environmental justice movement, the term must be fully defined and explored from a number of different perspectives.

The Biological Experiences of Motherhood

One of the most recognizable definitions of motherhood identifies women based on their “biological experiences” in “relationship to a child.”¹ Following this definition, mothers are characterized by a “natural” aptitude towards their children that inevitably ensues after the intimacy of “pregnancy, labor, childbirth, nursing, and postpartum recovery.”² Through these experiences, women supposedly form an early and exclusive connection with one’s child that grants the mother a sense of *storge* – or familiar affection – a love distinct from one of

1. Caroline Whitbeck, “Maternal Instinct,” in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), 186.

2. *Ibid.*, 186.

infatuation.³ These experiences in particular are what distinguish mothers from fathers and necessitates separate identities for the two parents.

In this biological viewpoint, mothers are uniquely equipped to answer the needs of their children because of their physical experiences and memory. This may be why the term “fathering” is not as popular and is difficult to define. In its most common use, “fathering” is not a set of characteristics, or even the opposite of “mothering,” but rather the absence of the experiences associated with motherhood. While mothers are viewed as a parent that learns and grows with a child, fathers are seen as a slightly more distant “mentor.”⁴ The “natural” connection produced by the biological experiences of motherhood define a number of essential characteristics of the identity. During these stages, women relate to feelings of helplessness and interdependence—feelings that their children later reflect back to them.⁵ When these emotions are brought to a woman’s attention, she reacts with nurturing and attachment. Pregnancy and early motherhood are also isolating, drawing the mother and the child closer together.⁶

The biological experience of motherhood also connects a woman to her child and the wider environment through a realization of the concepts ecologist Sandra Steingraber describes as “motherselfhood” and “mother-earth-hood.”⁷ As a child rests in the womb, the mother represents the child’s first “habitat,” and claims responsibility for the conditions and substances to which the child is exposed. Through this phenomenon, a mother experiences the “sensation that one is now inhabited by another conscious being whose moods, needs, and habits are not

3. Ibid., 190.

4. Ibid., 193.

5. Ibid., 189.

6. Sandra Steingraber, *Having Faith: An Ecologist’s Journey to Motherhood*, (New York, Routledge, 2015), 94.

7. Ibid., 148.

identical to one's own.”⁸ Steingraber extends this concept with “mother-earth-hood” to highlight the dependency of humans on the conditions and substances that the surrounding environment provides.⁹ Just as the bodies and resources of mother and child are interconnected and shared, so too are the land and the body. Steingraber claims that this experience makes biological mothers especially sensitive to messages about the interconnectedness of life and ecology, suggesting that the trends of women and mothers in environmental justice work runs deep and would be inevitable given the experiences of pregnancy and motherhood.

These biological definitions of motherhood connect women to identities that are caring, nurturing, interdependent, and sensitive to the needs for maintaining life. While many women who identify as mothers have these characteristics, they are by no means all-encompassing. The biological view is especially limited and exclusive towards women who enter motherhood by adoptive or foster relationships or take on mothering roles as a relative or community member. It also does not account for the diverse experiences that women may experience, even in the biological stages listed. For this reason, an examination of motherhood as a social construction is useful.

Constructing American Motherhood

Perceptions of what motherhood is and entails coincides with historic gender roles and has varied as America's expectations of women have transformed. Before the American Revolution, women's roles as mothers were considered secondary to their roles as wives.¹⁰ At this point in time, fathers were much more involved with the daily care that goes into modern

8. Ibid., 148.

9. Ibid., 148.

10. Cynthia Stavrianos, *The Political Uses of Motherhood in America*. (New York, Routledge, 2015), 11.

mothering and the key characteristics that now tie women and nature together were not as prominent in their daily lives.¹¹ In addition to helping with daily care work, fathers spent much more time fostering children's intellectual and spiritual growth. This task was shifted to mothers around the establishment of the Constitution in the late 1700s, as men began to spend more time outside of the home for work and ideas about what ideal American citizenship should look like began to form.¹²

With the new responsibility of raising a healthy and value-driven generation of Americans, the role of motherhood acquired greater importance. Though their work was respected and recognized for driving the moral fortitude of the country through the idea of "Republican motherhood", women still lacked political power.¹³ Women of privilege began to appeal for political influence by connecting the work they did for their children in the home to wider spheres of society, suggesting that "home was anywhere women and children were."¹⁴ This appeal turned out to be far more effective than appeals made for equality or human rights, and it is a strategy that continues to be used today.¹⁵ Framing their political demands in this way made them more "palatable" and enabled them to be compatible with patriarchal notions about the role of women.¹⁶

Even after motherhood became idealized in this way, its social benefits were granted with more ease to some women. The women most likely to elicit political action from their pleas as

11. Ibid., 11.

12. Ibid., 12.

13. Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1967), 189.

14. Stavrianos, *The Political Uses of Motherhood*, 14.

15. Ibid., 16.

16. Ibid., 19.

mothers identified as middle- and upper-class “club” women.¹⁷ Their husbands already carried a significant amount of influence and their calls for action often did not extend past their immediate community. Women of color and of lower social classes did not enjoy all of the benefits of motherhood that more privileged women experienced and continued to struggle for recognition today. For women of color and of working-class that hold these identities, motherhood is just another intersecting identity that subjects them to criticism and discrimination. Before these women can demand change as mothers, they must go to greater lengths to prove that they are “good” mothers and worthy of help and attention.¹⁸

Through the social construction of motherhood, mothers have come to take on the role of moral, spiritual, and sometimes political guides. Still, this social construction suggests that mothers are characterized by their dedication, sacrifice, and contributions to others. In order to be “worthy” of the title of “mother” and the possible benefits that accompany it, a woman must put her children’s needs before her own, always be available to answer those needs, and be fulfilled in carrying out these roles. Thus, the socially constructed perceptions of motherhood are still limited and may confine and judge women based on a monolithic experience of motherhood.

Redefining Motherhood

When analyzing the specific work and tasks that mothers do, it becomes clear that the duties and characteristics of motherhood are not and should not be exclusive to women or even women who are biologically connected to a child. Defining motherhood continues to be difficult because of changing perceptions of gender and family in the United States. In feminist theory, a

17. Leslie Kemp Poole, “The Women of the Early Florida Audubon Society: Agents of History in the Fight to Save State Birds,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (2007), 316. ; Stavrianos, *Political Uses of Motherhood*, 19.

18. Stavrianos, *The Political Uses of Motherhood*, 24.

much broader definition of motherhood has emerged, centering around the skills, thinking patterns, and consciousness that women develop in the process of caring for others.

Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick is credited with conceptualizing “maternal thinking.” In this framework, Ruddick argues that mothering produces a distinct worldview and develops a set of specific skills just like any other form of work.¹⁹ The work that mothers typically engage in revolves around the three demands of children – preservation, growth, and social acceptance.²⁰ Thus, motherhood is defined on an individual basis according to each person’s experience and the results of one’s “disciplined reflection” on how to best accomplish care work.²¹ Additionally, it suggests that mothering may be learned by anyone that engages in the tasks and thought patterns that support the three demands of children, including men and other women in the community.

Feminist views of motherhood continue to draw attention to the care work aspects of mothering, rather than feminine characteristics or biological experiences. Care work is defined by sociologist Patrizia Albanese as “household work we do on a daily basis done for the self and others.”²² In contrast with the biological experiences that the values of traditional motherhood center on, the values produced through care work center on the experiences and feelings of relationships. This ties back to Ruddick’s maternal thinking, which explores how reason and passion work together to shape the conscious of mothers. She opens her theory with a question:

“Is it possible to reconceive a reason that strengthened passion rather than opposing it, that refused to separate love from knowledge? ... In the past, women who have criticized prevailing

19. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1989), 26.

20. *Ibid.*, 17.

21. *Ibid.*, 24.

22. Patrizia Albanese, “Introduction,” in *More Than It Seems: Household Work and Lifelong Learning*, ed. Margrit Eichler, Patrizia Albanese, Susan Ferguson, Nicky Hyndman, Lichun W. Lin, Ann Matthews, (Canada, Women’s Press, 2010), 16.

ideals of reason or failed to measure up to them have been called irrational. Would it be possible to reverse this judgement, finding fault not in women, but in the ideals?”²³

Because care work is typically associated with the gender roles assigned to women, it receives both insufficient financial and social value, just as Ruddick observed. Care work, however, provides insurmountable benefits to a society and lays the foundation for skills such as time management, organization, patience, conflict resolution, budgeting, and leadership.²⁴ These skills are important in the household and also in career and activist spaces. Again, care work may be practiced by a person of any gender, and encouraging wider participation in it could be a beneficial result of redefining motherhood.

Broader definitions of motherhood benefit women as individuals, removing the perceptions that either undermine the hardships of motherhood or overburden women with the responsibilities of care work. It shows a clearer distinction between the daily lived experiences of mothering and motherhood as an institution that has been used to support gender roles, a “traditional” family structure, and a citizenry trained to carry on related morals and values. Broad definitions of motherhood also bring humanity back to those who engage in care work and emphasize that experiences in mothering are separate and subjective from one person to the next.

Terms Used in This Work

With these various limitations, definitions, and redefinitions in mind, the language and terminology used in this work must be considered. In order to respect the diversity of experiences that mothers encounter and to recognize those that do the work or tasks of “mothering,” broader and more open terms will be used to discuss the case studies.

23. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 9.

24. Margrit Eichler and Ann Matthews, “Learning through Household Work,” in *More Than It Seems: Household Work and Lifelong Learning*, ed. Margrit Eichler, Patrizia Albanese, Susan Ferguson, Nicky Hyndman, Lichun W. Lin, Ann Matthews, (Canada, Women’s Press, 2010), 77.

“Motherhood” will refer to the social practice and institutions surrounding women and caretaking. Meanwhile, “caretaking” is the general practice of taking care of others—whether that be children, family, community, elders, paid or unpaid work. “Women who practice mothering” will be the specific term used to identify the women in the case studies when speaking as an author. The term “mother” will be saved mostly for historical and very general contexts, or when a woman personally uses it to identify herself.

Constructing “Mother Nature”

Ideas about and imagery of motherhood are deeply ingrained in the discourse surrounding nature and the environment. They are widespread and even included in the “Principles of Environmental Justice,” one of the foundational documents of the movement.²⁵ The document, written during the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, claims that the movement should aim to “re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth.”²⁶ In both mainstream environmentalism and environmental justice, the employment of maternal themes draws out a wide variety of emotions that simultaneously uphold traditional gender roles while demanding agency and respect for the group that deals most intimately with environmental inequality. For better or for worse, the construction and the implementation of the idea of “Mother Nature” carries a number of implications for the expected and realized relationship that women have with the environment.

The connection between women and nature has roots in both history and religion. In many origin stories, a feminine figure is present and reflects many perceptions about women and

25. “17 Principles of Environmental Justice,” ejnet.org, Accessed December 1, 2018, <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>

26. Ibid., 1.

nature that people continue to hold in present times. Gaia from Greek mythology, Eve from the Christian Bible, and Isis of Egyptian folklore all offer up examples of how women and nature were connected as givers of life, maintainers of peace, pristine entities needing protection and improvement, and guardians of empathy and morality.²⁷ In a number of indigenous cultures, mothers are recognized as the “first habitats” or “first environments” for their babies, illustrating the interactions between women and child as a microcosm of the global ecological network.²⁸ This imagery has inspired generations of women to call on the “moral authority of motherhood” to speak on the environment and demand change around issues of pollution, household toxins, and much more.²⁹ These characteristics that tie women and nature together are especially effective and compelling for environmental activism, which is the second most popular cause for which mothers advocate.³⁰ More specifically, many women and mothers are drawn to environmental justice work due to its intersections between ecology and human relationships.

