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# Engaging with Motherhood: Gender and Sexuality in Environmental Justice

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**Engaging with Motherhood: Discourses of Gender and Sexuality in  
Environmental Justice**

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2011-12 academic year, Pomona College, Claremont, California

Readers:

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To My Family:

For their endless love and support. They keep me going strong.

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### **Introduction:**

On a steamy, but surprisingly clear August day in Southern Louisiana, I am sitting in the front seat of the Honda of Colette Pichon Battle, the director of the law and policy wing of Moving Forward Gulf Coast. We are headed south from New Orleans, on our way to make a house call on Chief Thomas Dardar Jr. of the Houma Nation, to meet with he and his family over Sunday dinner.

Before long we are out of the Honda and into the Chief's pickup truck, driving along highways lined with bayous, and houses on stilts. With us, is a college student, and general helper to the chief, who they jokingly refer to as his body guard. Our target is a liquid waste facility—one that is not authorized to receive oil waste from the clean-up of the Deep Horizon BP gulf oil blow out—but one which the Chief suspects is taking oil nonetheless.

When we arrive on site, it does not take much effort to see why the chief is suspicious. From the road, we can clearly see the waste facility, more of a giant hole dug into the ground than anything else. And around the edges of the liquid is a clear, thick, oil ring—a high water mark much like the one you might get if you filled a bathtub with oily water, and then drained some out.

As we head back, the Chief tells us about the siting of the open air dump, upwind from many houses. The EPA had come to test for dangerous particulates blowing downwind, but had only tested during two weeks when the wind was blowing the other direction. The Chief next swings around to take us by an example of the massive erosion of the coastal wetlands in the area. What used to be marsh and grassland is now glassy water. He jokes about the “No Fishing” signs alongside

the many families out fishing for the day, saying those signs are only for non-community members. And then we head back to his home where a delicious steak and shrimp pasta dinner is waiting courtesy of the Chief's wife.

On the way home, we discuss the unsettling sight of families fishing only a few miles away from a liquid toxic waste dump. Colette Pichon Battle explains the importance of these visits. Even though very little business was discussed regarding Moving Forward Gulf Coast's involvement in the Houma Nation's battle for federal recognition, this type of meeting and socializing over meals is essential to maintaining the connections that keep the organization effective.

The Environmental Justice movement grew in the 1970s out of localized efforts of vulnerable communities to protect themselves from disproportionate exposure to toxins and pollutants. These efforts, from the battle to clean up and rectify Love Canal, to multiple fights throughout the South to halt the siting of toxic facilities in communities of color, set the stage for a wider movement. Robert Bullard, a pioneer in environmental justice research, writes in his foundational EJ text, *Dumping in Dixie*, that in the late 1980s and 1990s, "out of the small and seemingly isolated environmental struggles emerged a potent grassroots movement," that "be[came] a unifying theme across race, class, gender, age, and geographic lines" (Bullard, xiii). The movement promotes and fights for universal rights to "live, work, play, go to school, and worship in a clean and healthy environment" (Bullard xiii), and sets itself in opposition to those national, mainstream environmental organizations that place nature apart from humanity and care more about saving wilderness than saving people (not that they are

mutually exclusive).

I open with the Louisiana story because it encompasses many of the aspects of Environmental Justice work that draw me in, and those that get me wondering. The trip was local and personal. On it, we saw the power of personal observation and experience, and the places where government policies and standards are failing certain communities. It involves family structures and the power of tradition, as well as the ways that people adapt to change. And it highlights the ways that localized relationships can translate into much larger resistance.

In working with Moving Forward Gulf Coast (MFGC) in Louisiana over the summer of 2011, and with the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCAIE) in Riverside, CA in the spring of 2010, I came to appreciate these dynamics often present in Environmental Justice work, and I also came to appreciate the women who drive these organizations, guiding them through all the challenges that these dynamics present. At the CCAIE, I felt comfortable, sitting around the dining room table that serves as a conference room table, eating lunch and listening to the staff members chat about their lives. And I was impressed by Mrs. Battle's ability to spend the afternoon joking with MFGC's staff members when they had just been through a particularly hard day dealing with hurricanes and oil spills.

But I also noticed that, while women shaped the everyday office dynamics, and the types of action taken by their organizations, the role of women within these organizations was never really discussed. Environmental Justice was instead described in terms of globalization, of race, of class, and of geography. This is echoed

in early foundational EJ texts. In *Dumping in Dixie*, Bullard focuses almost entirely on race and class and the geographical inequalities of environmental justice, as is seen in this quote from Chapter 1: “An abundance of documentation shows blacks, lower-income groups, and working-class persons are subjected to a disproportionately large amount of pollution and other environmental stressors in their neighborhoods” (Bullard 1). His work centers on statistics that show this inequality by geographic area. Those areas with a greater number of his identified vulnerable people have a greater number of polluting factories and dumps (Bullard).

The involvement of women in Environmental Justice Organizations has been well documented (Stein 5). As early as 1994, women were estimated to fill seventy to eighty percent of EJ leadership jobs (DeLuca and Peeples 59). This knowledge, and my personal experiences working in and observing these organizations, left me wondering: Why are such a large percentage of women involved in Environmental Justice? How is gender and sexuality talked about within and from outside the movement? And finally, how does this discourse shape the movement itself? In this thesis, I explore these questions looking specifically through the lens of my experiences with each of these organizations. I look at a history of the intersections of race, gender and sexuality in environmental justice in North America in order to frame the discussion of how these three interact today. I then explore current scholarly work on gender and environmental justice, and interviews with women from each organization finding that much of the discourse around gender and environmental justice is about Motherhood. I finally critique this discourse through a queer theory lens, and suggest ways to move forward in our conversations around



gender, sexuality, and environmental justice.

CHAPTER I.  
**An Introduction to Two Environmental Justice Organizations**

Because so much of my research is shaped by my experience with two organizations, It is important that I begin this paper with a more thorough introduce the two organizations that are framing this work:

*CCA EJ:*

Any introduction to the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice begins with the Stringfellow Acid Pits, the notorious, aptly named liquid toxic dump located uphill from the community of Glen Avon. The pit opened in 1956 and would ultimately receive more than 33 million gallons of toxic waste before its closure in 1975 (Newman 4). The chemicals that made up this acid waste included: “heavy metals, such as lead, cadmium, chromium, arsenic; organic solvents, including trichloroethylene [TCE], tetrachlorethylene [PCE], chlorinated biphenyl’s [PCB’s], and chloroform; pesticides such as DDT; and large amounts of sulfuric, nitric and hydrochloric acids” (Newman, 8). The pits were later found to contain perchlorate (5). Throughout the sixties and seventies these pits caused a series of toxic floods, overflows, fires, and gas releases and leaked carcinogenic material through fissures in its bedrock base into the water table.

While authorities continued to assure the community of the safety of the toxic dumps, several groups of residents organized to fight to close down the site, to initiate clean-up and eventually to seek compensation for damages. In 1972, a group called Mothers of Glen Avon, led by Ruth Kirkby, obtained a court agreement with General Steel to close the site. Still, Mothers of Glen Avon continued to petition for

the toxins to be removed from the pits. In 1979, after pit-related disasters continued to plague the surrounding community, the West Riverside Businessmen's Assoc., Glen Avon PTA, Jurupa Junior Women's Club, and Glen Avon Babysitting Co-op combined to form Concerned Neighbors in Action (CNA) (Newman, 17).

CNA soon learned to implement direct tactics, publicly asking responsible parties to sign "accountability agreements," initiating "polluter of the month" awards and going to protest at the Attorney General's house. Though persistent organizing and creative tactics, the CNA was largely successful at working for justice with respect to the Stringfellow Acid Pits.

