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The background features a complex network of colorful lines (yellow, teal, red, green, blue) and various icons. Icons include a globe, a compass, a microscope, a calendar, a lightbulb, a target, a magnifying glass, a bookshelf, a document, a star, a leaf, a gear, and a person. The lines connect these icons in a web-like pattern, suggesting a network or research process.

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LAUR Reflective Essay

When I first began thinking about my senior thesis, I imagined a STEM-focused project. As an Environmental Studies (B.S.) major, I had spent much of my academic career immersed in scientific work, from GIS analysis to ecology. But as I began planning my thesis, I found myself stuck. I could not land on a question that felt both personally meaningful and intellectually engaging. I was frustrated, and for a while, I considered not writing a thesis at all.

Instead of giving up, I turned toward the topics that have always ignited something in me: feminism, environmental justice, and grassroots activism. I became curious about how identity – especially gender and race – shapes people’s lived experiences of environmental harm. This shift brought me far from my original plans and into unfamiliar territory. I was now attempting to write a humanities-based thesis rooted in feminist theory, historical case studies, and social movement analysis.

The UCSB Library became essential in navigating that transition. At first, my research process was wide and unfocused. I searched JSTOR and ProQuest for any materials on environmental justice or feminist theory, using general terms like “feminism and environment” and “ecofeminism.” I found interesting articles, but struggled to build a coherent narrative or narrow my topic. I did not yet have the tools to filter for relevance or recognize which scholars were shaping key conversations in the field.

Meeting with a UCSB librarian transformed that process. During our consultation, the librarian helped me refine my search terms. They also guided me to new databases, with a whole section of the Library website dedicated to the Environmental Studies thesis class. One particular book seemed perfect for my project, but was not available at UCSB. The librarian

ordered it through an interlibrary loan and emailed me personally when it arrived weeks later. That small act of support made me feel that my research mattered.

With better tools and guidance, my search strategies became more targeted. I began using layered Boolean phrases like “(environmental justice OR ecofeminism) AND (race OR gender)” and filtered results by discipline and date. I tracked citations backward to identify foundational texts and read widely across fields – including environmental history, Black feminist thought, and Indigenous scholarship. Along the way, my topic sharpened. I chose to focus on how women of color have led and theorised environmental justice movements, and how their frameworks of anger, care, and anti-sexual violence reveal deeper connections between environmental harm and social inequality. As my project took shape, the UCSB Library remained central. Beyond consultations and databases, I regularly used the Library Search system to access e-books and consult research guides on feminist studies and environmental studies.

Ultimately, my thesis argues that feminist theories of care, anger, and anti-sexual violence are essential to understanding the intersections of environmental degradation and structural oppression. I build this argument through close readings of activist writing, scholarly literature, and historical case studies such as the Warren County, North Carolina protests, the Mothers of East Los Angeles activism, and the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

In the end, my pivot away from STEM was not a detour, it was a path toward discovering the kind of scholar I want to become. The UCSB Library did not just support that shift, it made

it possible. From learning to search more efficiently, to thinking more expansively, to feeling encouraged by staff who genuinely cared, my research process was shaped at every step by the resources and people who make the UCSB Library what it is.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

‘Powerful Knowledges of Resistance’:

Listening to Women of Color Feminism in Environmental Justice Movements

by

Isabel Marie Chang

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in

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ABSTRACT

‘Powerful Knowledges of Resistance’:
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By
Isabel Marie Chang