Mothers in Environmental Justice

Assessing the history of the environmental justice movement, the foundational role of women and mothers is evident. Love Canal preceded and helped inform the environmental justice movement, but long before the community’s success, the issues and methods that women and mothers utilized as environmental activists reflected the values and pathways of environmental justice. Beginning with the idea of ecology and following the movement’s history to the international grassroots network it is today, women consistently recognized the

27. Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*, (New York, Routledge, 1996), xvi.

28. Steingraber, *Having Faith*, ix.

29. Stavrianos, *The Political Uses of Motherhood*, 3.

30. *Ibid.*, 42.

interdependence between their home, their community, and the environment and recognized the value of promoting the health of each one.

The root word “eco” is derived from the Greek, “oikos,” which means home.³¹ Rachel Carson’s seminal ideas of “ecology” in her groundbreaking 1962 book *Silent Spring*, linked home and environment together and sparked the modern environmental movement.³² From the start, women’s connection to and dominion over the home inevitably brought their attention to concerns about the environment. Public awareness about the environment erupted around the same time that the women’s liberation movement did, giving women a framework of justice and equality, which they used to examine concerns about the environment.³³

American women put these values to the test when they began fighting environmental toxins that were making their way into their homes and into their community’s bodies. After Carson brought public revelations about the prevalence of human-made chemicals and toxins in the world, the residents of Warren County, North Carolina, set a national example for protests and outrage about this issue. As women and mothers led the community in protests against the placement of a toxic PCB dump, they were continually ridiculed and overlooked by men in power.³⁴ Despite this, the women and mothers of the community found plenty of motivation to form strong multiracial and multigenerational coalitions to address these issues. Very often, rage against, discontent with, or distrust of governing bodies served as the motivation for them to take

31. Merchant, *Earthcare*, 139.

32. *Ibid.*, 139.

33. *Ibid.*, 145-149.

34. *Ibid.*, 161.

matters into their own hands and form broad-based grassroots networks. This was the case for ecologist Steingraber, who analyzes the “environmental crisis as a parenting crisis”³⁵

“In the absence of federal policies that are protective of child development and the ecology of the planet on which our children’s lives depend, parents have to serve as our own regulatory agencies.”³⁶

“Why does abstinence in the face of uncertainty apply only to individual behavior? Why doesn’t it apply equally to industry or agriculture?”³⁷

As these examples show, women and mothers realized that no matter what precautions were taken to protect their children and families within their homes, they were still subject to environmental hazards in every other space with which they interacted. Though these environmental hazards extended beyond the traditional “dominion” as women and mothers, their effects were brought home and manifested in sick and dying family members. Thus, the concept of home and family health needed to expand to include environmental and community health. Today, this means that women and mothers advocate on behalf of their families and communities on environmental concerns ranging from placement of polluting facilities to unequal distribution of healthy and affordable food to degraded air quality from mountaintop removal.

How Mothers Function as Activists

Despite beginning steps made to redefine motherhood, gender roles and expectations still strongly influence the experiences of women as mothers. For this reason, many women have developed, through experiences beyond physical child-bearing, common strategies and methods to be effective activists. The individual and collective skills that women have built through mothering harmonize well with the values and principles of the movement that they helped

35. Sandra Steingraber, *Raising Elijah: Protecting Our Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis*, (Boston, DaCapo Press, 2011), 281.

36. *Ibid.*, xvi.

37. Steingraber, *Having Faith*, 107.

construct. These values and principles prioritize experiential learning and understanding, as well as relationship and community building.

Women's experience as mothers also expose them to circumstances that elicit anger and rage. Disbelief and outrage with the environmental crises represent a double-edged sword for concerned women and mothers, who are moved to action because of their anger while they are simultaneously demeaned for the display of emotion. On one hand, fury on behalf of children or others stands as the only acceptable form of female anger in American culture, and thus represents an effective tool for women in environmental justice activism.³⁸ However, women and mothers working for the movement still face discrimination and invalidation because of the struggle to make powerful entities consider the connection between home and the environment. Ultimately, however, when pushed to the margins in conversations about the environment, women and mothers have chosen to turn their opponents' ridicule into empowerment and to assert their confidence in their knowledge and the validity of their concerns.

Once a woman enters the world of activism as a mother, she may choose to advocate on behalf of her children, her community, or herself. She also may choose to promote her demands on the basis of equal rights for all or to speak from her role as one of society's "moral gatekeepers." Stavrianos found that women experienced the most success in getting their demands met when they advocated for others and leaned towards rhetoric focusing on their duties as mothers than when they spoke up on their own needs as mothers. As this result shows, the current definitions and expectations of motherhood continually confine women of varied backgrounds and experiences, especially in the political and activist spheres. This reveals the

38. Marilyn Frye, "A Note on Anger," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 91.

shallow nature with which motherhood is revered in America and highlights how concepts of traditional motherhood serve to uphold the unjust structures that drive women and mothers to action in the first place.

For these reasons, being a mother in an activist space is challenging. Women and mothers that enter this space must balance communicating their true and personal values with leveraging their symbolic status as mothers to the leaders and industries in power. While motherhood may grant women a degree of protection and respect in politics and activism, it also severely limits their scope. Despite this contradiction, motherhood is an identity that, just like any other identity, can not be left behind and is carried into activist spaces, influencing the way that women act. For many women, the identity of mother or care taker or concerned community member is still an important identity to acknowledge in their activist work and should be respectfully considered.

Conclusion

The following interviews and case studies explore the multifaceted ways that women experience mothering, environmental crisis, and community activism. While many women interviewed share similar experiences and sentiments in response to environmental injustices, their roles in the community, methods of action, and personal takeaways from their activism differ widely. Their stories affirm the changing perceptions and expectations of women and mothers and reveal how environmental justice work and motherhood continues to interact with and transform them moving into the future. With the examples and precedents set by the women and mothers of the movement's history, activists leading the movement today carry on the legacies and values of community, collective knowledge, intergenerational activism, empathy, storytelling, and much more.

Chapter Three: Pregnancy, Lead Poisoning, and the Precautionary Principle – Flint, MI

“It’s one thing when you’re an adult and you can ask questions, and you can take steps to protect yourself. But that little bitty baby—my son—relied on me and my husband for everything... This beautiful little baby is in my care and I’m going to do everything in the world to make his life wonderful and his future bright.” – Mona Munroe-Younis, Flint Resident¹

When Flint, Michigan, resident and University of Michigan professor, Mona Munroe-Younis discovered that she was pregnant in the midst of what is now a well-known water quality crisis, she was flooded with conflicting emotions. First came the joy and wonderment of welcoming a new member to her family. Then came the overwhelming gravity of introducing a loved one to a terribly mismanaged and tainted environment. Munroe-Younis and many other Flint women faced an issue that offered them limited choices with detrimentally long-lasting impacts. As the water crisis unfolded, the women and mothers of Flint had to move with quick feet and heavy hearts to deal with an environmental disaster beyond their control. The stories that Munroe-Younis shared and that are familiar to many other Flint mothers provides a prime example of how an environmental crisis can drive mothers to action, change their relationship with the government and their families, and prepare future generations to make continued demands for an equitable environment.

The Flint water crisis began to emerge in the early months of 2014. While Flint was undergoing economic strain, an emergency manager was appointed to make decisions on behalf of the city.² As an unelected official, the emergency manager, Ed Kurtz, made decisions with

1. Mona Munroe-Younis. (Flint Resident, University of Michigan Public Health Program) interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia, Skype interview, August 2018.

2. Anna Clark, *The Poisoned City: Flint's Water and the American Urban Tragedy*. (New York, Metropolitan Books, 2018), 4.

little accountability to the residents he was serving.³ This included the fatal decision to source Flint's water from the Flint River instead of from the City of Detroit's water supply.⁴ City officials looked forward to the switch, projecting that it would total to a savings of \$5 million for the city.⁵ Residents at the time showed optimism as well, viewing it as a "return to self-determination, self-sovereignty."⁶ The Flint River and the city's infrastructure, however, were unprepared and insufficient for this switch. A combination of the water quality in the Flint River, the outdated technology of the water treatment facilities, and the deteriorated state of the city's pipes resulted in alarming outflows of tinted, smelly water into residents' homes.⁷

This ongoing water crisis is just the latest episode in the history of the city's environmental degradation. In the past, the Flint River served as the unofficial dumping grounds for General Motors and the other automotive manufacturers that dominated the city's economy.⁸ These automotive industries attracted a peak population of 200,000 during the 1950s, consisting of diverse class backgrounds.⁹ This new workforce was highly segregated, however.¹⁰ As Flint continued to grow, city officials set their sights on developing an industrial park to strengthen and slightly diversify the economy during the 1970s.¹¹ To make room for this industrial park and the corresponding expansion of the interstate, the city amassed and allocated relocation funds to

3. Merrit Kennedy, "Lead-Laced Water in Flint: A Step-By-Step Look at the Makings of a Crisis," *National Public Radio*. April 20, 2016.

4. Ana Aceves, "Flint Water Tied to Fetal Death and Lower Fertility Rates," *Public Broadcasting Station*. September 22, 2017.

5. John McQuaid, "Without these Whistleblowers, We May Never Have Known the Full Extent of the Flint Water Crisis," *Smithsonian Magazine*. December 2016.

6. Anna Clark, interview by Jeremy Hobson, *How Flint's Water Crisis Happened, And Why It Isn't Over, Here & Now*, July 10, 2018.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Dominic Adams, "Here's How Flint Went from Boom Town to Nation's Highest Poverty Rate," *Mlive.com*. September 21, 2017.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Clark, "How Flint's Water Crisis Happened."

11. Adams, "Here's How Flint Went from Boom Town."

move people away from the city's center.¹² This further triggered the trends of "white flight" that had begun in the 1960s after desegregation.¹³ The United States' oil embargo of the 1970s served as the final blow, sending the automotive industry into a crash and taking the population and infrastructure of Flint down with it.¹⁴ The residents that remained in Flint largely represented unemployed and impoverished populations, and today, the poverty level stands at about forty-five percent.¹⁵ A majority of these residents identify as Black or African-American, making Flint a target for environmental injustice. Today, the city continues to grapple with how to remediate and what to do with the remnant factories that now stand as brownfields and the various vacant and dilapidated residencies.¹⁶ Eventually, after many complaints from residents and studies showing alarming levels of lead and other possible carcinogens in residents' water, the City of Flint made the decision to realign their water sources with the City of Detroit in October of 2015.¹⁷ Although the water sources had only been diverted for eighteen months, the effects of this choice persist to this day, threatening the livelihood of all of Flint's residents.

The most prominent contaminant that residents saw, and smelled, in their water supply was lead. The water extracted from the Flint river carried different chemical properties than that of the Detroit River – properties that made it corrosive to the aging pipes running throughout the city.¹⁸ City officials had failed to observe this difference, and did not take steps to implement erosion control at their water treatment plants before lead unexpectedly began showing up in people's homes. This mistake on the city's part dealt both financial and fatal consequences. Lead

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Melissa Denchak, "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know," *National Resource Defense Council*, November 8, 2018.