In the early 1990's, the CNA felt the need to institutionalize, widening their focus from the Stringfellow battles to many environmental justice issues across California (Newman, 65). They knew that in order to succeed, CNA needed to buckle down for the long run: "it became clear it wasn't "magic facts" or brilliant arguments that convinced the powers-that-be to meet our demands. We won through perseverance and the power of people united in their demands, organized in their efforts and focused on a target" (Newman 65 ).

As they shifted their focus, they also shifted their internal attitude, Newman writes, "CNA, like far too many community organizations, found that its hectic activities were leading to burnout of its leaders and a continuing feeling of crisis by the members. It was clear we would not survive the battle to see the end of the war" (65). In order to avoid burnout, the CCAEJ thrives off an environment of encouragement and support: "The importance of nurturing members for the long haul in a group fighting a contaminated site may seem obvious, since such battles

are, by nature, slow and arduous...An organization that plans for the long-term is able to develop its own vision of for the future. Instead of simply reacting to proposals thrust upon us by corporations, we can begin to plan for what we want our community to be" (Newman, 66). Today, in order to ensure that the CCAEJ will be there to help plan for the future, the women are determined to keep from burning the candle at both ends. The office is only open Monday through Thursday. The women there are quick to celebrate each other's accomplishments and offer support in times of struggle.

Since its formation, the CCAEJ has taken on many issues in Riverside and Glen Avon. They run programs for leadership development, for clean air in communities that are put at health risk by diesel exhaust from the goods movement industry, and for environmental justice intervention and revitalization. They've accumulated a long list of accomplishments. They successfully fought to incorporate the city of Jurupa. They fought to establish a state Superfund program that provides matching funds to qualify for federal Superfund money and address sites that don't qualify for the federal program. They were the first community to establish a Community Advisory Committee (now standard practice among a variety of agencies), and were the first community to win intervention in a federal enforcement case in which 250 major corporate polluters challenged their standing all the way to the US Supreme Court. Finally, According to Richard Worthington, a professor at Pomona College who has worked closely with the CCAEJ for the last ten years, in the last ten to fifteen years, the CCAEJ's workforce has shifted from being made up almost entirely by white women, to be made up almost entirely by Latina

women. They have greatly expanded programs that address needs in the Latino community (Worthington 11/22/2012).

*Moving Forward Gulf Coast:*

My first day on the job with Colette Pichon Battle, the director for the Center for Law and Policy at Moving Forward Gulf Coast, she told me the story of how Moving Forward came to be. This organization, much like CCAEJ was born from disaster. While Glen Avon was dealing with an on-going, yet highly localized problem, Battle and her community were motivated by a disaster that struck New Orleans like a lightning bolt. Battle, who was living in Washington D.C. at the time of Hurricane Katrina, described how she and many other native Louisianans, came together to share information and support in the aftermath of the storm. Battle explains that there were so many young professionals working in D.C. from the Gulf Coast because of the opportunities for those with college educations—what Battle called brain-drain (Battle 12/02/2011). Battle herself, a woman from a lower-income rural community, was happily working at a major law firm when the storm hit.

These local New Orleans locals waited for news, usually sent in the form of text messages, from friends who had stayed behind. One of those friends was Trupania Bonner, who is now Colette's partner. After moving his family out of the disaster zone he returned to Washington to document his experience and report back to friends. A group called Louisianans in Diaspora came together in Washington D.C. to cope with the disaster. They soon formed The Louisiana

Network, a group that facilitated and implemented direct assistance, which eventually grew into MFGC

For several years Moving Forward dealt only in Katrina specific issues. They worked to move displaced people back into their homes and toward reconstruction. In 2010, they started plans to disband Moving Forward because they saw their work with Katrina recovery as winding down and they wanted to pursue other projects. However, on April 20, 2010, BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, causing a blowout that would eventually leak 4.1 million barrels of oil into the gulf coast (Aigner, nytimes.com). Collette describes this as the moment when she and the staff at Moving Forward realized an awful truth: the catastrophic "natural" disasters and "accidents" were going to keep coming as long as the Gulf Coast was a place that undervalued people of color, poor people, undocumented people, and the environment.

And so, rather than scale down, Moving Forward Gulf Coast decided to develop a more permanent model for their organization. Moving Forward now is involved in many important areas of social and environmental justice. On their website, they describe themselves as a "community-based initiative committed to Restorative Justice for residents of the Gulf Coast region." One of their main focuses is on media and communication. They work to,

"Arm the residents of the Gulf Coast with up-to date and accurate information; provide allies outside the Gulf Coast with a direct link to the unheard voices of our region; and, to offer decision-makers, on the local, state, federal and international level, proof that the current social, economic, ecological and political policies impacting the Gulf South is not only detrimental to the people of this region- but amount to an overall negative impact for the US and the globe." ("Moving Forward")

They do this through recording and editing interviews with community members, public meetings, actions, protests, second lines, and speeches and distributing the videos online.

Moving Forward Gulf Coast describe their action as the “intersection of new media, community organizing and training, policy strategy and legal service providing” (moving forward website). The Programs MFGC runs include the Black Men and Boys Initiative, which focuses on creating an environment in New Orleans in which black men and boys can thrive; and the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy, which focuses on “the preservation and protection of human rights, tribal sovereignty, and natural resources found throughout the Gulf Coast region” (Moving Forward). Through this program, two days a week Moving Forward provides legal aid for community members trying to make claims. Other programs include the 2009-2013 census redistricting campaign, which “advocates for displaced persons who are and have been actively rebuilding from the hurricanes of 2005- to be counted by the US Census Bureau at their pre-storm residence”; and Feminas a group for Latina women which works to “strengthen the leadership of Latinas in the Gulf Coast region through culturally rooted community-building; community education around vital information and resources; and, human rights advocacy.”

*A Note on Environmental Justice Definitions:*

I think it’s important at this point to address what exactly I mean by an “environmental justice organization” and how Moving Forward fits and doesn’t fit

into that definition. I consider EJ organizations to be those groups which deal on a local level with the fallout from the reality that “natural” disasters, pollution, and many forms of environmental degradation have a disproportionate impact on racial/ethnic minorities, people with lower income, and (as I am arguing in this paper) women and people who identify with non-heterosexual sexualities, while simultaneously working to change the systems and structures which create this disproportionate impact.

The CCAEJ certainly fits this definition. Environmental justice is central to its mission, its everyday work and action, its history, and its name. CCAEJ is held up as an example of one of the most successful EJ organizations in the region (Worthington 11/22/2011). The activist at CCAEJ work on very localized projects from training people to recognize toxins in their own home with the SALTA program, to working to reduce the number of diesel trucks near the community of Mira Loma (CCA EJ.org ). But they also engage large-scale institutions like the goods movement industry and work on far reaching projects like influencing California air quality policy.

Moving Forward Gulf Coast, on the other hand, is not self-defined as primarily an Environmental Justice organization. They let community needs dictate the focus of their work. However, I would argue that the work this organization did in response to Katrina does count as environmental justice. Certainly, the hurricanes that caused flooding in 2005 disproportionately impacted poor people, people of color, and other underrepresented populations. This was a direct result of the policies that allowed for weaker infrastructure and shoddier planning in the



communities that host these populations (Battle 12/02/2010). This neglect and devaluing of communities bears a striking resemblance to the more traditional environmental injustice of the Stringfellow Acid Pits. This sentiment is echoed by Mrs. Battle herself, who explains that the environmental and subsequent human damage from Hurricane Katrina are, “definitely why we exist,” and that the community that they serve is a “community that is culturally dependant on its environment”(Battle 12/02/2012). MFGC also emulates traditional EJ organizations in the local makeup of the staffers, most of who hale from in or around New Orleans.