The environmental justice movement emerged in response to the disproportionate burden of environmental harm experienced by marginalized communities, specifically emphasizing the role of race and class inequalities as a driving force. However, critical environmental justice expands on this to incorporate and center all overlooked communities. More specifically, critical environmental justice recognizes that environmental inequalities are deeply intertwined with multiple systems of oppression, demonstrating that this intersectionality is required to fully understand and address environmental injustices. One aspect that is often overlooked is the intersectional role of gender. Women of color have been at the forefront of environmental justice movements since the very beginning. They are situated at the crossroad of racial, class, gender, and environmental injustices. Mobilizations by women leaders in Warren County, North Carolina, by the Mothers of East Los Angeles, and at the Standing Rock Sioux reservation are all examples of how women of color use this unique perspective at the intersection to combat environmental injustices. This thesis draws on scholarship from across multiple disciplines and uses the feminist frameworks of anger, care, and anti-sexual violence to analyze and understand the driving forces of this activism. It asks: What is it about women of color’s experiences that allow them to critique and analyze the system that creates disproportionate environmental burdens on marginalized communities in the United States? In what ways do concerns about gender inequality and gender politics shape the environmental justice movement, and how is feminism used as a framework within this context? By incorporating feminist frameworks, critical environmental justice helps scholars and activists better understand the lived experiences of women of color and their leadership in environmental justice movements.

Despite long-standing claims by elites that Blacks, women, Latinos, and other similarly derogated groups in the United States remain incapable of producing the type of interpretive, analytical thought that is labeled theory in the West, power knowledges of resistance that toppled former structures of social inequality repudiate this view. Members of these groups do in fact theorize, and our critical social theory has been central to our political empowerment and search for justice.

– Patricia Hill Collins, “Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice

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First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor David Pellow, for his unwavering confidence in my ideas since the beginning. His deep commitment to justice has not only shaped this thesis but has profoundly influenced the way I approach both research and the world. I feel incredibly lucky to have had the chance to learn from him. His guidance, support, and patience have meant so much to me throughout the process. It truly has been an honor to work with him.

I am also sincerely thankful to Karly Miller, who has made the thesis-writing process feel less daunting. She was always there, marker in hand, to help me map out my ideas. From organizing writing rooms for us to sharing fresh persimmons, I never doubted that Karly was in my corner. She truly went above and beyond to foster a sense of community throughout the entire process.

To my family and friends – thank you for being my support system throughout this journey. An entire section of this thesis exists because of my mom, who, at the very beginning, sent me an article about the Mothers of East Los Angeles that ended up shaping so much of my research. My dad has also been an essential part of this process – through every phone call, text, and edit, he was always there when I needed him. I leaned on both more than I can say, and their love and encouragement have meant the world to me.

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Finally, thank you to the Environmental Studies department here at UC Santa Barbara for this opportunity to pursue this research and for shaping my academic journey the past four years. This department has been a place of growth and discovery for me, and I can confidently say I have learned to think more critically and compassionately about the world around me. I am incredibly grateful for the faculty, staff, and fellow students who have helped me grow into the person I am today.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In 1977, a group of Black feminists gathered in Boston and wrote something that changed everything. They called themselves the Combahee River Collective, named after the river where Harriet Tubman led one of the only known military operations in US history planned and executed by a woman. The Combahee River Collective reminds us that environmental justice must be grounded in the lived experiences of those impacted by intersecting forms of oppression. Their statement was not just a political document calling for an intersectional approach to liberation; it was a declaration of survival, love, and refusal. It was a roadmap for how to live and struggle at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work (Combahee River Collective, 2015).

This statement – bold and uncompromising – sits at the heart of this thesis. It is a reminder that liberation is not something that is handed down. It is something that is built collectively, with anger and care, against sexual violence. The Combahee River Collective made it clear that systems of oppression are not separate, they are entangled.

Environmental justice is part of this. It is a feminist issue that is shaped by systemic and structural violence and exploitation that disproportionately harm women of color. Rather than just a matter of addressing pollution, women of color's voices expose the ways in which environmental justice is inseparable from the histories of colonialism, capitalism, racism, and cis-heteropatriarchy. They challenge the dominant narratives of

environmental issues. The Combahee River Movement reminds us to center these voices, as they have the clearest vision of justice.