15. Adams, "Here's How Flint Went from Boom Town."

16. Munroe-Younis, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

17. Kennedy, "Lead-Laced Water"

18. Denchak, "Flint Water Crisis."

poisoning exerts exceptional risks to children and the women that carry and care for them. Throughout the duration of this crisis, an estimated 9,000 children under the critical age of six interacted with lead through their daily drinking, eating, and bathing functions.¹⁹ The crisis exposed thousands more fetuses, older children, and pregnant mothers to the harmful health effects of lead. According to the Center for Disease Control, these effects range from fatigue, irritability, and memory loss in response to short-term exposure and depression, decreased fertility and cancer after long-term exposure.²⁰ Lead also bioaccumulates, which means that it persists in the body in fat reserves, and each time a person is exposed to lead, the concentration and effects of lead amasses.²¹ This makes lead especially deadly to fetuses and children, who exhibit symptoms of lead poisoning at much lower levels than adults.²² No level of lead exposure has been deemed safe, and even minor exposures in children can detriment their emotional and intellectual health.²³ Beyond lead, other water contaminants, including the bacteria responsible for Legionnaires' disease, claimed multiple lives in the community.²⁴

In an attempt to undermine people's concerns, city officials downplayed or failed to acknowledge the long-term effects that lead poisoning would have on Flint's children and families. Government officials, who would later be indicted for negligence, insisted that the city's water met accepted standards for bathing and drinking. Even after national attention turned to the water crisis, Brad Wurfel, a representative for the Michigan Department of Environmental

19. Kristi Tanner, "All Flint's Children Must be Treated as Exposed to Lead," *Detroit Free Press*, January 16, 2016.

20. "Lead Health Problems," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, June 18, 2018.
<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/lead/health.html>

21. Tanner, "All Flint's Children Must Be Treated."

22. "Lead Health Problems," *Centers for Disease Control*.

23. "Trump Administration Unveils Federal Action Plan to Reduce Childhood Lead Exposure," *Environmental Protection Agency*. December 19, 2018. ; Tanner, "All Flint's Children Must Be Treated." ; "Lead Health Problems," *Centers for Disease Control*.

24. Denchak, "Flint Water Crisis."

Quality proclaimed that “anyone who is concerned about lead in the drinking water in Flint can relax.”²⁵ Even healthcare providers swept the negative outcomes under the rug, not yet understanding the full scope of the issue. One nurse reportedly told a mother, “It’s just a few IQ points. It’s not the end of the world.”²⁶ Now, over five years into the crisis, these comments serve as evidence to the women and mothers of the community that their gut instincts about their family’s health have been true all along. Since the winter of 2016, lead levels have tested at accepted concentrations based on standards set by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. Many families, however, are still experiencing negative health impacts from other water contaminants and remain wary about their environmental health and safety. The nonchalant denial of these concerns left mothers in the dark, either moving through their pregnancies in fear of exposing their children in utero or struggling to resolve their child’s sudden skin rashes or rash behavior.

For Munroe-Younis’ son, the toxicity of the city’s water manifested in a skin rash that consumed great swatches of the young child’s body. The rash appeared just months after his birth when Munroe-Younis bathed him with the tap water that city officials had put their full confidence behind.²⁷ No matter how carefully Munroe-Younis planned and navigated through the crisis, she found it nearly impossible to avoid such negative outcomes. She recalls spending late nights researching the optimal home filtration systems and the possible water contaminants that could impact her family after noticing the change in their tap water early on. Munroe-Younis found her family “lucky” in that their house went through the switch fairly early and that she was

25. Kennedy, “Lead-Laced Water in Flint.”

26. McQuaid, “Whistleblowers.”

27. Munroe-Younis, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

able to notice the changes almost immediately.²⁸ Still, this early advantage and even the advantage of having an academic background and stable financial status could not protect her and her family.

It was not difficult for Munroe-Younis to figure out that the point-of-use filters offered by the city to residents would be insufficient. Such filters attached to residents' faucets and were distributed and installed by city residents working door-to-door for the Community Outreach and Education (CORE) team.²⁹ Equipped with hours and weeks of research, Munroe-Younis decided to take her home water filtration process a step further to mitigate the effects of the bacteria and lead-ridden water. Munroe-Younis and her husband settled on installing a reverse osmosis system and central water softener in their household to triple filter their water and reduce its acidity. Even with these systems in place, Munroe-Younis' son still displayed a negative reaction to the water. The other option would have been to bathe her son with water packaged in plastic bottles – a solution that did not satisfy her either. For many other families in Flint, however, these two options were the only viable ones.

All of the research and resulting actions taken by Munroe-Younis to protect her son reflect the ideals of and her faith in the precautionary principle. The precautionary principle is used often in the environmental health field to describe the guidelines and processes that should take place during environmental decision making “when an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment.”³⁰ Under the precautionary principle, decision makers are

28. Ibid.

29. “State of Emergency Declared in Flint,” City of Flint. 2016. <https://www.cityofflint.com/state-of-emergency/>

30. David Kriebel, Joel Tickner, Paul Epstein, John Lemons, Richard Levins, Edward L. Loechler, Margaret Quinn, Ruthann Ruel, Ted Schettler, and Michael Stoto; “The Precautionary Principle in Environmental Science,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 109, no. 9 (2001), 871.

expected to take the utmost precautionary measures towards the implementation of environmental activities, even when the possible effects of the activity are not yet fully understood.³¹ For Munroe-Younis, this meant working to prevent exposure at all costs, whether or not city officials deemed the water safe. She commented that “if you don’t know the effects of a substance, you don’t put it into the environment, you don’t risk exposure.”³² Despite all of the safeguards that she put in place, denial from the government forced her to bathe her child in what she came to understand as “a weak acid.”³³

The discrepancy between Munroe-Younis’ personal adherence to the precautionary principle and the government’s relative negligence caused great frustration. Ecologist, author, and fellow mother, Sandra Steingraber echoes this sentiment in her reflections on having her first child:

“Why does abstinence in the face of uncertainty apply only to individual behavior? Why doesn’t it apply equally to industry or agriculture? ... Obviously, a public health policy that asks expectant mothers to give up certain foods while allowing industries to continue contaminating them is absurd.”³⁴

When Munroe-Younis found herself constantly being misled by the government, she was forced to find the answers for herself and developed a distrust in her local government.

“They said they thought it would be okay to use the filtered water. But then a few months later, the government came out with a hard line of – “Use bottled water if you’re pregnant or under six years old” – That’s not what you told me three months ago... You make the best decisions you can, but you have to constantly read and become as much of an expert as you can.”³⁵

31. Ibid., 871.

32. Munroe-Younis, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

33. Ibid.

34. Sandra Steingraber, *Having Faith: An Ecologist’s Journey to Motherhood*, (New York, Routledge, 2015), 17.

35. Munroe-Younis, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

As they failed to give her answers, she, like many other women and mothers in the area and throughout the history of environmental justice, sought answers from the internet, each other, and from other experts outside of the government.

“The only thing I can really do is keep asking other people in my networks, expanding my networks to include other experts, reaching out to folks in higher education, but also in other communities that have dealt with water contamination,”³⁶

At first, Munroe-Younis found that others were hesitant to communicate their family’s struggles with the water crisis. Stories of sick and affected children were conveyed in hushed tones and bowed heads. This is one factor that made it difficult for her to come to terms with the fact that her family was enduring an environmental injustice. The silence of other families left her personal questions about her family hanging in the air.

“You don’t know if other people are having the same issues as you, like we have here with the widespread rashes. People didn’t want to talk about it at first – it’s very personal. And then we started connecting the dots, because we’d be in meetings...we realized every single person in that room had had a significant rash during water crisis”³⁷

The connections made in these private meetings were brought out into the public and national scale when one mother spoke up without shame. Leanne Walters challenged claims made by city officials about Flint’s water quality after her son was diagnosed with lead poisoning in February 2015.³⁸ When Brad Wurfel directly addressed Walters’ situation as an outlier, she turned to scientist Marc Edwards to affirm the concerns of her own family as well as others.³⁹ Just like Munroe-Younis, Walters took on the responsibility of research and precaution to protect her family, and reached out to the rest of the community for support. Both Munroe-

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. McQuaid, “Whistleblowers.”

39. Ibid.

Younis and Walters' experiences show the political power and individual courage of collective and collaborative activism.

These values of collective knowledge and community action serve as the basis for the Flint Environmental Transformation Movement (ETM Flint) that Munroe-Younis has worked to launch. Munroe-Younis envisions ETM Flint as a way to foster environmental justice solutions and leadership in the community.⁴⁰ She recognizes that Flint still has a long way to go – even beyond transitioning out of the water crisis, the community must also transition from the fallout of the automotive industry and the legacies of segregation. ETM Flint will provide sustainable leadership for Flint throughout multiple generations while addressing a wide variety of issues. Walters has started a non-profit as well, the Community Development Organization of Flint, which similarly aims to bring power and resources to the initiatives of Flint residents related to lead contamination.⁴¹

With these organizations, the mothers of Flint set a precedent of activism for their children and the greater community. By centering their work on their children and including them in that work, these mothers show the influence that they have on environmental justice. Because mothering requires a strong understanding of interdependent relationships, the spaces that mothers occupy as activists are supportive of families and other networks of relationships within the community. Munroe-Younis views including all generations in activism as an essential component of building a strong community.

“I bring my son with me, and I think it’s part of the ethics of raising him. There’s actually a very strong tradition in Flint of involving children in protests and in organizing meetings. It

40. Munroe-Younis, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

41. McQuaid, “Whistleblowers.”

doesn't mean they're all kid friendly, but people bring their kids to stuff. And that's the sort of experience I want him to have. I want him to feel part of the community from an early age."⁴²

Letting children participate in activist spaces not only builds their sense of community, but as ecologist Sandra Steingraber discovered, also prevents a sense of overwhelming dread at the thought of impending crises.

“During the Cold War, when the specter of nuclear annihilation hung in the air, a teacher asked her third graders how many of them thought that nuclear war would happen. Only one child did not raise her hand. And in response to the question, *Why not?*, the lone dissenter answered, *Because my parents are working to stop it.*”⁴³

Accommodating families within activist spaces empowers families with knowledge and Steingraber's example suggests that knowledge is an impactful source of protection for children. Knowledge digs the frightening possibilities out of the dark and makes solutions seem possible and even imminent. While the complete impacts of Flint's water crisis cannot be fully assessed within this generation, the work of mothers in the area has provided great momentum towards solutions that are long overdue for the city and its residents.

42. Munroe-Younis, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

43. Sandra Steingraber, *Raising Elijah: Protecting Our Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis*, (Boston, DaCapo Press, 2011), 178.

Chapter Four: Answering a Child's Call – Perry, Florida

“Every time I would take my son to school, when we crossed the river, he'd say, ‘Momma, you need to make them clean that up.’ He was about twelve or thirteen years old. He thought that I could just make a phone call and fix it... You know how kids are, they think momma can do anything, right. So I said, ‘Well I'll start on that right after supper tonight.’” – Joy Towles Ezell, Perry resident and Fenholloway River advocate¹

Memories from her own childhood certainly influenced Joy Towles Ezell's attitude towards environmental activism, but it was a question from and a promise made to her late son that made her one of Perry, Florida's most influential and controversial community members. Returning to her hometown after years of schooling and working in the agricultural industry, she stood out as a firm dissenter of the county's economic foundation—the Foley pulp mill. Now owned by Georgia Pacific, the pulp mill has undergone a number of name changes and shifts in management, but its negative impact on the community and the local Fenholloway River remained consistent.²

Ezell's family has been local to Taylor County, Florida, for more than six generations.³ Coming from a family of ranchers and farmers, Ezell was exposed to her local environment at an early age and identified as an environmentalist early on, through her experiences exploring the Gulf with her father. These positive memories were soiled, however, at the age of seven when she was struck by the image of “millions of dead fish” suspended in the vein of the Fenholloway River that ran through the city's center.⁴ The next day, Ezell ventured into the Gulf of Mexico with her father and grandfather and discovered even more fish kills and the cause for destruction.

1. Joy Towles Ezell. (Perry resident, Fenholloway River advocate) interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia, Winter Park, FL, November 2018.