Finally, MFGC combines the elements of working directly on local issues by helping people apply for government reimbursements and holding conferences to address violence in the community, and working on a structural level, advocating for immigration reform and questioning policies around natural disaster cleanup (MFGC website). Because of these dynamics, I believe it is helpful to include examples from Moving Forward Gulf Coast in my exploration of gender, sexuality, and environmental justice.

## CHAPTER II.

**A Genealogy of Women In North American Environmental Justice: Points of Intersection between Sexuality, Gender, Race, Class, and the Environment**

In order to give context to the work of the women in Moving Forward Gulf Coast and the CCAEJ, and to understand current discourse around gender sexuality and environmental justice, it is essential to explore other moments in time when gender, sexuality, and environmental justice intersect. An explicit exploration of these intersections will give us insight into the reasons why women are so involved, and the ways in which this involvement might be successfully framed. The focus of this genealogy is North America (where both of my central organizations are sited) beginning in the mid-1600's. I draw here on the work of Nancy Unger and Susan A. Mann, as well as several other ecofeminist and queer theorists.

One history of environmental justice (and thus of women inside the movement) that is often retold begins in the 1970's with the resistance launched in communities such as Love Canal against toxic dumping. The movement gained momentum across the South where industrial plants were sited in lower income communities or communities of color. When asked to push the origin of EJ back further, many point to the efforts of white upper/middle class women working to clean up the streets and promote sanitation in the early 1900's (Unger). While these women, no doubt, participated in important work and helped develop a discourse in which women's work moved outside of the home to greater communities (Unger 52-53), I'd like to pay special attention to those instances when race, class, sexuality, and gender were all in play with environmental degradation and environmental

justice. This means, at times, moving away from traditional ideas of EJ work as cleaning up toxins and pollution, towards other connections between moments of empowerment for traditionally subjugated people and the environment.

In her article “Gender, Sexuality, and Environmental Justice,” Nancy Unger highlights connections between sexuality, and the environment for women in Pre-Columbian California. In many of these communities—and Unger is quick to point out that many diverse communities existed—women had a large impact on the sustainability of land use. This was in part because divisions of labor often meant that women were farming and gathering food (Unger in Stein, 47). But extensive control also came from controlling population and birthrates, often through “the nearly universal practice of prolonged lactation” (Unger in Stein, 48). Women combined this practice with other population control methods including abortion, infanticide, and abstinence. Through these methods, women kept populations below the land’s carrying capacity (Unger in Stein, 48).

Unger later relates the power women gained through their control over sexuality and reproduction to women’s resistance to conversion after the arrival of Catholic missionaries from Spain. Women used many of the same practices to resist bringing future members of the laboring class into existence (Unger in Stein 50). This demonstrates how, through controlling reproduction, women were able to both maintain the sustainability of their environments, but to resist economic and political exploitation. Through this means of control, the environment was very much connected to efforts for justice.

Enslaved women in North America also used their sexuality and knowledge

of the environment to undermine the structures and institutions that bound them. Women used knowledge of medicinal plants including cotton root to create abortifacients. This denied their masters new workers and lowered the value of these women as slaves (Unger in Stein 50).

Unger also describes the calculated agricultural restraint that enslaved women would use to purposefully diminish crop yields. Resistance took the form of constantly breaking and misplacing expensive tools, and refusing to fertilize fields or terrace hillsides. Such practices led to widespread soil depletion and in some ways, led to the escalation that brought the civil war. Unger writes, “to cotton-growing southern whites, because of the crucial issue of soil depletion; to prevent the spread of slavery was to bring about its demise” (Unger in Stein, 51). Again, environmental control was directly linked to resistance. In this case it was environmental degradation, not sustainability, which was vital to the cause. But the women’s solid knowledge of environmental systems, and ability to sabotage these systems, allowed them to stage opposition.

Moving toward the 20th century, Unger focuses on the white middle/upper class women who worked toward urban health and sanitation after the industrial revolution. Many of these women defended and expanded their roles as social actors by appealing to their roles as mothers: “The term ‘municipal housekeeping’ was used to describe this environmental activism. Under the banner of municipal housekeeping, thousands of women were drawn to home-related issues like ensuring safe air, food, and water for their families or conserving nature to beautify their lives” (Mann, 8). Women like Alice Hamilton, Jane Adams, and Ellen Swallow

Richards promoted reforms to combat health hazards and pollution. They worked to address “concerns specific to women in economically depressed neighborhoods” by “promoting healthful food preparation and proper baby and child care” (Unger in Stein 52).

The focus on health and safety and the fallout of pollution and urbanization means this work aligns well with some current conceptions of Environmental Justice work. However, some common criticisms of this movement are that while it was launched by women, it did not directly address women’s rights or suffrage, and that it was largely a movement whose membership consisted of relatively wealthy white women, “who had the time, energy, and resources to center their lives both on their homes and on unpaid volunteer work” (Mann, 9 citing Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English).

At this time there were also many women in North American cities who took on issues of class, race, sexuality, and gender in their environmental work. Rose Schneiderman did not focus her arguments for urban reform and workplace safety on the importance of women as future mothers, but rather on the rights of the women themselves (Unger in Stein 52). Margaret Sanger took on overpopulation by criticizing impoverished women’s sexual subservience to men (although this focus later was shifted to supporting forced eugenics) (Unger in Stein 53). And later, while Rachel Carson did not overtly frame her arguments in *Silent Spring* in terms of sexuality and gender, the backlash against her writing was certainly framed in those terms. She was criticized and dismissed for being hysterical, overemphatic, and because of her “unnatural status” (Unger in Stein 54). This, of course, was referring

to the fact that Carson was never married and hinted at the idea that she was a lesbian. In this way, Carson's writing came to be about gender and sexual inequality in its critique of the scientific-industrial complex (Unger in Stein, 54).

The desperately needed piece that Erica Mann brings to this conversation is the work of women of color during this time. Mann introduces black women's clubs "that provided aid to the African Americans who undertook the great migration to northern cities," as a point of interjection into environmental justice for women of color (Mann, 11). Ida Wells-Barnett organized the first of these clubs in Chicago in 1893. Much like the organizations formed by their white counterparts, these clubs worked to "reduce the filth diseases that arose from unsafe air and water" (Mann, 13). They also created health centers to treat filth diseases like tuberculosis and enlisted black college students to conduct surveys (Mann, 13). These women saw the connection between human health and the environment in an urban setting, and were the forerunners of those environmental justice activists of the seventies and eighties who are considered to mark the beginning of the environmental justice movement.

The examples in this chapter show us the multiple and varied ways in which gender, sexuality, race, class, and the environment can interact and shape each other, and the many ways they can be connected in resistance. While controlling one's own sexuality can be a form of power, other times implications of queer sexuality are used as an excuse to extend gender and class based environmental oppression. And while some racial and ethnic identities were born from slavery, race can be a mode for crossing class lines. This plurality of interactions will prove

useful as we try to imagine new discourses for current environmental justice work.

## CHAPTER III.

**Queering the Rhetoric of Motherhood**

There are very few texts that explore Environmental Justice through a queer studies lens. In this section, I argue that such a lens is useful to more fully explore how environmental justice might address structural injustice around gender and sexuality in addition to race and class. I first briefly explore texts that connect queer studies and ecology or ecofeminism. I then look at several texts, from the early 1990's to the present, which address gender and environmental justice.