1.2 Research Question

This research project investigates how women of color have shaped the environmental justice movement by examining three case studies. It focuses on Warren County Citizens Concerned (WCCC), Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA), and the women of Standing Rock as environmental justice groups that have distinguished women of color leaders. Primarily using feminist frameworks, it analyzes the work and aims of these activists and organizers to provide insights into how their experience and position have provided critiques, analyses, and strategies that are crucial for movements for environmental justice. What is it about women of color's experiences that allow them to critique and analyze the system that creates disproportionate environmental burdens on marginalized communities in the United States? In what ways do concerns about gender inequality and gender politics shape the environmental justice movement, and how is feminism used as a framework within this context? The research applies feminist theories of anger, care, and anti-sexual violence accredited to Audre Lorde, Joan Tronto, and Indigenous feminist scholars.

1.3 Scholarly Rationale

In the growing scholarship on environmental justice, gendered analyses often appear but are hardly ever the central focus. Gender is often mentioned when discussing how environmental burdens are disproportionately impacting marginalized groups. However, these discussions rarely provide a full analysis of how gender – and especially feminist critiques – inform environmental justice activism and movements. This gap fails to fully

appreciate and capture how feminist and women of color critiques and analyses influence environmental justice movements. In turn, this absence limits our ability to fully understand the root causes and the scope of systemic injustices that create environmental inequities. The integration of gender analysis in environmental justice is needed to explain why environmental injustices persist and what action to take to address them.

Gender and environmental inequalities are deeply connected. The systems that create and uphold gender inequalities also perpetuate environmental injustices, especially for women of color. As the UN Women organization has observed, “women and girls experience the greatest impacts of climate change, which amplifies existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety” (UN Women, 2022). Women of color are more likely to live in communities that are exposed to environmental hazards, while also having less access to resources and less power in decision-making to change their situations (Bell, 2016; Rumph et al., 2022). Studying environmental justice without including an intersectional approach that incorporates gender erases the experiences of these women and hides the crucial ways that women – and women of color, in particular – have shaped movements for environmental justice. This erasure makes it impossible to clearly see the powerful critiques, analyses, and strategies that women have devised and led.

Many leaders of the environmental justice movement are ignored because the movement lacks a gendered analysis. The women of color who are using their lived experiences to challenge systemic inequalities at the forefront of grassroots activism are being silenced. Their contributions are underrepresented in academic discourse. This silences a large part of the work being done in the environmental justice movement and

creates a one-dimensional narrative of environmental justice. This incomplete account of the movement limits our ability to implement solutions that will benefit all people.

1.4 Policy Rationale

The lack of a gendered perspective in environmental justice policies has severe consequences. Existing policies aim to address bigger-picture issues of climate change, but without the acknowledgement of how environmental issues disproportionately impact women of color, they fall short - or even make the existing inequalities worse. Policymakers also may learn from the analyses of women of color to understand and address the roots of environmental inequality.

The benefits of these existing policies are not equitably distributed. Many studies have examined the influence of atmospheric pollutants on menstrual cycle function. For instance, studies conducted from 2016 to 2020 have all concluded that increased levels of environmental toxicants are associated with an increase in menstrual cycle irregularities (Hammer et al., 2020). There are also increased risks of domestic violence during climate crises (UN Women, 2022). Yet, there is a lack of access to reproductive health services and protection of women during climate disasters. Instead, most disaster response plans focus on rebuilding infrastructure and providing basic aid. Not taking the experiences of women of color into consideration when creating environmental disaster plans reduces the effectiveness of these policies for entire communities.

Integrating gender as a central component of environmental justice policy will allow policymakers to create just frameworks that address the unique ways in which women of color are affected by environmental harms. In turn, this will create more equitable policies that improve the lives of the communities that are most impacted by

environmental hazards. In the cases of WCCC, MELA, and Standing Rock, this looks like protecting marginalized communities from building plans that perpetuate and expose communities to toxic hazards.