2. “The history of the Foley Mill,” *Georgia Pacific*, Accessed March, 13, 2019, <https://www.gp.com/about-us/mill-sites/foley-mill/foley-mill-florida-history>

3. Ezell, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

4. Ibid.

The devastation of the local water systems came from the local pulp mill in Perry. The mill began operating in 1954 under the ownership of Procter and Gamble.⁵ Central to the mill coming to the area, was the state legislature's designation of the Fenholloway as a Class V industrial river appropriate only for "navigation, utility, and industrial use."⁶ The river acquired this status in 1947 after World War II when Taylor County needed an economic boost.⁷ As local leaders overemphasized the need for economic growth and jobs and local residents felt the strains of financial insecurity, environmental health and sustainability was pushed to the back burner.⁸ Researcher and environmental science advocate, Gloria Horning termed this exchange of jobs to polluting industries as "environmental blackmail," a situation that is common in environmental justice communities, especially those in the economically-depressed South.⁹ This trade-off was appealing enough at first to the residents of Perry, who largely lived in poverty and had limited educational or career training.¹⁰ The pulp mill promised about 500 new jobs for the area's residents.¹¹ These new job prospects and the increased local tax revenue from the pulp mill gave the area new economic vitality, supporting community programs and attracting other businesses as well. Any residents that displayed disfavor towards the mill were easily ignored by the state legislature who supported the mill and would never experience its effects firsthand.¹²

Although the mill provided some sense of relief to the community, underlying issues of poverty

5. "The history of the Foley Mill," *Georgia Pacific*, Accessed March 13, 2019.

6. "Chapter 62-302: Surface Water Quality Standards" (EPA rule description, 2018), 13.

7. Leslie Poole, "Florida River Tragedies: How Economics Trumped Ecology to Damage the Fenholloway River," *FCH Annals: Journal of the Florida Conference of Historians* 86, no. 1 (Unpublished article, 2019): 4. ; Mary Beth Regan, "A Town's Lifeblood – And Polluter," *Orlando Sentinel* (Perry, Florida), March 1992.

8. Regan, "A Town's Lifeblood."

9. Gloria Horning, "Social Network and Environmental Justice: A Case Study in Perry, Florida," (master's thesis, Florida State University, 2005), 41-42.

10. Ezell, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.; Lynn Hatter and Kate Payne, "Taylor County's Fenholloway River: A balancing act between economy and ecology," *WFSU Public Media*, November 24, 2016.

11. Lynn Hatter and Kate Payne, "Taylor County's Fenholloway River."

12. Leslie Poole, *Saving Florida: Women's Fight for the Environment in the Twentieth Century*, (Florida, University Press of Florida, 2015), 186.

and environmental exploitation were never addressed. Today, the poverty rate in Perry stands at roughly 31%, more than double the national rate, and the environment continues to suffer while the economic benefits of the pulp mill have leveled off.¹³

Ever since the Fenholloway River acquired classification as an industrial river, corporations like the Foley pulp mill were granted liberal allowances in depositing their waste and effluent directly into the river. It did not take long after the change in classification for local residents to experience and lament the environmental impacts of this decision. Before the new classification, residents enjoyed the Fenholloway for fishing, swimming, and other leisurely activities. Afterwards, however, long-time residents such as Vivian Sheffield, were left with only memories “of tire swings and special swimming holes, and fish-frys on hot, summer afternoons.”¹⁴ Sheffield recognizes that “that community no longer exists.”¹⁵ These images have been replaced by an unsightly stream of darkness that washes up dead fish on its shores, only adding to the stench of the mill. In 1992, Perry resident Sharon Cutter shared horror stories from her home where she found “coffee-colored water spewing out” and her family fell to sickness after using ice cubes.¹⁶ Several other residents began to complain of symptoms like skin rashes and sores.¹⁷ The river is no longer a place of community gathering, but a road of warning signs, urging visitors not to interact the water or its fish.

At the demand of environmental activists, the Fenholloway was downlisted by the legislature in the late 1990s from an industrial to a Class III river, defined by the Environmental

13. “Perry city, Florida,” United States Census Bureau, Accessed March 13, 2019, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml ; Kayla Fontenot, Jessice Semega, and Melissa Kollar; “Income and Poverty in the United States,” United States Census Bureau. September 12, 2018.

14. Lynn Hatter and Kate Payne, “Taylor County’s Fenholloway River.”

15. Ibid.

16. Regan, “A Town’s Lifeblood.”

17. Ibid.

Protection Agency (EPA) as a water body that is suitable for “fish consumption; recreation, propagation, and maintenance of a healthy, well-balanced population of fish and wildlife.”¹⁸ This demand erupted as a response to reports from the EPA about the health and environmental effects of dioxin, one of the mill’s byproducts.¹⁹ The state and federal offices tasked with implementing this change moved slowly and the outcomes seem to be unsatisfactory.²⁰ Ezell believes that the river is not appropriate for recreation or public use and should still be classified as a Class V industrial river.

Despite the Fenholloway’s polluted condition, public opinion still largely favored the presence of the pulp mill as a source of jobs and income. Former Florida Governor Claude Kirk referred to the distinctly noxious scent of the pulp mill as the “smell of money.”²¹ County Tax Collector Mark Wiggins, finds sacrificing the river to be necessary to the survival of future generations, “I want to see this community grow. I want my children – your children – to come back to this community and put back into it what they got out of it.”²² The ubiquitous nature of this mindset put Ezell in a difficult but impassioned position when she reunited with her hometown in the early years of her adult life.

Ezell left Perry to pursue a degree in agricultural business – a field that she felt fortunate to be pursuing as a woman in the 1970s. “Companies were wanting to hire me before I graduated... A woman can get a job if it’s related to agriculture, because there’s not very many women in it.”²³ Job offers brought Ezell and her son to Alabama, Tallahassee, North Carolina,

18. “Chapter 62-302: Surface Water Quality Standards” (EPA rule description, 2018), 13.

19. Horning, “Social Network,” 51.

20. *Ibid.*, 62.

21. Ron Cunningham, “Arrogance is the history of Florida,” *Ocala Star-Banner* (Ocala, Florida), March 2016.

22. Lynn Hatter and Kate Payne, “Taylor County’s Fenholloway River.”

23. Ezell, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

and Tennessee. While she was doing well in her field, she was drawn back to Perry, a situation that she recognizes as unique.

“There are no jobs there except for the mill. So generally, when people go off and get a college degree, they don’t come back – they’re gone. And that’s a shame because we lose knowledge that way. Basically, the people that stay there are the ones that are not able to go to college, or maybe aren’t smart enough to go to college, but they get a job at the mill or at the prison. And that’s their life – they’re stuck there, then.”²⁴

Perhaps it was a conversation with her grandmother that ignited her drive and motivation to return and give back to her community. By the time Ezell returned to the area, Buckeye Technologies had entered into a partnership with Procter and Gamble to operate part of the mill before fully acquiring and operating it from 1995 to 2003.²⁵ Ezell remembers her grandmother’s devastated words and tone quite clearly.

“In 1981, I had been off work and I had come back home, and my grandmother said ‘Our water’s got Buckeye in it’ ... And I said, ‘What do you mean, momma?’ And she said ‘Well, just smell it and taste it.’”²⁶

The water from her grandmother’s tap gave off a yellow color and the undeniable stench of the pulp mill. Equipped with years of experience in agricultural business and chemicals, Ezell recognized that very few residents and employees of the mill understood the true impacts of the chemicals being deposited into the river and directed into their homes. Because of this, she viewed the harms to the environment and health as unintentional, and was open to communicating with residents and managers of the pulp mill about what she knew. Her former knowledge and ensuing investigation of the mill led to a greater understanding of the mill’s byproduct of dioxin and its effects.

24. Ibid.

25. “The history of the Foley Pulp Mill,” *Georgia Pacific*.

26. Ezell, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

Ezell researched the toxins and her commitment to taking action only grew as she realized the impacts went beyond her own child and family. The presence of dioxin in her community was not to be taken lightly and immediate action was needed. In the process of making paper, chlorine is used to bleach wood pulp. When chlorine comes into contact with organic materials, dioxin—one of the chemicals found in Agent Orange—forms.²⁷ Dioxin is a known carcinogen that has threatened countless other environmentally-disadvantaged communities throughout the United States. Dioxin contamination leads to skin rashes and discoloration, liver malfunctions, and disruption of the endocrine and reproductive system.²⁸ Besides water effluent, pulp mills also espouse airborne pollutants including sulfides that cause an unpleasant odor, respiratory irritation, nausea, and cardiovascular disruptions.²⁹

While her grandmother provided the spark for Ezell to begin researching the issue, it was a comment from her son, Trey, that gave her the burning passion to take action. Just as the sight of dead fish in the river made a mark on Ezell's childhood, the discolored and polluted state of the Fenholloway pushed her son to demand for better. With all of the confidence and frankness of a young child, he demanded, "Mama, you've got to make them clean this up." Though Trey had no concept of who was actually responsible, he felt security in asking his mother to make things better. Conversely, Ezell did not quite know where to start, but she knew that she could not fail her Trey's confidence in her. "He was my conscience there for a long time – and still is

27. "Dioxins and their effects on human health," *World Health Organization*, October 4, 2016.
<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/dioxins-and-their-effects-on-human-health>

28. *Ibid.*

29. "What's that smell? Pulp and paper industry odors," *Wisconsin Department of Health Services*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/air/pulpodors.htm>

... I carry this on for him, because he wanted me to clean it up ... Your kids will hold you accountable in so many ways.”³⁰

Despite general acknowledgement of the pulp mill’s failure to meet environmental standards and suspicions of heightened health crises in the area due to the pulp mill, Ezell still faces great opposition in answering her child’s call and holding the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the managers of the pulp mill accountable. Again, the economic benefits of the pulp mill keep it in the favor of residents and regional and state officials. Additionally, the constant overturn of company names and managers work intentionally to preserve the pulp mill’s reputation and perception. Finally, the political power of the pulp mill’s few dissenters and the population of Perry as a whole is quite limited in comparison to the abundant resources and credibility of the large corporations that run the pulp mill.

“When you get a reputation of being a contaminated community, [polluting corporations] think it’s easy to get in there. We don’t have a lot of money, we don’t have a lot of political power, we are considered dumb and stupid and they can put anything they want on top of us and they think we won’t say anything.”³¹

Perceptions of Perry as a financially dependent and, therefore, politically powerless community affirms its status as an environmental justice community. It follows then, that Ezell drew on past examples of collective activism to help establish the HOPE (Help Our Polluted Environment) group and direct several other direct action and publicity campaigns.³²

Forgotten legacies of activism in Perry, however, have shown Ezell that these perceptions are false and that the residents of Perry and Taylor County do have the capacity to resist industries that compromise their environmental and physical health. She points to two specific

30. Towles-Ezell, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

31. Ibid.

32. Horning, “Social Network,” 63.

precedents, set by successful oppositions in the early 2000s to a bombing range and a coal-fired power plant, as proof that Taylor County doesn't have to continue standing as the pulp mill's dumping grounds.³³ Ezell draws on this history and the motivation from her son to direct her environmental ethics and activism. She feels compelled in her identity as a mother to follow historic examples and continue communicating the truth of the pulp mill.

“If you're a mother, and you realize that there's a problem in your community, you have to do something. You have to. When you learn enough about a subject and you know it's gonna affect your family, that is all the motivation a mother needs to get out and get involved.”³⁴

The attitudes and values set by her own family also played a part in placing her on the path of activism. She admired the responses that her own father and grandfather gave to her personal concerns about the river from a young age and acknowledged the example they set for her as environmentalists.

Ezell's strategies for bringing attention to the pulp mill are as wide and varied as her knowledge on chemicals. Mirroring the methods of Lois Gibbs in Love Canal, N.Y., she asked community members who shared her concerns to contact her in order to begin organizing and answering the questions that the DEP and the EPA would not address. Since then, she has “done about everything [she] knows to do.”³⁵ She has gotten involved in lawsuits, started her own local news site, shared her story with the CBS show “60 Minutes,” and has gotten college students involved in protests at grocery stores selling products from the pulp mill. She also stays up to date with environmental activists in other communities, sharing mutual support and creative ideas for their campaigns. Her activism has persisted for years through death threats and the loss

33. Nathan Crabbe, “Is one of our last pristine coastlines in danger?,” *The Gainseville Sun* (Gainseville, FL), July 8, 2006.