While in many ways, these texts present a discourse around gender in grassroots environmental justice organizations that challenges traditional gender boundaries (like the space between private and public spheres), the use of motherhood as the primary motivator for action and the basis for authority ultimately plays into a privileging of normative reproduction and gender roles which limits the possible scope of the movement. This builds to my eventual conclusion that a narrative that connects the battles against the oppression of many subjugated groups will be more effective in fighting for Environmental Justice without supporting dualisms which sometimes work to spawn and justify further oppression.

***Queer Ecology:***

Because the lack of a robust body of work that directly explores the connections between queer theory and environmental justice. I will pursue this analysis first through an examination of queer ecology and ecofeminism and will



then tie this into a discussion of papers on gender and environmental justice.

Queer environmentalism creates and acknowledges an understanding of the environment that is rhizomic, unbounded and not separate from humans. In his article, "Queer Ecology," Timothy Morton explains that this type of analysis is important because ecology "demands intimacies with other beings that queer theory also demands" (Morton 273). He goes on to highlight the gendered ways in which we traditionally think about the environment, explaining, "Much American ecocriticism is a vector for various masculinity memes, including rugged individualism, a phallic authoritarian sublime, and an allergy to femininity in all its forms" (Morton 274). One picture here is the classic image of John Muir or Ansel Adams traversing the great landscapes of the West exuding manliness. Classic ecofeminist movements have similarly gendered, emerging from feminist separatism and biological essentialism. Privileging some extra feminine connection to "mother earth" supports dualisms that, as I explain below with the help of Greta Gaard, are unhelpful in working against structural injustice.

Morton next argues that queer ecology disrupts the idea of nature as a closed system with an inside separated from its outside. Instead, a queer ecology helps us view nature through notions of interrelatedness (Morton, 174). He supports this view by pointing to the open-endedness of biology, where gender, sexuality, and species are constantly shifting to avoid classification. In the world of ecology, it becomes increasingly hard to pin down distinctions between what is one species versus another, what is human versus not human, what is alive versus what is not alive. This messiness points to a view of environmentalism that embraces the

messiness of the inseparability of humans from nature. This view fits very nicely with the environmental justice movement, which, focuses on urban, toxic, and often unnatural natures. Environmental justice work necessarily views humanity as a part of nature because it fights natural degradation that directly threatens human health and safety.

These authors identify the ways in which nature is queer, and the ways in which our discourse around nature can be distinctly heteronormative. It is important to keep these ideas in mind as we begin to explore environmental justice discourse and imagine new ways of talking and thinking about the movement.

Finally, in her article, “Towards a Queer Ecofeminism,” Greta Gaard does a post-structural queer examination of ecofeminism and, less directly, environmental justice. She argues that the liberations of nature and of women are codependent—that dominant western culture creates a “master model”—a series of dichotomies: male vs. female, reason vs. nature, civilized vs. primitive, public vs. private, white vs. non-white, and heterosexual vs. queer—in which the later of the pairs are devalued. Because the master model associates each lesser-valued half of the pairs with each other, it is essential that these groups work together to fight this valuation. Gaard puts forward a theory of queer ecofeminism that works to dismantle this master model structure.

This argument will prove useful as I discuss several articles that examine gender and environmental justice more directly.

***Gender and Environmental Justice:***

For a long time, Environmental Justice, a concept born from the exploration of Environmental Racism, was discussed almost entirely within a framework for race and class based oppression (Robert Bullard). At the same time, women have been documented as the primary leaders and movement participants, especially within local grassroots organizations (Kurtz 409). Kurtz Explains this disconnect early in her article, “Gender and Environmental Justice in Louisiana: Blurring the boundaries of public and private spheres,” writing that, “Environmental justice activism and scholarship foregrounds race, ethnicity, class and imperialism as axes of discrimination and injustice, yet EJ activists confront intricate webs of social disadvantage along gendered axes as well” (Kurtz 410). As early as 1994, the Citizen’s Clearinghouse on Hazardous Waste estimated that 70 to 80 percent of leaders of local Environmental Justice groups are women, and women are at least as large a percentage of the members (Epstein in DeLuca and Peeples 59).

Explanations for the predominance of women in Environmental Justice organizations are hypothesized based on women’s proximity to the toxins targeted by such organizations, and their position within the family unit. Women are particularly vulnerable to the health risks from toxins because the way their bodies are geared toward reproduction. Buckingham and Kulcer note that the European Union recently conceded in its REACH legislation that “pregnant and nursing women, as well as women who plan to bear children in the future, are particularly vulnerable to environmental pollution,” (Buckingham and Kulcer 665). Thus, some scholars believe that women participate more because of their vulnerabilities.

Another reason for female participation is that women, with their traditional roles as caretakers of the family and the household, are the closest to toxins and so are more likely to see the damage they cause and want to work to stop such damage: Because women, worldwide, still have primary responsibility for feeding, housing, and childcare, they are often the first to notice when the water smells peculiar....when children develop mysterious ailments—or they are the first to worry that these assaults in family safety and health are imminent. (Seager in DeLuca and Peeples 63)

This idea is reflected in the opinions of interview participants from Kurtz's work on EJ protests during a petrochemical facility siting in Louisiana. She writes, "roughly 90% of the interview participants who opposed locating the Shintech facility in St. James Parish, men and women alike, attributed to women a quasi-biological, quasi-cultural role as nurturers and caretakers" (Kurtz 416). One of her interview participants expresses the belief that, "I think that women, at least women in Louisiana seem to have a greater, and this is probably sexist, but a greater urge towards nurturing"(interview participant in Kurtz 417). Another explains, "the woman...whether she's a homemaker or a career woman, she's still the caretaker... And I kind of think that's where it starts. It starts with your kids or your husband getting sick"(Kurtz 417). This blends the idea that women are more likely to care about family health, and that they will be the first to notice and take action when toxins begin to threaten that health.

Women are also considered to be in a privileged position for Environmental Justice action because often EJ battles are framed as weighing community jobs

against community health. One might argue, because women are less likely to hold these jobs, they are more likely to fight against them. Kurtz again gives us an example of how this logic develops. She writes,

Several interview participants quietly observed that the women in St. James Parish were in a better social position than many men to speak out against Shintech because women did not work in the petrochemical industry...In this view. Women were structurally enabled to participate in EJ protest because their social location in the private sphere was...somehow insulated for the relatively public sphere of industrial employment. (Kurtz 418)

Other authors suggest that women continue to participate for longer because they are more accustomed to being undermined by state and corporate institutions and are thus less willing to trust that institutions are honest, transparent, or have their best interest in mind. In his article, "Feminist Theory and Environmental Justice," Robert Verchick writes, "some commentators speculate that men are more likely to lay down the sword because they are more likely to hold large stakes in the economic and political institutions that create environmental harms." While women, "associate misfortune with an illegitimate system" and are thus, "more likely to rebel against it" (Verchick 64). This is extended by Celene Krauss, who argues that female African American EJ activists "view the government with mistrust, because they have been victims of racist policies throughout their lives" (Krauss 255). Those who are used to being under-represented find it easier to identify when a structure or system is not on their side.

Whatever the reason, women are an integral part of the environmental justice movement. Thus, it is surprising that gender has not played an equally central role in Environmental Justice narratives. In their article, "Gendered

Geographies of Environmental Justice,” Susan Buckingham and Rakibe Kulcer attribute this lack of gender discourse to structural exclusion or oppression on several scales: the body, the household, the political arena, and outward. They point out that because women are not geographically centered like many ethnic minorities it is much harder to point to toxins as being targeted at women as a population as opposed to a certain ethnic or class group that might be situated in some specific locations (Buckingham and Kulcer 661).