1.5 Hypothesis

Women of color have a special lived experience and perspective of environmental injustices. They occupy a unique space at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. These intersecting identities allow for a distinct perspective of the racial, gendered, economic, and environmental inequalities occurring - and how they are all connected. Rather than a priority on singular aspects of environmental harm as separate issues, women of color offer a narrative that highlights the interconnectedness of social and environmental inequalities. This lived experience provides a basis for an analysis and critique of systemic injustices and positions them as key leaders in the environmental justice movement.

By centering the voices that are most impacted, the environmental justice movement expands to address the connections between environmental and social injustices. Feminism provides a framework for understanding and addressing how gender and environmental issues intersect. Throughout the environmental justice movement's history, different kinds of feminism have been used to propel critical thinking and action forward. Intersectionality is an important and commonly used framework that shapes action in many environmental justice movements.

1.6 Research Design

Using an interdisciplinary qualitative research approach, this thesis investigates the intersection of environmental justice and feminism, focusing on the unique contributions

of women of color to the environmental justice movement in the United States. By analyzing feminist literature, examining case studies, and applying feminist of color frameworks to said case studies, this research aims to provide a comprehensive and intersectional understanding of environmental justice.

Different feminist theories focus on different aspects of women's experiences. Similarly, different lived experiences allow women of color to understand, analyze, and critique systemic injustices that motivate different environmental justice movements. The application of women of color feminist theory is central to the research design. Drawing from feminist theorists, these texts provide multiple theoretical lenses through which to analyze environmental justice movements led by women. This recognizes the complexity of the lived experience of environmental burdens on women of color.

The research incorporates media sources, including news articles and blogs, to detail the ideas and actions taken by women leaders from Warren County Citizens Concerned, Mothers of East Los Angeles, and Standing Rock. This method allows for personal details to be added by women who contributed to the movement, along with allowing for women of color's narratives to be the central voice in the history of the movement rather than a retelling of the history by someone who did not experience it. It centers the voices of women of color in the environmental justice movement who are usually underrepresented and overlooked in mainstream media outlets.

1.7 Chapter Roadmap

This thesis will begin with a literature review giving background on environmental justice and its evolution into critical environmental justice. The review will include the development of the environmental justice movement and why many scholars are calling

for its expansion to include more marginalized identities. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the feminist frameworks of anger, care, and anti-sexual violence. These frameworks offer critical insights into the unique perspectives and motivations of women of color in environmental justice movements. The thesis will then go on to use these frameworks to analyze movements within environmental justice that are led by or have significant contributions by women of color.

The first case study will center on what many credit as the birthplace of the environmental justice movement: Warren County, North Carolina. Because it is often recognized as the conception point of environmental justice, it is important to understand that women – specifically Black women – were not only part of the movement but leading it from the beginning. This chapter will include a brief history of the motivation behind the creation of the WCCC environmental justice movement, including a focus on one of the leaders, Dollie Burwell. The second part of this chapter will analyze intersectional feminist, scholar, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde’s theory of anger and the power behind it. This feminist framework will then be applied and used to analyze the WCCC movement. Anger is both an emotional response women feel when silenced in our patriarchal society, but also a political mobilizing force. Dollie Burwell and the women of WCCC channel this unique form of anger into their environmental justice activism.

The next chapter will delve into the case study of the Mothers of East Los Angeles. It will include a history of the creation of the movement and the methods and motivation behind the activism. All too often women are reduced to their identities as mothers. MELA shows that this identity is not limiting but instead allows for a unique

understanding of injustices as caregivers. This chapter will also include an explanation of the feminist theory of care, drawing from Joan Tronto. It will take the discussed framework of care as a feminist theory and apply it to the Mothers of East Los Angeles. The concept of care as an ethic and practice, as well as an economic structure is drawn from activist and scholar Robert Gottlieb and organizer and author Ai-jen Poo's writings. Connecting this theory to MELA demonstrates how their activism is shaped by their experiences as caregivers in their families and their communities.