34. Ezell, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

35. *Ibid.*

of loved ones, however, she keeps her focus on speaking the truth and getting people to stop to think about it. This work undoubtedly becomes increasingly difficult as the environmental health of the area continues to degrade.

Today, the pulp mill is managed by Georgia Pacific and has been under its direction since 2003.³⁶ Though it appears that the complaints of local activists like Ezell have reached them, the solutions they have provided for environmental restoration are still insufficient and unsustainable. The solution proposed in 2015 was to clean up the river by building a pipe to dispose the effluent directly into the Gulf of Mexico instead.³⁷ This solution does not satisfy Ezell or other water activists including Linda Young of the Southeast Clean Water Network, who refers to the proposal as “a huge toxic mess.”³⁸ The degraded quality of water and wildlife in the Fenholloway lead activists to believe that contamination will only scale up to uncontrollable levels in the Gulf, which provides crucial recreation and commercial fishing revenue to the region.

Ezell’s story offers many examples of the varied ways that motherhood impacts environmental justice. First, Ezell’s motivation to get involved as a mother reflects the sentiments of many other women who get involved in this type of work. She finds mothers to be the most consistent and active respondents to her calls for action. In her experience, Ezell finds that mothers are already keen to the looming environmental and health risks within the community and are more than ready to speak up and stand in support once they are called upon.

“You mess with a mama bear and you’ve got trouble on your hands . . . Women are fierce about protecting their children and so they are going to stand up and do the right thing. No matter how

36. “The history of the Foley pulp mill,” *Georgia Pacific*.

37. TaMaryn Waters, “Foley cellulose mill plans river restoration project,” *Tallahassee Democrat* (Tallahassee, FL), June 1, 2015. <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/2015/06/01/foley-cellulose-mill-plans-river-restoration-project/28327979/>

38. *Ibid.*

scary it might be or how intimidated they might feel in their community, women eventually get the gumption and the strength to stand up and say what needs to be said.”³⁹

Ezell proclaims that as the “nurturers” of the family, environmental issues are ones that mothers can not afford to ignore and ones that prove they are “not afraid to act.”⁴⁰ In addition to being inspired by the needs of the community’s children, Ezell also makes a point to include rising generations in her work. Like Munroe-Younis of Flint, Ezell draws new energy and enthusiasm from the passion and involvement of younger community members. She finds relief in the fact that “the kids that are growing up now *are* concerned about the environment as well,” and is inspired by students’ participation in her wildly creative awareness campaigns.⁴¹

These awareness campaigns not only show how creative and passionate mothers are about their work, but speaks to the higher standards that women as mothers must reach in order to be taken seriously. Ezell engages in her activism with more than just attention-drawing tombstone props and color-coordinated outfits to reference Agent Orange. She also enters grassroots, legislative, and academic spaces with thorough research and impeccably accurate facts. She experiences great pressure to be precise and accurate not only from dissenters who seek to discount her credibility, but also from the obligations she feels towards the community’s children.

“[The people at the mill] don’t like me much. But they respect me because they know I’m telling the truth ... You need to know what you’re talking about. Especially in front of your kids. You have to tell them the truth – always. Even though it might be hard sometimes, you have to tell them the truth. That’s part of your responsibility too in being a mother.”⁴²

39. Poole, *Saving Florida*, 189.

40. Ezell, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

41 . Ibid.

42. Ibid.

This virtue of transparency in the face of discomfort and sometimes hopelessness is likely what inspires distrust of the government in women and mothers like Ezell.

Though the limited progress in the area hampers her morale from time to time, Ezell constantly turns to the lessons learned from her years of experience and fellow activists, including Lois Gibbs, Linda Young of the Clean Water Network, and author Jack Davis to persist in her work. Her hopes for her community's future revolve around ensuring a just transition into pulp mill technologies and other sources of income that do not pollute, and showing the community's youth that Perry is worth the investment of their passion and education. As construction for the Gulf pipe ensues, Ezell maintains her love and dedication to her hometown, and wants to make clear that the defenders of the Fenholloway River are not going anywhere. "Things change with time. It will close down eventually. I do believe that ... You have to keep saying things. If you stop, they'll think that you've gone away."⁴³

43. Ibid.

Chapter Five: Navigating Generational Struggles – Apopka, Florida

“Family is a place where you sit down and just enjoy one another. No arguing, no bickering, no fighting, don’t even talk about the news – just what you can do for one another. Them was the good old days. They dead. They won’t come back no more.” – Linda Lee, former Lake Apopka farm worker¹

As the examples from Flint, Michigan, show, the impacts of today’s environmental disasters will not come into full view until future generations rise to adulthood. It is no surprise then, that the health effects and environmental concerns of Lake Apopka’s farm working community in Central Florida continue to make headlines and necessitate research, roughly twenty years after the last of the community’s major farming operations were shut down in the late 1990s.²

Linda Lee, one of the community’s well-known matriarchs, speaks of Apopka’s environmental injustices from decades of personal experience of life in the “muck.” Throughout the years, she has lost countless friends and families that shared these memories to the persisting health consequences of working the fields. Efforts from the community to obtain reparations for decades of chemical exposure, income theft, and other unjust working conditions are continually undermined by instances of cancer, lupus, birth defects, and other ailments that devastate and break the spirit of the community. Lee is determined, however, to keep these memories alive in the hopes of bringing overdue economic and environmental justice to her fellow farmworkers.

When Lee realized that the stories of those who lost their lives to the muck were becoming erased with time, she proposed an innovative way to remember their struggles and

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1. Linda Lee. (Apopka resident and retired farmworker) interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia, Apopka, FL, October 2018.
 2. Martin E. Comas, “Sick Apopka Farmworkers Hope for Major Study of Their Illnesses,” *Orlando Sentinel*, September 19, 2015 ; Dale Finley Slongwhite, *Fed Up: The High Costs of Cheap Food*. (Florida, University Press of Florida, 2014), xxii.

their triumphs—the Lake Apopka Memorial Quilts. The pair of quilts honors over sixty deceased community members with bright and colorful patterns that reflect their life legacies, their passions, and their role in their community.³ For example, Jonas Ray is memorialized on the quilt engaging in his favorite past time, fishing in Lake Apopka.⁴ In another square, Lee’s sister, Geraldine Moore, is pictured with a basket of vegetables to commemorate the more than twenty years that she spent working on the muck.⁵ Meanwhile, mother of four, Emily Burdon is shown doing her children’s laundry.⁶ She died after laboring on the muck farms for about six years. As the memorial grew from one square to a whole quilt and from one quilt to two, the community’s struggle for understanding and validation seemed unending.

Although life in the muck may be turning into a faint memory, the negative environmental and health legacies of the area’s history continue to weigh on the population. Farming in the area began during World War II, amidst national concerns about resources and rationing.⁷ The government drained the northern shore of Lake Apopka, reducing it from the second largest lake in Florida to the fifth in order to capitalize on the nutrient-rich layers of muck soil that lay underneath.⁸ As the example from the Fenholloway River showed, in cases of environmental injustice, the health and ecological outcomes of making drastic alterations to the environment are overlooked in the name of economic security in times of crisis.

3. Slongwhite, *Fed Up*, 144.

4. *Ibid.*, 147.

5. *Ibid.*, 148.

6. *Ibid.*, 158.

7. Barry Estabrook, “The Sunshine State’s Pesticide Problem,” *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2011. ; Slongwhite, *Fed Up*, 2.

8. Slongwhite, *Fed Up*, xxii. ; Anne Saville and Alison Adams, “Balancing Environmental Remediation, Environmental Justice, and Health Disparities: the Case of Lake Apopka, Florida,” *Case Studies in the Environment* (2019): 2. ; Estabrook, “Pesticide Problem.”

The laborers that showed up to work the farms were largely African American or immigrants from Haiti and Latin America who were accustomed to a life of low-paying, migratory farm work. Many of them could not read and had little resources to advocate for the value of their labor and time. A combination of negligence, disenfranchisement, language barriers, and lack of autonomy subjected them to repeated injustices within their economic, environmental, and social health. While they spent their days toiling to provide food for the struggling country, Apopka remained segregated, with whites living on the northern side of the regional railroad tracks.⁹ Alternately, young men of color were recruited or forced to work on the muck farms if they were found to be in violation of the community's vagrancy laws established in the 1940s to limit their mobility to the south side of the railroad tracks.¹⁰

For years after the war, the northern shore of Lake Apopka continued farming operations. The lake's water and the underlying soils took on an influx of agriculture chemicals including the notoriously deadly insecticide and focus of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, DDT. DDT stands for dichlorodiphenyltrichlorethane and is directly linked to symptoms of "vomiting, tremors or shakiness, and seizures."¹¹ In *Silent Spring*, Carson exposed the national prevalence of DDT and exhibited its harmful effects on life through studies conducted on birds, fish, and other wildlife populations.¹² Besides DDT, farming operations in the area also required heavy use of organochlorine and organophosphate fertilizers, pesticides, and insecticides with persisting and bioaccumulating effects.¹³ These chemicals reached farmworkers indirectly through soil and

9. Dale Finley Slongwhite, *Fed Up: The High Costs of Cheap Food*. (Florida, University Press of Florida, 2014), 5.

10. *Ibid.*, 5.

11. "Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) Factsheet," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 7, 2017, https://www.cdc.gov/biomonitoring/DDT_FactSheet.html ; Anne Saville and Alison Adams, "Balancing Environmental Remediation," 3.

12. Gloria Horning, "Social Network and Environmental Justice: A Case Study in Perry, Florida," (master's thesis, Florida State University, 2005), 3.

13. *Ibid.*, 3.

water contamination, as well as directly through exposure during spraying. Even after Carson and other activists in the anti-toxins movement exposed the deadly impacts of agricultural chemicals, farmworkers remained uninformed and exposed to the hazards. This continued use of agricultural chemicals has resulted in pesticide poisoning for up to 20,000 farmworkers each year, according to the EPA.¹⁴

Being sprayed in the fields with chemicals represented just one of the many hardships and dangers of laboring as a farmworker. Farmworkers also worried about accidentally exposing their homes and families to chemicals through their field clothes, feeding their families during looming threats of wage theft, avoiding exhaustion from overheating, and keeping their spirits up when facing racism, sexism and denial of the severity of their conditions. Many, including one of the community's late activists, Geraldean Matthew, struggled with these issues beginning with their work on the muck as children. Matthew described the labor camps that she stayed in with her family as "really rough for a young girl."¹⁵ She recalled sleeping in horse stables and witnessing blatant domestic and sexual violence in the common space. When she got older, Matthew also worried about her vulnerability working in the fields where sexual assault was a regular occurrence. When she began raising a family, Matthew worried about exposing her children. "We would pick up our young children. And we would hold our babies. And their mouths, with their tongues out, would be on our shirts. And our babies later had rashes all over their skin."¹⁶ Another former farmworker, Louise Hamilton, spoke with regret about the opportunities lost to life on the farm. Besides having her hard-working wages absorbed by

14. Earthjustice, "Pesticide Lake – The Poisoning of the Workers of Apopka, Florida," Youtube video, March 2, 2015.

15. Dale Finley Slongwhite, *Fed Up*, 43.

16. Comas, "Sick Apopka Farmworkers."

manipulative “boss men”, she faced further limitations after losing part of her eyesight and developing arthritis and stomach cancer due to tough labor and chemical exposure.¹⁷

The farmworkers of Apopka have been advocating for themselves and the resolution of these issues ever since the area’s major farming operations closed down in the late 1990s. Just a few years before that, the Farmworker Association of Florida expanded from its founding office in Mascotte, Florida, to other major farming communities in the state, including Apopka.¹⁸ Still, the presence and resources of a statewide advocacy group for the farmworkers’ concerns had little impact on the decisions made to address Lake Apopka’s increasing deterioration. Local officials and scientists only became serious about cleaning up the lake after mass bird deaths during the winter migration season of 1998.¹⁹ Images of beautiful and beloved species lying dead in the muck made national headlines and caused massive outcries that pushed the St. John’s River Water Management District to develop and implement the Lake Apopka Restoration Act in 1996.²⁰ Since then, research and funding continue to focus largely on the ecological restoration of the lake, resiliency of the species affected, and a transition to an economy of ecotourism.²¹ Yet, comparatively minimal efforts have been put into understanding the economic and health impacts on the farmworkers that were exposed to the same conditions every day over multiple generations. While the state of Florida dedicated \$1.5 million to research on bird deaths and supported private research on alligator deformations, the Apopka farmworkers have not been

17 . Ibid., 68-77.