Buckingham and Kulcer argue that injustice on the scale of the “household, or even the body, is likely as not to have its genesis at the wider scales, which more commonly come under the purview of economists, political scientists and mainstream geographers” (Buckingham and Kulcer 664). They conclude that while gender is embedded in environmental justice on many scales, it is often ignored as part of the movement: “As with many political movements fought in the name of ‘liberation’ ... within the environmental movement gender difference has been suppressed in the name of ‘greater humanity community, or class’ ...or by ‘lack of time’” (Buckingham and Kulcer 676). However, it would be incorrect to say that EJ movements always suppress discussions on gender. In the next section, I explore the ways gender is addressed in the movement.

### ***Motherhood as a Strategy of Power:***

In “The Truth of the Matter: Motherhood, community and environmental justice,” Kevin M. DeLuca and Jennifer A. Peeples explore the rhetoric and communicative tactics used by female environmental justice leaders themselves in

interviews and autobiographical texts. In these texts, DeLuca and Peeples examine motherhood figures as an essential motivator for change and for action.

One reason why activists find appealing to motherhood effective is that it expands “women’s issues” to all injustice. The authors quote long-time African American Environmental Justice activist, Cora Tucker who writes, “Everything is a Women’s issue because every child that’s born, some woman had it” (DeLuca and Peeples 59).

DeLuca and Peeples describe women’s rhetoric around Environmental Justice as an attempt to negotiate the tensions between doing, “what is appropriate for women and simultaneously doing what is necessary based on the perilous situation in which they exist.” They refer to this dance as “feminine style”(DeLuca and Peeples 61). Part of this feminine style is resituating the “truth” within the individual so that all experiences are honored.

Motherhood is also an effective title to appeal to because it affords the wearer a form of authority already accepted and supported by social norms and family structures. As the authors of *Empowering Ourselves* write, “We’re insecure challenging the authority of university trained experts, but we also have a title of authority, ‘MOTHER!’” (DeLuca and Peeples 63). The authors go on to reference Barbra Epstein, who argues that women appeal to motherhood because being driven by concern for children holds much more clout than concern for ones own health and safety alone (DeLuca and Peeples 63).

The authors find that talking about motherhood in environmental justice emphasizes the connection between motherhood and health and safety. Toxins and pollution—the threat to health and safety—are thus highlighted as the opposite of

motherhood. They write, “references to motherhood are used to mark women’s role in giving and maintaining life and to draw attention to the unnatural condition of its antithesis: the illness and death of children”(DeLuca and Peeples 63). This gives their position of mothers extra strength in EJ fights.

While women may be discouraged by gender norms to be active in the public sphere, one accepted mode of motherhood is protection from life-threatening evils. The women in this article use this duty of protection as an excuse to work in the places outside the home that are threatening the home because, “the typical acts of mothering are shown as insufficient to protect children from the death that is lurking in the community” (DeLuca and Peeples 64). They then are able to expand the range of protection from just ones own home to the protection of the entire community. The authors call this mama-bear style of protective action “maternal militancy.”

Under the logic of maternal militancy, activists argue that no one else is going to save the children, and so mothers must step up. The authors point to Cora Tucker’s reaction to being called a hysterical housewife in. Tucker embraces the term, saying hysterical is an appropriate reaction to life or death situations.

Environmental Justice, then,

Attempts to transform the identity of ‘mothers’ and ‘housewives’ from staid domestic women to engaged community activists. The rhetors argue that it is not only of dire importance to do so, but the militant activist persona is already embedded in motherhood and just needs to be released.” (DeLuca and Peeples 65)

Thus, motherhood is not only used as a banner, under which action is accepted and given authority, but also as a recruiting method of sorts. Women are convinced to



join the environmental justice movement by being appealed and connected to, as mothers. They are convinced that, in this case, motherhood requires radical action. Motherhood is then seen as a way to grow and connect the movement because mothers are everywhere and all mothers should care about their children.

In her article, “Women and Toxic Waste Protests: Race, Class and Gender as Resources of Resistance,” Celene Krauss does a similar examination of how traditional roles of motherhood become resources in grassroots toxic waste protests. She focuses on motherhood across different class, race, and ethnicity groups interviewing white, blue-collar communities; African American communities; and Native American women, comparing their experiences. She offers an important intervention into this conversation by highlighting the intersections of race, ethnicity and gender in discourses of motherhood.

She found some major differences between the groups. For instance, white women tended to have much more initial trust in the state and the justice system as an option for redress than women of color (Krauss 254), and initiation into environmental justice was often accompanied by some disillusionment. White women came from, “a culture in which traditional women’s roles centered around the private arena of the family (Krauss 543). While white women focused on class in their interviews, African American and Native American women felt that their protests were grounded in race (Krauss 258).

Krauss believes that activism through an expanded motherhood is not as much of a stretch for the Native American women she interviewed because they “come from a culture in which women have had more empowered and public rolls

than in white working-class culture,” and women are respected in their role as the people upon whom men and children all depend (Krauss 258). Similarly, African American women have traditionally, “played a central role in community activism and in dealing with issues of race and economic injustice” (Krauss 256). So she believes women’s rolls as leaders in EJ battles are at least accepted inside their communities because of traditionally accepted roles. I include these differences here because they underscore the extent to which race and gender shape each other in these conversations.

Despite identifying these differences, Krauss has a fairly similar take on womanhood as DeLuca and Peeples. She writes, “Traditional beliefs about home, family and community provide the impetus for women’s involvement in these issues and become a rich source of empowerment, as women reshape traditional language and meanings into an ideology of resistance.” They believe that by embracing the role of care-taker and protector that is exemplified by motherhood, women can leverage traditional gender roles as an effective method of activism.

Hilda Kurtz picks up on the motif of motherhood adapted for resistance in her research as well. Activists often invoke children as the reason to resist environmental injustice. Several of the participants interviewed in Louisiana pursued this argument passionately with statements like, “every child is just as precious as the next child!” (Kurtz 418) and, “Unless you’ve had to hold a child in your arms in the middle of the night who’s gasping for breath because they’re having an asthma attack... then you can’t understand...” (Kurtz 422). Kurtz interprets the predominance of materialistic explanations from participants as a

sign that,

The social discourses of able, active and even collective motherhood have considerable purchase among interview participants, forming a narrative structure that lends coherence to an array of social performances enacted by mothers of different racial, ethnic and class backgrounds. (Kurtz 417)

Because the activists believe strongly that their involvement is based on motherhood, their forms of protest are shaped by motherhood as well. This connects earlier hypothesis of why women participate in Environmental Justice campaigns to the methods in which they participate.

***A Queer Ecofeminist Frame on the Motherhood Narrative:***

Before I articulate my challenge to using motherhood as a tool for resistance, I think it's important to stress that I do not intend to discount the experience of those many women who are engaged with this work because of their experience as mothers. In my research, I have encountered countless stories of great emotional resonance describing the atrocities faced by families in communities faced with environmental injustice. I cannot begin to imagine the feelings of helplessness, frustration and horror of watching a child become sick or miscarrying or even losing a child because of toxins dumped in my community. And I hope that those stories continue to be honored and retold to ensure that these atrocities do not continue. These experiences are the wellspring of great power and community motivation and it is not my intent to criticize those women who were empowered by their experience as mothers, but rather to look at ways to pursue environmental justice while challenging those dualisms that continue to privilege the building of toxic sites

over the health of the community.