The following chapter will describe the history and motivation behind the creation of the Standing Rock activist movement. The struggle to protect Indigenous land and water from the Dakota Access Pipeline highlights the relationship between the colonial roots of environmental and sexual exploitation. Then, it will explain the feminist theory of anti-sexual violence to link colonial violence and gender oppression. Indigenous feminist work and Edward Said's *Orientalism* help explain how the fight against sexual violence is inherently connected to the fight against colonial expansion and exploitation of both people and land. This link explains why Indigenous women have a unique lived experience and critique of environmental injustices.

The final chapter of this thesis will synthesize the insights from the case studies, highlighting the intersections of race, gender, and environmental justice. It will reflect on how the feminist frameworks of anger, care, and anti-sexual violence are essential tools to understanding women of color's contributions to the environmental justice movement. The conclusion will also emphasize the need for the integration of gendered analyses into environmental justice in order to advance the movement.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

At its core, the environmental justice movement addresses the systemic inequalities that allow marginalized communities to be disproportionately affected by environmental harm. Women, and particularly women of color, experience these injustices most heavily as they are the intersection of gendered, racial, and environmental oppression. American civil rights activist and critical race theory scholar Kimberl  Crenshaw’s framework of intersectionality is particularly useful for understanding this convergence and how it allows women of color to have a unique critique and analysis of the systems that create these unequal balances of environmental burdens. Intersectionality highlights how multiple systems of oppression must be studied through a new lens as they are not additive, but rather create distinct vulnerabilities and insights (Crenshaw, 1991).

Throughout the environmental justice movement, women of color have used this unique perspective to lead organizations and critique the systems in place. Feminist theories can be used as frameworks to analyze these organizations and understand the ways in which systems of multiple oppressions converge to provide a distinct perspective of environmental justice.

2.2 Environmental Justice

The movement in Warren County, North Carolina is often seen as the origin of the U.S. environmental justice movement. The protests against the building of a toxic waste incinerator in a predominantly Black neighborhood sparked a form of activism, political critique, and field of study that focus on addressing the unequal distribution of environmental harms among different social groups (Krauss, 2009; Mohai et al., 2009).

Early environmental research largely ignored social inequalities, failing to consider how race, class, and other factors shaped environmental harms (Mohai et al., 2009). As a result, the voices and perspectives of people of color were often excluded from efforts to address environmental issues, despite the marginalized communities facing the brunt of the negative impacts from said environmental issues (Mohai et al., 2009).

Coined by activist and author Benjamin Chavis, the idea of environmental racism was a central motivation behind the political movement against environmental inequalities occurring in the early 1980s (Hossain, 2023; Mohai et al., 2009). Robert Bullard, commonly recognized as the father of environmental justice, defines environmental racism as “any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color” (Bullard, 1994). He uses the concept of environmental justice as a solution to environmental racism, defining it as ensuring all people and communities “...equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations” (Mohai et al., 2009). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) then goes on to formalize environmental justice with their official definition of “the fair and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (Mohai et al., 2009).

The framework of environmental justice has been used in policy. For example, in a recent EPA report on climate change, they conclude that “the most severe harms from climate change fall disproportionately upon underserved communities” and “racial and ethnic minority communities [are] particularly vulnerable to the greatest impacts of

climate change” (US Environmental Protection Agency, 2021). This analysis is greatly important to expose the racial and socioeconomic imbalances in environmental burdens, but there is no mention of gender or any other lived inequality. Moreover, the official Principles of Environmental Justice, created at the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, only comes close to mentioning a gendered experience once in Principle 13, stating “Strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color” (United Church of Christ, Commission for Racial Justice, 1991). The mention of nonconsensual use of women of color for reproduction experiments is only one part of the drastic environmental effects on women – and specifically women of color – that environmental justice should be addressing. These principles lack a gendered lens, which causes a lack in the ability to truly and fully address the complexities of environmental harm.

The roots of environmental justice in race and class often leaves other aspects of identity that also intersect with environmental issues unexplored. The role of gender in shaping the experiences of environmental harm is often neglected in environmental scholarship and activism. While the work demonstrating how communities of color and low-income communities bear the brunt of environmental degradation is foundational and should not be looked past, it has left significant gaps in understanding how intersectional identities exacerbate vulnerabilities to environmental hazards.