18. “Our History,” Farmworker Association of Florida, Accessed April 8, 2019.
<http://floridafarmworkers.org/about/>

19. Ibid., xxii.

20. Anne Saville and Alison Adams, “Balancing Environmental Remediation,” 3.

21. Ibid., 3.

promised a single penny.²² In 2011, Florida legislators even voted to allot \$500,000 to aid the farmworkers, but former Governor Rick Scott eventually vetoed the budget.²³

Even without the evidence of a formal study, the community's matriarchs began to notice health trends that varied from their family history and persisted in their children and grandchildren. Spontaneous and widespread skin rashes offered a very visible symptom of life on the farm. Then, even graver conditions such as miscarriages, birth defects, lupus, kidney failure, and various types of cancer proliferated throughout the community in patterns that followed farmworkers and their families. A study conducted by the Farmworker Association of Florida concluded that up to 92 percent of farmworkers in the region had been exposed to the pesticides linked to these conditions and that the birth defect rate of 13 percent in the area is more than four times that of the state average.²⁴ Lee has struggled with lupus since 1989.²⁵ The prevalence of these conditions in the community aligns with the known effects of DDT and other pesticides, and are common in other farm working communities as well. Despite the widespread occurrence of these ailments, the county Health Department asserted that the farmworking community did not experience lupus or kidney diseases at heightened rates.²⁶ While the study conducted by the county Health Department only considered hospital visits, and did not examine exposure, it is used to delegitimize the community's demands.²⁷

Conducting a health disparities study to confirm and obtain resources to address these disproportionate trends is especially vital in the community because of the loss of wages that

22. Pesticide Action Network, "Out of the Muck – Lake Apopka Farmworkers – Apopka, FL," Vimeo, 2012. ; Estabrook, "Pesticide Problem." ; Earthjustice, "Pesticide Lake."

23. Ibid. ; Earthjustice, "Pesticide Lake."

24. Estabrook, "Pesticide Problem."

25. Lee, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

26. Comas, "Sick Apopka Farmworkers."

27. Ibid.

occurred after the local farms shut down.²⁸ Many families had been working on the farms for multiple generations, with the assumption that their children and their family could continue making their living in the same way. When farming operations were suddenly suspended, many families faced difficulty transitioning to other types of work due to limited skill sets and job training. An estimated 2,500 jobs were lost due to the closure of the north shore's farms.²⁹ Again, the impact on the laborers that supported the economy and food resources was overlooked. Community member, Betty Lou Woods wishes that local officials would have held themselves more accountable in ensuring a just transition, or in securing adequate work conditions in the first place. Despite the harrowing conditions on the farm, she still in her final days "[wished] they'd bring the farms back" and that they "didn't get destroyed" in the first place.³⁰

Though calls for a health study have gone unanswered to this day, the community has not slowed down their efforts to communicate their story and advocate for their needs. With the Farmworker Association of Florida, prominent women in the community like Matthew and Lee have promoted the visibility of Apopka and have lobbied for state and national legislation to promote farmworkers' rights and ban the use of life-threatening chemicals in the fields.³¹ Matthew and, now, Lee repeatedly assert the accountability of the state and former farm owners in the community's health crisis. Beyond conducting an official health study, community activists are now asking for reparations to families that have lost loved ones and proper health

28. Estabrook, "Pesticide Problem."

29. Dale Finley Slongwhite, *Fed Up*, xxii ; Comas, "Sick Apopka Farmworkers.>"; Pesticide Action Network, "Out of the Muck."

30. Dale Finley Slongwhite, *Fed Up*, 86.

31. Lee, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

care to aid survivors. Though Matthew died in 2016, her legacy lives on among her family and her peers, including Lee.³²

The activism of women like Lee in the region extends far beyond the nuclear family and illustrates the importance of mothering in environmental justice work. First, the legacy of Lee and the Lake Apopka Farmworker Memorial Quilt reveal the intergenerational nature of the community's activism. The lifestyle that Lee and her parents and grandparents endured has had lasting effects on her children and grandchildren despite their family's separation from farm work. The lasting effects of environmental traumas thus requires the awareness and activism of multiple generations. This intergenerational approach to advocacy reflects the community's deep commitment to family and the importance of matriarchal figures in echoing familial and communal histories and thus bringing environmental injustices to light. By observing and understanding the community as mothers, the women of Lake Apopka were especially equipped to identify and bring attention to environmental and health traumas. Examples of empathy and hard work set by her own parents motivate Lee to watch out for her own community.

“I looked at how my parents worked hard. They tried to feed and take care of us. Other people around here too, they was concerned about the children. You could talk smack or whatever, but you come messing with children – you almost get killed.”³³

Although the environmental and health concerns that Lee faced during her childhood may vary from the concerns of current farmworking families and younger generations, a strong sense of community and a broad definition of and connection to family remains constant. The strong sense of community and family in the area can be seen by the continued prevalence and strength of organizations like the Farmworkers Association and the Hope CommUnity Center. The Hope

32. Bethany Rodgers, “Pillar in Apopka farmworker community dies at age 66,” *Orlando Sentinel* (Orlando, FL), October 9, 2016.

33. Lee, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

CommUnity Center was founded in 1971 by a group of Catholic sisters, including Ann Kendrick and Cathy Gorman, affectionately known as the “Apopka nuns.”³⁴ After learning from the iconic farmworking rights activist, Cesar Chavez, in California, the Apopka nuns spent time getting to know the Apopka community before beginning their ministry.³⁵ They felt that this period of community building was crucial, sensing the high value that the population placed on their families and their work. Community members’ bonds are both personal and political, fortifying activists’ voices and giving them purpose and hope in the work that they do. Memories with her own mother and grandmother bring a smile to Lee’s face after discussing the dismay and discouragement she felt after repeatedly losing loved ones to the ailments of farm work. She reminisced - “Family. That’s a beautiful thing ... In my family, my grandmother and my momma used to cook a whole lot of food on a Sunday ... Oh yeah, them was the good old days.” Dedication to her family also gave her the final push to bring her ideas of the memorial quilt to life.

“When my sister Margie died, I made a point to myself saying that I’m not gone take it no more – not lying down. I created the quilts and remember the people that worked on Lake Apopka to make people believe like I know ... That was real peoples on that farm working out there. They was proud of themselves, they went to church on Sunday, they try to reach out to help each other, they tried to stick together when things was tough. I think they owed some kind of honor, I do.”³⁶

With the hope and strength that she continues to gather from the community, Lee remains steadfast in her demands for the dignity and reparations that she knows Lake Apopka farmworkers deserve. Lee’s two biggest concerns are “healthcare and testing.”³⁷ She also notes a

34. “The Story of Hope,” Hope CommUnity Center, Accessed April, 8, 2019. <https://www.hcc-offm.org/our-story/> ; Leslie Poole, *Saving Florida: Women’s Fight for the Environment in the Twentieth-Century*, (Florida, University Press of Florida, 2015), 192.

35. “The Story of Hope,” Hope CommUnity Center.

36. Lee, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

37. Ibid.

great need in the community for wage and housing equity. Safe and efficient healthcare and housing are both inaccessible to many families on the south side of Apopka who face higher rates of poverty. This is exacerbated by persisting health issues that either kill heads of households or force them into retirement.

Today, Lake Apopka continues to undergo restoration and rebranding efforts to appeal to ecotourists. A wildlife drive occupies what used to be the muck farms and a bike trail connects various points around the lake. Representatives from the water management districts and partnering non-profits are satisfied with this progress. Meanwhile, Lee and the farmworking community still face devastation from the deaths of loved ones.

“I lost my daughter – forty-three years old. I lost my granddaughter at twenty-five ... They passed, but I’m still here ... I don’t wanna get close to nobody no more. ‘Cause the way it look like, you get close to somebody, have fun a little bit, and the next thing you know, they gone. Oh, no. I’m tired of being said, tired of feeling bad.”³⁸

Despite this, Lee continues to promote the Lake Apopka Memorial Quilts and encourage younger members of the community to connect with the region’s history so that they may continue pursuing the community’s needs. Jeannie Economos, the Pesticide Safety and Environmental Health Coordinator of the Farmworker Association deeply reveres Lee’s dedication as both an activist and a friend.

“[Lee and Matthew] know that they might not get any compensation. They might not get any help in their lifetimes. But they want to see things change for future generations. I admire them tremendously. I think Betty [Dubose] and Linda and Geraldean are heroes.”³⁹

Lee continues to tour college campuses, libraries, and other community centers with the memorial quilts and can still celebrate any progress made with her grandchildren. In 2018, she

38. Ibid.

39. Earthjustice, “Pesticide Lake.”

was recognized by Central Florida Jobs with Justice with the Treston Davis-Faulkner Legacy Award in honor of her grassroots work.⁴⁰

40. "Jobs with Justice Presents Linda Lee with the Treston Davis-Faulkner Legacy Award," *Farmworker Association of Florida*, December 18, 2018. <http://apopkaquiltproject.blogspot.com/>

Chapter Six: Environmental Awareness through Other-Mothering - Orlando, Florida

“We have good days and bad days, but I think the few people that’s left in Parramore deserve to be treated better. And if it’s gonna be me and a few others, then we gonna hold all of the people accountable and we’re not gonna go away. We gonna fight until we can’t fight anymore. So, this is Parramore.” – Lawanna Gelzer, Parramore resident and activist¹

As Lawanna Gelzer drives around her childhood neighborhood, things just don’t feel the same anymore. Neglected roads in poor condition weave through abandoned properties and other buildings that are barely holding up. “I watched houses disappear, I watched homes disappear... Generations grow, leave, stay, cycles – you name it,” Gelzer commented. She has been connected to the community, since birth, for over five decades through her roles as a financial advisor, activist, and partial owner of her family daycare business. Thus, her memories and family history are rich with reflections on the evolution of one of Orlando’s most prominent Black neighborhoods, Parramore. As Gelzer experienced the disenfranchisement and gentrification of the community, she was moved to action. At first, she aimed to force change through a role in public office. After her campaign for city council however, she discovered rampant faults and corruption in her local government and turned instead to building up her community’s voice through grassroots activism.

Her voice has been loud and clear in national news stories calling attention to one of Parramore’s housing projects, Griffin Park. Looming towers of concrete for the Ultimate Interstate 4 expansion project eventually give way to the crisscrossing ramps of State Road 408, trapping the Griffin Park housing project of west Orlando inside. In between the maze of highways, residents try their best to shield themselves from the noise, dust, and ground-shaking

1. Lawanna Gelzer. (Parramore resident and activist) interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia, Orlando, FL, November 2018.

construction that smother the uniformly beige housing units. Their efforts are ongoing and seemingly futile. Gelzer notes, “People live there and they say they have all kinds of stuff in their house.”² From increased carbon dioxide emissions to fine particulate matter, this “stuff” manifests in residents as chronic respiratory issues, inflated rates of cancer, and the highest child asthma rate in the county.³ This reality is easily overlooked by the countless vehicles that pass by the intersection each day. On the ground, however, the presence of the development projects feels monumental and oppressive. “Unless you really look up, you really do not understand the magnitude of what this community has been dealing with.”⁴

As Orlando develops towards the goal of becoming “one of the most environmentally-friendly, economically and socially vibrant communities in the nation,” the burdens of development fall disproportionately on neighborhoods like Griffin Park.⁵ The neighborhood is just one subset of the larger community known as Parramore - a historically Black community that has been seeking recognition for and answers to the various social and environmental issues that they face in addition to air pollution, including lack of fresh food, gentrification, and an abundance of brownfields—properties designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as inaccessible due to hazardous substance contamination.⁶ These issues are largely hidden from the general public and contrast sharply with the increasing prosperity of east

2. Ibid.

3. Health Council of East Central Florida, “The Parramore Heritage Community in Orlando Florida: The Impact of Traffic-Related Pollution on Asthma Rates” (report, Orlando, FL, 2014), 6. ; Sarahbeth Ackermen, “Report: Parramore Has Highest Rate of Asthma in Orange County,” *WFTV* (Orlando, FL), April 17, 2018.