*Motherhood and the ecofeminism framework*

In, "Towards a Queer Ecofeminism," Greta Gaard lays out the logic of contemporary ecofeminism. This perspective on the environment focuses on a dissection of the "master model" as detailed by Val Plumwood's 1993 critique of western philosophy. Plumwood argues that the "master identity" creates, and depends on, a "dualized stricture of otherness and negation" (Plumwood in Gaard 23). Plumwood produces a list of binary, exclusive, and oppositional dyads structured within western philosophy in such a way that one is given superiority over the other. This list includes culture/nature, reason/nature, male/female, mind/body, master/slave, mind and spirit/nature, subject/object, and self/other to name a few. The master identity is formed around identifying with the first in each of these pairings, and distancing oneself from the second. Gaard argues that some dualisms which are excluded by Plumwood should be included; specifically, white/nonwhite, empowered/impooverished, heterosexual/queer, and reason/the erotic (Gaard 23).

These dualisms become linked both horizontally (one half of the dualism to the other) and vertically (among a group of dyads) in several ways as identified by Plumwood: the master relies on the services of the other but simultaneously downplays his dependency (backgrounding), the master exaggerates the differences between the self and other and minimizes similarities (radical exclusion), the master's qualities are given as the standard while the other is defined by lacking

those qualities (incorporation), the other's main purpose is portrayed as serving as a resource for the master (instrumentalism), and the dominated class of others is seen as homogenous (homogenization) (Plumwood in Gaard 24-25).

Because the dominated classes are connected by incorporation, radical exclusion, and homogenization, and because "the association of qualities from one oppressed group with another serves to reinforce their subordination" (Gaard 24), Gaard argues that these classes must come together to reject this philosophy of dualisms. She writes, "social ecofeminists have rejected any claims of primacy for one form of oppression or another, embracing instead the understanding that all forms of oppression are now so inextricably linked that liberation efforts must be aimed at dismantling the system itself" (Gaard 24). When the dominated classes are linked so thoroughly, the oppression of women, or non-white people, or of nature, or of queer sexuality, is directly connected to the oppression of any other class. And Environmental Justice organizations must work with this understanding in mind.

Gaard presents this type of ecofeminism in contrast to liberal feminists, who "align themselves with the public male sphere of rationality," and cultural feminists, who, "[reveres] the valuations and [embrace] these associations," with emotion, the body, nature, and reproduction, and devalue the male rational culture (Gaard 25). She argues that both of these reactions to the master model actually re-enforce the dualisms rather than dismantle them, and that ecofeminism works to reject this structure of dualisms and acknowledge that women and men are equal parts nature and culture. In the next sections, I will evaluate the rhetoric of motherhood within this lens—identifying the ways in which such rhetoric upsets and rejects these

dichotomies, and the ways it accepts and supports them.

*Queering Motherhood and Motherhood as Queer:*

In this subsection, I examine discourses of motherhood in the environmental justice movement through a queer lens. I first examine the ways in which deploying motherhood is, in some sense, a queer act that blurs the dichotomies identified in Gaard and Plumwood's work. I then explore the way that a discourse of motherhood excludes queer people from the movement. Finally, I argue that the heteronormative narratives and discourses that privilege reproduction and exclude queer identities are, in fact, hurtful to the movement.

Queer theory can be an elusive framework through which to think. Most theorists necessarily shy away from steadfast definitions of what is queer and what is not because the field attempts to continually mix up categories, play in the ephemeral space between, and re-imagine those very structures that might provide a clear definition. This is why many scholars focus on queer as a verb: to mix up, to muddle, to problematize, to disorient. Nikki Sullivan writes, in her introduction to *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, that she intends to focus on "critiques of normalizing ways of knowing and of being that may not always initially be evident as sex specific" (Sullivan vi). Examining the discourse of motherhood through this lens, one can identify many ways that it queers hegemonic structures, and subverts those voices that tell "hysterical housewives" to stay in their place.

First, many of the articles examined in this chapter note that a narrative of

resistance centered around motherhood necessarily blurs the lines between public and private. In some ways, environmental justice work itself blurs such lines because it often involves public reactions to toxic invasions into the home, and a privileging of local experiences over scientific data or conventional authority. As Kurtz writes, “in the EJ movement in particular, in which grievances link localized experience of various environmental hazards to broader structural patterns of social injustice, activists’ roles are complicated by competing constructions of public and private, insider and outsider, expert and layperson” (Kurtz 410).

In the articles explored in this section, motherhood is both identified as a position from which to navigate the accepted roles of women, the myths of public-private dichotomies and the gendered hierarchies that they support, and as a rhetoric that helps to subvert this dichotomy. In the examples given by DeLuca and Peeples above, motherhood gives women an excuse to be protective of their children and their community in the public arena, and Krauss concludes that women are able to leverage traditional family roles into forms of resistance, effectively embracing the private in order to move into the public spheres.

Women’s activism can be seen as blurring public/private boundaries in the home as well. Kurtz points out that activism can “challenge household gender divisions of labor, taking women away from traditional roles and duties within their households and families” (Kurtz 412). For example, DeLuca and Peeples describe some activists’ dismay at no longer being able to perform the duties they once had as mothers and wives. They write, “The loss of the traditional mother is mourned.

Theresa Freeman discusses that she no longer can cook meals for her family... and the editors provide anecdotes of women who no longer clean, bake cookies or garden” (DeLuca and Peebles 66). This troubling of the myth of a public-private dichotomy is just the type of work for which Gaard pushes.

A second way motherhood queers structures is through the dissemination of knowledge, and the power that accompanies that knowledge, away from academia and the state. In his seminal work, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Michel Foucault works to show the complex connections between knowledge, power and sexuality. In part three, he argues that knowledges, and the discourses that surround them, are fluid, multidimensional, and diffuse. He writes,

Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. (Foucault 100).

The authors from this chapter help identify how motherhood is also linked to a restructuring of the ways in which knowledge is produced and linked to power. In her article, “The links between Environmental Justice and Feminist Pedagogy,” Bertha Berlia points out that women in environmental justice organizations employ the feminist tactic of collaboration and coproduction of knowledge. By reciting knowledge with people who trace the everyday consequences of environmental hazards, these women, “produce counter-knowledges, turning the tables on who counts as experts” (Berlia 93). DeLuca and Peebles show how this extends



particularly to those women who employ a rhetoric of motherhood. They identify how appealing to the authority of motherhood allows for and demands alternative constructions of knowledges:

The rhetorical situation they face requires the activists to use these resources [the resources of the rhetoric of motherhood] to rhetorically construct the 'truth' of the matter, one not necessarily based on scientific statistical fact... but one based on personal experiences as mothers and thought knowledge gained from the community and their bodies. (DeLuca and Peeples 60)

When mothers claim that, while they may not be trained experts or government officials, their knowledge counts because they are mothers, they are using motherhood to shift the modes of production of knowledge to the individual and local experience. This queering of the sources of knowledge and blurring of dichotomy between public and private is essential to queer theory as well as to feminist and ecofeminist theory.

One particularly powerful example of this comes from a Penny Newman quote in DeLuca and Peeples. She writes,

Those of us that live near toxic dumps...are the true experts on the issue though first hand experience. While others gather their information from textbooks, and reports, we live, breath and die this issue...we're the ones that must lie awake listening to our children struggling to breath; who comfort the young woman who has suffered her 6<sup>th</sup> miscarriage... we're the ones that know the pain of parents whose beautiful babies die in their arms and the agonizing feeling of helplessness at not being able to stop it. (Newman in DeLuca and Peeples 68).

Newman shows how mother's knowledge can be seen as true and powerful knowledge.

However, for all of the ways that motherhood can be a force for queering, relying too heavily on this as the sole discourse of gender in environmental justice is

problematic. By focusing on children and the family as a main reason to create change, motherhood narratives exclude those people with non-normative sexualities and family structures. In "Towards a Queer Ecofeminism," Gaard highlights the connection between the oppression and colonization of nature and that of queers, and shows how heteronormativity is used to create environmental destruction through what she calls "erotophobia". For example, when Spanish colonists came to Colombia's Sierra Nevada Mountains, "gender and sexuality played a prominent role in the rhetoric and justification of colonial conquest" (Gaard 35). The Spanish were upset both by the fact that men did not dominate women, and by the "acceptance of homosexual behaviors and transgendered identities," and they used these practices as an excuse to commit genocide against the indigenous people and take their land. This was echoed in exchanges between indigenous people and colonizers in North America as well (Gaard 35). Because queer sexualities have been so connected to environmental injustice, and because queer people are among those most impacted by environmental injustices, relying so heavily on an idea of resistance focused only on reproduction and normative family structures is destructive to the aims of environmental justice.

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman furthers this point, claiming that an appeal to the future and to protecting the innocence of children necessarily excludes queer people whose sexual practices are not reproductive and positions them against the most unquestionable ideals of reproductive futurism. He examines the, "pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value and propose[s] against it the impossible

project of a queer oppositionality” (Edelman 4). Edelman explains that the ideal of the child controls what counts as political discourse:

In its coercive universalization ... the image of the Child, not to be confused with the lived experiences of any actual historical children, serves to regulate political discourse—to prescribe what will count as political discourse—by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address...That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed.”(Edelman 11)

He finally argues that queers must then embrace the fact that they are on the outside of this system, and position themselves against political appeals to the future, “And so what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively – to insist that the future stop here” (Edelman 31). He sees appeal to the future as a delay when we could be fighting for justice today. Edelman is useful to this discussion because he shows how a narrative of motherhood plays into the structures that exclude queer identities and into the rhetoric that contributes to injustice (environmental or otherwise).

If motherhood can be both an axis of resistance, and a problematic extension of heteronormative rhetoric, how should the environmental justice movement move forward? One idea, spawned from Gaard and other queer theorists work, is to establish a rhetoric of plurality and collaboration. This rhetoric would be based on the recognition of the connections between the oppressions laid out in the Master Model, and would embrace those people and voices whose oppression are connected to environmental degradation. The next chapter gleans more perspective from the activists themselves in order to move towards an answer to more fully

answer this question, and to explore whether such a rhetoric would be possible.

CHAPTER IV.  
**Speaking with Women in Environmental Justice**

In this chapter, I look to two women who work in the EJ organizations with which I am most familiar, to provide insight on how and when gender and sexuality are discussed in the EJ movement, and the ways this impacts their work. I first spoke with Colette Pichon Battle, the director of the Center for Law and Policy at MFGC, and then with Rachel Lopez, a project director at CCAEJ. Despite the fact that the women I spoke to hailed from different sides of the country, generations, ethnic backgrounds, and education levels, I learned from our discussions of gender, sexuality, and EJ, that they saw eye to eye on a surprisingly large number of issues.

Both women had a keen understanding (rooted in extensive personal experience) of the structural mediations of gender in the world of environmental justice. Specifically, the women reported that men held the traditional positions of power, both within and outside the EJ movement. Battle explained that one of the most surprising things about the non-profit world is how it mirrors the business world with respect to the distribution of work among men and women. She said, “The truth is, at the top were the men, but overwhelmingly the staff working with the community were women” (Battle 12/02/2011). She described her surprise at sitting in national meetings with men who were supposed to be leaders in Louisiana EJ, but who she had never seen in her day to day work in Louisiana.

Lopez, on the other hand, talked about the men in high places with whom she had to deal in EJ work, but who aren’t associated with environmental justice: “most of the agencies... local governments, state, and federal governments are all run by men... And they tend to look down on women or minimize their information or their

knowledge or their voice” (Lopez 12/02/2011). However, she added, this minimization, “creates in us more determination to make our voices heard...they learn very quickly that we are very powerful.”

Both women also identified places in their work where race and gender intersect and shape each other. Battle spoke about the shift in population of the EJ movement in the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. Where the movement had once been almost entirely made up of African American women, now “female white folk and female Vietnamese folk” also became involved. The racial and ethnic makeup of the movement began to shift, but the gender make up of environmental justice workers remained largely the same. Battle also talked about the ways that gender shapes racism in the south:

What we’re not use to calling out is the racism between women... it’s not one shotgun blast, it’s a million razor cuts. It’s just as deadly, but it comes in a very different way....that racism that we often think about in a very masculine way is there in the feminine spaces and we have to be able to deal with it. (Battle 12/02/2011)

Battle identified differences in both the types of racism executed, and the ways in which people reacted when issues of racism are brought to their attention. She noted the tendency for women to be quicker to deny their actions and feel victimized when confronted, but also saw a greater potential for healing.

Mostly, Battle felt that gender played a secondary roll to race in both the types of oppression she saw and faced in the south, and the types of communities she identified with for resistance. She says, “In the Deep South my reality has rarely taken my gender into consideration...there are lines drawn, honey, and they are clearly based on race.” And she continues, “The moment that I break ranks with race

and switch to gender is the moment that I lose my community... Despite the fact that everybody in my community doing anything that I consider worthwhile is a woman, despite that, my community is based on race” (Battle 12/02/2011). It was only when she began to consider things on a larger scale that she started to see oppression and community more explicitly in terms of gender. She describes first recognizing issues like the historical sterilization of poor black women in the south as a race based atrocity, but in recognizing this type of thinking in conversations about population control in many developing countries, she began to see it is more closely related to gender and class.

For Lopez, on the other hand, connections between race and gender are very apparent when it came to the challenges faced by Latinas in EJ:

You do have to talk about [gender] because some of us, when we come to the table as activist, I think we bring a certain type of baggage with us...especially in our culture, and I want to say the Latina culture. You know, some of us have been raised that you don't speak out of turn, you're quiet, you're respectful, you don't shout, you don't show emotion to anybody, you sit in the back and anybody with a title knows what they're doing... 'Doctors know everything. You can't ask them a question. How dare you?' you know... men in high positions and with titles, they know what they're doing and agencies know what they're doing. (Lopez 12/02/2011)

Lopez goes on to point out that Environmental Justice work plays a role in women moving beyond those constructs they were raised with, saying, “through the environmental justice issue, we've grown to say, ‘no more.’”

Questions about why women are so involved in EJ draw responses about the nature of women and the nature of the work—yet both women also provide some structural or cultural reasons for why women are the way they are. Battle believes

women are especially cut out for this work because of their understanding of service from a young age:

I think women have to understand from a very early age what it is to take care of someone/something else.... I think it's intensely true in the South where some of the first things you learn to do... as a southern woman is how to serve your father or how to serve your brother...you are always in service... There's nothing wrong with me serving my dad. I loved it. But it was still this notion of being able to say 'I can put myself to the side for this moment and serve someone else,' Right? And I think environmental justice work in particular requires the ability to be able to ... be in service of the sustainability of mother earth...that idea might be a little kooky to a lot of men.  
(Battle, 12/02/2011)

Beyond service, she identifies being exposed to ways in which humans rely on natural systems at an early stage when she was “exposed to garden and kitchen before brother.” She also offers an explanation of women’s involvement on the level of the body: “I think we understand from our bodies, from female bodies, we understand that there’s sometimes a little pain that goes with naturally being able to reproduce...But I think it grounds us somehow.” She says that because women are connected to earth systems by their menstrual cycle, they are more ready to understand all the connections between human beings and the earth. She explains, “I think EJ work requires you to have a unique viewpoint. One that says people and environment are part of one larger ecosystem. It necessarily requires you to not have an individualistic approach to the work. You have to have an intersectional approach on whatever level.”