4. Gelzer interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

5. “2018 Community Action Plan,” City of Orlando, accessed January 29, 2019,

<https://beta.orlando.gov/NewsEventsInitiatives/Initiatives/2018-Community-Action-Plan>

6. City of Orlando, “Parramore Comprehensive Neighborhood Plan” (report, Orlando, FL, 2015), 28 ; Gelzer interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia. ; “Overview of EPA’s Brownfields Program.” Environmental Protection Agency, November 6, 2018. <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/overview-epas-brownfields-program>

Orlando, prompting a rising group of community activists to demand better treatment in the name of environmental justice.

The activism of women like Gelzer serves as a strong example of “other-mothering” and its comparable impact on the environmental justice movement. Other-mothering is a term that describes the practices and ideals of motherhood utilized by many women within a community, not just those who have a biological connection to the community’s children.⁷ Women of diverse family structures find themselves involved and concerned with the wellbeing of children and their community as a whole. This practice is very common in communities of color and is very relevant in environmental justice, which is based on the same strong sense of community that allows for other-mothering.⁸ Although Gelzer does not identify as a mother, her experience with her family’s daycare business connects her with the generations of families that have utilized the daycare and brought her closer to the trends of childhood chronic and fatal illness that occur too often in the area.⁹ Other women who identify as grandmothers or aunts or just concerned citizens are also active in other-mothering and have raised concerns about the health of the community’s children amongst themselves and on a national scale in communications to the press.¹⁰

The onslaught of environmental ills that Gelzer and other Parramore activists are combatting exist as an effect of segregation. A relic of that era in American history, Division Street still separates Parramore from the shining new facilities of downtown Orlando—including multi-million dollar sports venues, a fire station, and a police academy.¹¹ The division between

7. Caroline Whitbeck. “Maternal Instinct,” in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa, Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), 186.

8. Cynthia Stavrianos. *The Political Uses of Motherhood in America*, (New York, Routledge, 2015), 30.

9. Gelzer interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia

10. Julia Craven. “Even Breathing is a Risk in One of Orlando’s Poorest Neighborhoods,” *Huffington Post* (Orlando, FL), January 23, 2018.

11. City of Orlando, “Parramore Comprehensive Neighborhood Plan,” 24-51. ; . Health Council of East Central Florida, “The Parramore Heritage Community”, 12.

the two areas is still very clear, with Division Street marking the transition into unkempt roads, unsightly construction sites, dormant brownfields, and some of the city's least desirable facilities, including dumpster storage lots. From the start, white landowners signed the community off as the city's dumping grounds, viewing the black population in the area as temporary and signing off on zoning that situated industrial, agricultural, and residential units side by side.¹² Despite this, the community developed a strong local economy with several thriving black businesses.¹³ When separate but equal laws came into effect in the 1960s, however, many residents left the area.¹⁴ The implementation of this law coincided with the construction of major highways, further isolating Parramore from the rest of downtown Orlando and erasing residents' struggles with political disenfranchisement, environmental pollution, and community fragmentation. As of 2013, the population of Parramore stands at just one-third of the 1960s population of over 18,000 people.¹⁵

What the community lacks in numbers, it makes up for in resilience and activism. Gelzer uses her background and expertise in finance to expose the city's negligent spending and stands as a strong and unapologetic advocate for her hometown. Like many other women in the movement, Gelzer felt moved to action after repeated negligence and withdrawal from officials that she had originally entrusted with the wellbeing of herself and her neighbors. Despite a number of initiatives developed to re-invest in the neighborhood, Gelzer and other activists feel that many of their most basic needs and concerns have been disregarded in favor of symbolic and publicly acceptable actions. Another community member, Jacqueline Young, remembers how

12. Ibid., 24.

13. City of Orlando, "Parramore Comprehensive Neighborhood Plan," 25. ; Ben Brotemarkle. "Florida Frontier: Orlando's Parramore Neighborhood." *Florida Today* (Orlando, FL), February 20, 2017.

14. City of Orlando, "Parramore Comprehensive Neighborhood Plan," 25.

15. Ibid., 27.

difficult it was to get help for her granddaughter, Lynette, who was facing chronic and severe asthma episodes. When her requests for information about her home's air quality weren't ignored, they were answered with incorrect information that further compromised Lynette's health. "There's always somebody in the ambulance," Young laments.¹⁶

The area also will be impacted by city plans for a multi-use downtown education, housing, and business district branded as the "Creative Village." These plans promise to "revitalize" Parramore through "investments by educational institutions,"¹⁷ according to the City of Orlando's Comprehensive Neighborhood Plan for Parramore. Creative Village will be in the shadows of the demolished Amway Arena, on the border of Parramore and the downtown business district. The city views the development as a service to Parramore residents, whom they claim will benefit from mixed-income housing and opportunities for higher education. Site clean-up and construction are underway with a budget in the hundreds of millions.¹⁸ This hefty price tag serves as the source of conflict and complaint for Gelzer who feels that this money could have been spent on the community's more immediate needs and existing requests.

In the wake of the death of Latoya Lee in late 2017, a long-term Parramore resident and friend to Gelzer, a health disparities study stands as one of the most pressing of these unanswered needs.¹⁹ Gelzer became acquainted with Lee and her family in the years that the Lee family spent living next to Gelzer's family daycare. When the Lee family relocated to a house closer to the city's railroad tracks and various brownfields, Latoya's health deteriorated until she

16. Julia Craven, "Even Breathing is a Risk."

17. *Ibid.*, 50.

18. Gelzer, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

19. Angela Jacobs. "Parramore Residents Demand Action on Neighborhood Pollution Complaints," *WFTV* (Orlando, FL), February 27, 2018.

passed from cardiac arrest.²⁰ In her memory, Gelzer joins Latoya’s husband, Allen, in demanding a health disparities study to confirm what they already know—their air is polluted.²¹

As Gelzer continues to watch generations of families broken apart by sickness and death, she finds herself alarmed by the lack of action from the city. She is especially appalled by the inaction because of the relatively low cost required to conduct a health disparities study.

“It doesn’t add up...I’ve just shown you forty-five million for a fire station. For the soccer stadium -sixty million dollars. And yet, we don’t have \$200,000 for a health disparities study for Parramore?”²²

Additionally, she asserts that giving Creative Village priority over understanding the health impacts of the community sends a very clear message about the value placed on the lives of Parramore residents. Although Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer states that his office “takes the health of all [Orlando] communities very seriously” and that “there’s a lot of aspects that [they’ve] taken action on,” Gelzer feels that their actions do not match this promise.²³

“So you tell me to wait ‘til 2020 ‘cause you don’t have any money. No, what you’re telling me is, Ya’ll probably be dead by then, or you’ll be moved out by all the gentrification, and I don’t have to worry about it. We’re not crazy, we know what’s going on... What you’re telling people – me, people of color, people who have income challenges – is that we don’t matter.”²⁴

If it’s not about outright racism, Gelzer sees the issue as an attempt by city officials to cover-up their accountability in Parramore’s economic and environmental decline.

“You’re gonna find out why people have died from cancer and if there was a cancer cluster in Parramore. I think the city is fighting us because they are a responsible party and there is a liability. So they’re trying to protect their pocketbook at all costs... People would sue.”²⁵

20. Julia Craven, “Even Breathing is a Risk.”

21. Angela Jacobs, “Parramore Residents Demand Action.”

22. Gelzer, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

23. Angela Jacobs, “Parramore Residents Demand Action.”

24. Ibid.

25. Gelzer, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia

The city would be directly liable for the harms caused by decades of unethical zoning that left places like the Orlando Gasification Superfund site adjacent to residential areas, schools, and churches.²⁶ Though the plant discontinued operations back in 1960, toxic chemicals including benzene, naphthalene, and coal tar persist at the site—compounds that have been linked with anemia, cardiovascular disruption, and respiratory disruption.²⁷ The railroad tracks also represent an area of high contamination, with traces of arsenic lingering in the soils.²⁸ While construction ramps up, comprehensive remediation and evaluation of deadly sites in Parramore remains incomplete. EPA surveys reveal that the area of contamination is expanding, although, this is something that Parramore residents experienced and suffered from long before the federal agency could publish a formal survey.

Gelzer and fellow other-mothers and activists continue to work on uncovering the full and true scope of environmental injustices in Parramore. Still, their stories already align with many themes of environmental justice and reveals the influence of mothering practices on the methods of the movement already discussed. First, the practice of other-mothering demands a connection and commitment to collective thinking and action. This mindset is revealed in gestures as small as using collective pronouns when speaking, and is also applied in a very strategic manner during activist processes. For example, Gelzer recognizes the importance of convening for town halls in local buildings that are familiar and accessible to residents versus city facilities where residents face confusion and belittlement. Women and mothers from other

26. “Orlando Gasification Plant.” Environmental Protection Agency, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://cumulis.epa.gov/supercpad/cursites/csitinfo.cfm?id=0405159>

27. News 13 Orlando, “Decades Later, Lethal Chemicals Linger from Orlando Gasification Plant,” *News 13 Florida*, (Orange County, FL), May 9, 2017. ; “Facts About Benzene.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. February 14, 2013. <https://emergency.cdc.gov/agent/benzene/basics/facts.asp> ; “Naphthalene Hazard Summary.” Environmental Protection Agency. 2000. <https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-09/documents/naphthalene.pdf>

28. Gelzer, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

communities have echoed the importance of being intentional with convening spaces. This issue is especially compelling to women and mothers looking for family-friendly spaces to do their activist work. Despite the fact that the movement is led by women and mothers, many women who take on mothering roles still find themselves impeded by activist spaces that do not accommodate for the presence of children.

This leads to the next impact of mothering on environmental justice – the carriage of the movement through generations. Environmental degradation cannot be alleviated in one generation. Because of their societal role as child rearers, women and mothers are particularly effective and intentional when it comes to including succeeding generations in the movement. Gelzer cites the continual support of her own parents as a strong foundation for her current activism.²⁹ She now communicates the lessons of resilience and assertiveness that she learned from her own mother to “some of [her] young brothers and sisters,” who she urges to “wake up” and join the fight.³⁰

Another common thread that characterizes the experience of women and mothers in environmental justice is a devastating loss of trust in the government. After repeated instances of disregard for Parramore’s demands, Gelzer turned away from the government as a source of information and turned instead to her fellow community members and the internet. Gelzer began to understand that the local government could not and would not provide her the security that she once assumed. Curiously, however, these communities may still seek resolve from the federal government, calling on the EPA or the president to mitigate the issues. Furthermore, as women and mothers continue to push for clear answers from their government and other corporations,

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

they deal with the gendered stereotypes of being “angry,” “crazy,” or plainly misinformed.³¹

Women and mothers like Gelzer have turned these labels on their side, proudly showcasing their anger and viewing it as a right to do so in the face of such injustice.

For the time being, the concerns of Gelzer and her fellow Parramore activists will likely face enduring scrutiny in combination with complete disregard. As the city’s redevelopment projects threaten to encase and choke out the neighborhood, community leaders work hard to maintain their message that Parramore and its residents are still there and they deserve to see true benefits from the city’s investment into the area. Past examples from history can’t predict whether their efforts will be successful, but they do show that there is hope and value in the grassroots approach that residents use and that the values and skills acquired through all varieties of motherhood efficiently guide these approaches.

31. Cynthia Stavrianos. *The Political Uses of Motherhood in America*, (New York, Routledge, 2015), 111.

Conclusion

Lessons Learned

The prolific position of mothers within the environmental justice movement follows and carries on a history of political disenfranchisement, disproportionate environmental burden, and gendered ideas about mothers and the environment. From landmark campaigns in Love Canal and Warren County, North Carolina, to the histories being formed every day by the women in Flint, Perry, Apopka, and Orlando, there are several lessons to be learned from the women and mothers in leadership. The experiences of these activists demonstrate what makes environmental justice activism successful and how their personal identities as women, mothers, and activists influence one another.

Taking Precautions

The experience of raising a child in an unavoidably toxic environment causes enough unrest and discomfort to push women, in their roles as mothers, to take matters into their own hands. Before calling on other community members and taking to mass protest, a mother's activism often begins with research of the problem and taking precautions to protect their family from toxins. As many women and mothers have discovered, however, no matter how many safety measures they take, their children likely will be susceptible to environmental crisis. This realization instills two values into environmental justice mothers. First, a high priority is placed on the expectations of the Precautionary Principle. Secondly, the discrepancy between the personal values of precaution and the failure of the government and to follow this legal principle leads to a prevalent and widespread distrust in the government, especially at the local level.

Munroe-Younis specifically discussed her efforts to navigate the Flint water crisis with as much precaution as possible and how she eventually was frustrated with the outcomes and

impacts that the water crisis had on her family. Similarly, families in Parramore sought out information and followed advice in order to limit air pollution in their houses, yet asthma and cancer-inducing particulate matter still invaded their homes and immune systems. These examples show that community members—women and mothers especially—are keen to what is occurring in their communities and are willing to spend their time and resources investigating potential harms facing their community.

The precaution of women and mothers in environmental spaces sets a standard and shows a commitment to health, safety, and sustainability that many corporations and governmental bodies fail to meet. This care for precaution in the face of negligence leads to a widespread sense of distrust in the government. Nearly all of the women interviewed explicitly expressed such distrust. Many also note that this opinion represents a sharp shift in personal viewpoint and came about when their governments failed to provide information, transparency, recognition, or any combination of these factors. Munroe-Younis and Gelzer believe their local governments intentionally and proactively worked to cover up the messes they made in the communities that elected them. Their concern and distrust also extends to non-elected officials, as Lee exemplified in her disdain for the county health department employees who told her that her community never faced disproportionate rates of lupus, cancer, or learning disabilities. Her disbelief and exasperation are clear when she proclaims, “You know, these people got to be lying. No, I don’t believe it.”¹ Gelzer displayed the most vocal dissatisfaction with her local government, stating that she felt “bamboozled” by the mayor and his office, and wanted to see them in jail.

1. Linda Lee (former Lake Apopka farmworker) interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia, Apopka, FL, October 2018.

Women and mothers in the movement not only blame the government for covering up environmental disasters, but also for posing barriers in discussing and addressing these issues. In these cases, a lackluster response from the government is replaced by no response at all.

Michelle Martinez, coordinator of the Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition, views her state and local governments as “complicit” in the degradation of health, place, and security for those facing environmental injustices in Detroit.² Meanwhile, Ezell shakes her head in dismay at the thought of environmental crises, both big and small, being erased from the vocabulary and narrative of the government.

“Nobody in the government now seems to want to talk about climate change. When the governor won’t even let people at the Department of Environmental Protection say the two words—that’s kind of pitiful, isn’t it? Pitiful. There’s some problems that are universal. It’s not only water pollution.”³

Knowledge, Community, and Power

A shift in perceptions of the government often lead to changes in habits revolving around where to seek help and who to trust. Munroe-Younis turned to community members she feared may be going through the same experience; Ezell turned to the internet and her background in agricultural management; and Gelzer turned to the examples set by other environmental justice campaigns throughout the United States. As women and mothers rejected the false claims, weak suggestions, and retaliating insults from their governments, they cultivated their own sources of knowledge and power. They set their priorities on finding the truth through the stories of those they felt could understand their plights, whether that be within their own communities or in other environmental justice cases elsewhere in the country. Gender roles and the practices of

2. Michelle Martinez (Coordinator, Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition) interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia, Detroit, MI, July 2018.

3. Joy Towles Ezell (Fenholloway River Activist) interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia, Winter Park, FL, November 2018.

mothering built a strong sense of community and an understanding of collective thinking and power. Martinez said practicing motherhood changed her priorities and “collectivized” her identity “almost immediately because you have to care for another before you care for yourself.”⁴

Routinely thinking about the collective allows women and mothers to view issues macroscopically, connecting the concerns they sense within their own communities to the larger international network of environmental injustices. Recognizing their situations as issues of environmental justice was difficult at first for some women, but as they gathered data and stories, the truth became apparent. They began to focus on producing knowledge and power within their communities, allowing them to create activist spaces that are welcoming, inclusive, and effective at recognizing peoples’ concerns and talents.

Making Activism Family-Friendly

Because women and mothers lead the movement, values of community and collectivism include and are sometimes modeled on their understanding of family. Although feelings towards and perceptions of family varied, most of these activist women mentioned how their roles within their own families influenced their work. Thus, women in the movement move to cultivate activist spaces that are not only welcoming to the wider community, but to families.

The environmental crises that women in these communities face can be complicated and daunting to explain, especially to a child. Martinez shared her struggles with communicating what exactly her job is to her children. She tried her best to introduce her child to others whose parents are activists so that they will not feel alienated or alone in their beliefs or family structure

4. Martinez, interview by Marie Gabrielle Buendia.

and so that “nothing is taboo.” As her children grew older, she recognized that their questions will become more difficult to answer if she didn’t share the truth early. Steingraber affirmed that telling children the truth is the best course of action in navigating such difficult and sometimes frightening conversations. Telling children the truth and sharing one’s knowledge digs scary things out of the dark and makes solutions possible, and, in fact, inevitable. In the struggle between protecting children from the environment and from the fear of crises, knowledge is the ultimate form of protection.

Seeing children understanding these issues and developing a similar passion can be very encouraging. Munroe-Younis and Ezell said they included their children in their activism while encouraging other young members of the community to join. Munroe-Younis felt completely comfortable with including her children in activism because of Flint’s “tradition” for doing so. On the other hand, Ezell was encouraged in knowing that her own grandchildren and the young college students she has met throughout the years will carry on her work.

Women and mothers recognize their obligations to tell children the truth and the capacity and dedication that children can have for the issues within their communities. Perhaps their experiences of being ridiculed and diminished by officials in power serves as the basis in their understanding that children are, in fact, capable. They are not only capable of asking tough questions about the environment, they are capable of hearing the answer and grappling with possible solutions.

Values and Ethics of Environmental Justice Mothers

The connections between women, motherhood, activism, and environmentalism are deeply-rooted and complex. They offer positive benefits and inspiring examples while also

posing limitations and barriers. The impact of mothers on the movement remains undeniable, though extremely varied. Just as there is no single way to be a woman or be a mother, there is no single strategy that women and mothers in this field take to accomplish their goals and garner recognition for their demands. There are many common experiences, however, that direct the concerns and values of women and mothers in the movement. Again, community stands out as one of the central and guiding values for women and mothers in environmental justice work. This value manifests in the sharing and passing on of knowledge and power between one generation and another. It manifests as the spark that pushes women and mothers to action or to visibility, if they were already taking action. It also manifests in the understanding of environmental injustice as a reality within their own communities and is just one component of a larger international crisis.

Whether or not the identity of motherhood positively serves women in the environmental justice movement is not a straightforward question. Centering one's activism on the identity of motherhood remains a double-edged sword and poses a conflict that may not be worth resolving until gendered views of the environment and community care are removed. Still, women and mothers have made great progress and learned how to strategically promote the benefits of motherhood while redefining the aspects of motherhood that currently limit them.

Envisioning a Better Future

While women and mothers continue to advance the movement, they must work against long legacies of segregation, economic disenfranchisement, illness, and other forms of oppression. This history cannot be undone, but women and mothers work hard to create a future free from these outcomes. Whether they seek health studies, relocation, compensation, or recognition, they continually employ persistence and innovation in their activism. The advent of

social media also creates a new space for them to engage with supporters, journalists, and elected officials.

Moving forward, it is important to consider that the connection between women, mothers, and their environmental activism is based on a network of gender roles and expectations that change with each day and each generation. Thus, it remains difficult to predict exactly how women and mothers will shape the path of the environmental justice movement. While their exact path moving forward remains unsure, it is quite likely that they will continue to lead the movement and promote their values through future iterations of womanhood and motherhood.

Making Activism Accessible

Although women and mothers lead the movement, accessibility issues remain in the movement. While many women enjoy including their children in activism and creating family-friendly spaces, they find that there are still many people and places in the movement that do not consider this perspective. Martinez and Munroe-Younis have encountered activist spaces that claim to be family-friendly or welcoming of mothers but provide no resources to support this. Munroe-Younis recalls one experience where she brought her son to a meeting and found herself embarrassed whenever he made disruptions. Though other attendees assured her that she and her son were welcome, it would have been beneficial for other children or child-care services to be present.

This experience shows a slight distinction between community and family and reiterates the isolation that some women feel in the experience of motherhood. While some spaces and aspects of the movement recognize the value of community, they do not support diverse family structures and accommodate for the different ways in which individuals and their families may want to participate. Martinez recalled that the isolation of motherhood and the desire to teach her

own children about environmental activism contributed to her attention and care for creating spaces that are accessible to children, mothers, and families. This sentiment extends to other groups that are not traditionally represented in activist spaces. Women and mothers create unique, vibrant, and diverse activist spaces because of their personal experiences with and understanding of exclusion.

Recognition and Validation

When women and mothers were asked about the future that they envision for their community, their first hope is to gain recognition and validation for their concerns. They call for health disparity studies to confirm and quantify the environmental destruction that is already apparent to them and their community. They demand accountability and reparations from the governmental bodies and industries that have put their loved ones at risk. They envision a future where the rest of their community catches up and validates the message that they have been transmitting all this time.

With their values for community knowledge and power, the women and mothers leading the environmental justice movement understand the importance of listening and believing in the experiences of others. Steingraber notes that women who practice mothering learn more from sharing experiences rather than hearing numbers.⁵ Women and mothers hope for a future where stories of environmental degradation and demands for justice are valued and treated with concern whether or not communities have access to empirical data. More often than not, the numbers confirm what community members already know, often after significant damage has been done to human health and the environment.

5. Steingraber, *Having Faith*, 62.

Mothering Beyond Mothers

Women and mothers acknowledge the unique and powerful role that they play in the environmental justice movement. Yet, at the same time, they note that their skills, passions, and values should not be exclusive to them. Ezell knows she can rely on other mothers in her community to take action but wishes that fathers would get involved as well. Martinez focuses on doing her work as a caretaker or as a parent, rather than as a mother specifically, because she believes everyone should be invested in children's health and environment. Gelzer and Lee are familiar with employing the methods of motherhood outside of that identity as "othermothers" to all in their community.

The desire to see more than just mothers involved in environmental justice work and the prevalence of "other-mothers" in the space coincides with a shift in gender roles and a redefinition of motherhood in recent years. Though the women interviewed did not necessarily oppose the gender connotations and expectations that drew them to environmental justice work, it would be beneficial to the movement for the links between gender, care work, and nature to be loosened. When caring for children and caring for their surroundings becomes the responsibility of everyone in a community, not just the women, environmental injustices may be taken more seriously.

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