Lopez identifies additional characteristics of women that enable them to fit well with environmental justice work—most of which relate to organizational skills:



I think the reason why you see so many women...in the environmental justice area, is as women...we can multitask easily...we can take care of our families, we can run a home, and yet we're out there. Either on the picket lines, either at meetings, and whatever it is that we have to do to raise the voices of our communities, of our families, we do it. (Lopez 12/02/11)

Like Battle, Lopez finds that the skills women are called upon to develop, in their capacity as women in the family structure, are very useful in environmental justice work. But she also, on some level, attributes these skills to an innate female nature. She explains, "as a woman, we're so gifted with being able to be very good organizers because as women we have to be organized...with our children, with our home," and later she continues, "naturally as mothers and as women we're very organized, and that's why we can accomplish what we've accomplished as environmental justice activists" (Lopez 12/02/11).

When asked how women shape the environmental justice movement, both women point to cooperation and collaboration. Lopez describes power as coming from the fact that, "we're together, we're united, and we're a team." Battle, affirms this sentiment, explaining that women are successful because they have a "much more supportive way of communicating with each other." She is also wary of masculine energy entering the movement, claiming, "we have a problem in our movement, because many women...think leadership is this masculine thing, and reproduce leadership in a masculine way," thus eschewing the values of cooperation and communication and instead insisting upon domination.

Finally, I asked each woman about her experience with motherhood narratives in environmental justice. Lopez spoke in similar terms to those laid out

by DeLuca and Peeples in their research. She identified her role as a mother and grandmother as one of the primary reasons why she got involved with the CCAEJ when, shortly after she moved to Mira Loma, a woman passing out flyers for the CCAEJ approached her. She says, “I was very concerned about the health of my family and eventually I was kind of like I want to do more, I want to get more involved... I wanted to let people know about what was going on.” She sees this immensely powerful impulse to protect children as an integral part of why women participate in this type of action, explaining, “We protect our young no matter what. If you’ve ever seen an angry bear protect its cub, that’s how we can be, and I think in that respect, we are protecting and trying to help our communities, our friends, our neighbors, our children especially, and our grandchildren.”

She also recognizes motherhood as an important tool in creating change—especially when it comes to convincing others to take action: “When we’re out in the community, you know, we look at the children, and we remind people... it’s a fight... it’s to protect our families. It’s a right that we have...Without those rights, our children, our grandchildren, and our families will suffer...when you think about it that way, you think about your families first” (Lopez 12/02/2011).

Battle, on the other hand, seemed much more uneasy about motherhood as a rhetoric. On one hand, she respects the importance of children to everyone in the community, and she recognizes how a rhetoric of futurity might fit well into environmental justice, especially because of the timely nature of the work. She explains, “Environmental work is so slow that it almost requires the out of body

experience that inevitably leads to future generations.” However, she has found that framing EJ work in this manner can lead to some frustrating outcomes:

I find it interesting and frustrating that a lot of the work that we do at Moving Forward in alliance with other groups is rooted in, sort of, past patriarchy and future motherhood... Why aren't we fighting for the now...I just can't figure out what people are waiting for...I wish that we were more focused on easing the plight of humanity currently, maybe in addition to making the world better for future generations, because there's something dangerous about looking to the future—which is telling yourself you have time. (Battle 12/02/2011)

Battle wants it to be okay for mothers to care for their children and also, “acknowledge that we need it safe for you, right now.”

There are several lessons to be taken from these women's responses. First, they show the importance of continuing to grapple with the ways that gender intersects with race and class in environmental justice. Battle's experiences with racism between women, and Lopez's recognition and navigation of the cultural forces that Latinas face in taking action for social justice, show that continued discourse around gender will be helpful in making the environmental justice movement more just.

Second, these interviews show how while many of the views about women in environmental justice discussed in chapter four may not be in line with current ecofeminist or queer theory, they still come from real lived experiences and legitimate understandings of the world. Battle reminds us that women in the South who work in EJ are more accustomed to service because they grew up with an ethic of service, and she sees women as closer to nature, because, in many communities, women *live* in closer contact with nature. Similarly, Lopez explains that women are

more organized and more able to multitask because that is how they *must* be in order to run a household. Similarly, it is clear here that motherhood is not a narrative that Lopez and Newman produced because it would be effective. It is an essential part of their lived experience, and it is effective because it comes from a powerful place. Professor Rick Worthington points this out when he talks about another staff-member getting involved at CCAEJ because her child has asthma. He says: “for her it’s not a tactic, it’s a experience“(Worthington 10/22/2012). It is important to remember when leveling queer or ecofeminist critiques about current rhetoric, that we must respect the origin of these belief systems.

That being said, the final thing these interviews teach us is that there is room for an interjection of ecofeminist and queer rhetoric into these discussions. Battle’s frustration with the need to focus on children and the future over all the people living now, and Lopez’s understanding of the power of alternative knowledges are examples of just this type of interjection. The women of this movement should not be too hasty to privilege motherhood above all other narratives when there is clearly room for inclusive growth.

**Conclusion:**

This paper explores current discourses surrounding gender and sexuality in environmental justice. While gender is not a traditional axis of environmental justice, the significant involvement of women in the movement is quite apparent, and this involvement has necessitated the production of several narratives explaining why and how women participate, and the power that women wield. I argue that it is important to accept and propagate a wide plurality of narratives instead of focusing only on the power of a rhetoric of motherhood.

The interview with Rachel Lopez from the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice shows how parenthood is a motivator for many people in environmental justice. And the testimonials, interviews, and analysis, laid out in Deluca and Peeples, Krauss, and Kurtz, reinforce this conclusion, highlighting motherhood as a point of entry, and a source of power, for many women in the movement. It would be illogical, and probably impossible, to refuse to use a rhetoric that is so powerful for so many women, and that has been leveraged for real political success in a field where few advantages are afforded to the activists.

At the same time, queer and ecofeminist frameworks expose spaces where there is room for types of discourse outside of motherhood. We see these spaces in examples of past places and times when gender, sexuality, race, class and environmental protection were joined in resistance against injustice. Indigenous women in pre-Columbian California used refusal to reproduce as a means for

maintaining environmental equilibrium *and* resisting domination by colonizers. And enslaved women in the South used similar methods to sabotage the economic future of their masters, and reduce the labor force. In these examples, women leveraged their capacity as *anti*-mothers.

Queer critiques, from Foucault, Edelman and Gaard, show us that privileging a heteronormative, reproductive, ideal in order to make change excludes non-normative people from the movement, and ignores the important connections between environmental degradation and the fear or oppression of non-normative sexualities. Focusing on children and the future also allows us to defer solutions to that injustice until later, rather than fighting for those people who are suffering today. Colette Pichon Battle from *Moving Forward Gulf Coast* voiced her frustration with the motherhood model because it privileges the future.

And so I argue that we need to move towards promoting other points of access and centers for resistance for women and queers in addition to motherhood. One example of an alternative discourse is one that centers on the connections between the oppression of many diverse people. Perhaps a framework of collaboration between all the people and things that are placed in the dominated side of the master model—and the deep acknowledgement of the connections between the oppression of one group and another and the environment, would foster greater inclusion in the movement, and support a movement that fights injustice on many levels.

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