2.3 Critical Environmental Justice

Some scholars, such as David Pellow, Susan Buckingham, and Rakibe Kulcur, have touched upon the need for the expansion of environmental justice. They push beyond the

foundational focus on race and class and advocate for the movement into the second generation of the environmental justice movement (Pellow, 2016). This new generation, referred to as critical environmental justice, includes nuanced analyses of gender, sexuality, citizenship, and other dimensions of identity that shape environmental justice struggles (Buckingham & Kulcur, 2009; Pellow, 2016). Environmental racism cannot be fully understood without a gendered perspective. Buckingham and Kulcur advocate for the importance of a gendered lens, stating that “a society which is racist and classist is likely also to be sexist...” (Buckingham & Kulcur, 2009). Critical environmental justice uses feminist – specifically women of color feminist – frameworks to address a broader scope of marginalized identities.

Black feminist scholars, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, provide such feminist frameworks that can be applied to the environmental justice movement. For example, Crenshaw critiques the limitations of analyzing race and gender as separate categories, arguing that this fails to account for the combined experiences of those who have lived at these intersections (Crenshaw, 1991). Her framework of intersectionality is vital to understanding both how women of color are affected differently by environmental injustices, but also how their perspectives bring personal critiques and solutions to environmental justice.

The women of the Combahee River Collective provide a foundation for critical environmental justice. They articulate the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class, stating “We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class and sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced

simultaneously” (Combahee River Collective, 2015). This recognition of intersectionality emphasizes the importance of understanding the systems of oppression from a personal perspective of women of color. The Combahee River Collective uses the “feminist principle that the personal is political” to demonstrate how the lived experiences of women of color allow for a unique understanding of environmental injustices (Combahee River Collective, 2015).

2.4 Anger

Anger is a transformative and vital framework for understanding the perspective of women of color in the environmental movement, as seen in Audre Lorde’s *The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism* and Marilyn Frye’s *A Note on Anger*. Lorde and Frye argue that anger is not an emotion that should be feared or dismissed as divisive, but rather channeled as a vital component of social and environmental justice (Frye, 1983; Lorde, 1981). Anger is a bridge between personal experiences of oppression and broader critiques of structural inequities (Poe, 2018).

Anger is not a destructive force, but a clarifying and mobilizing tool for women of color to understand and confront systemic inequities (Lorde, 1981). Lorde pushes for women of color to learn to channel their anger effectively, allowing them to understand and expose the intersections of racism and sexism they experience in their daily lives (Lorde, 1981). This form of anger can only truly be felt and channeled by those who face the brunt of multiple systemic oppressions, giving them the power to use their unique experiences to form action. Lorde’s essay stresses the point that anger is not just a personal response, it is a political act that can be used as a collective. Anger can be used to identify injustice, build solidarity, and challenge the structures that perpetuate

inequality, rather than being purely divisive (Lorde, 1981). In the environmental justice movement, anger emerges as a reaction to environmental harm impacting their livelihoods for women of color, and as a driving force behind their activism.

Frye complements Lorde's perspective by emphasizing anger as a legitimate response to oppression. She, and others, argue that "anger, then, is more than a feeling. It is a claim about one's dignity and humanity" (Poe, 2018). There is a societal dismissal of women's anger, particularly when it disrupts patriarchal or racist norms, and there is a societal expectation that women suppress their anger in order to not disrupt the peace (Frye, 1983). This suppression that Frye points out does not allow the usage of anger as a powerful political tool that Lorde argues for. Women of color are often ignored or silenced when it comes to their overlapping oppressions. The unique anger that women of color feel fuels their activism and leadership in the environmental justice movement. This motivation and perspective is demonstrated in the Warren County movement by women leaders who felt silenced.

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins adds to the framework used for understanding the unique positionality of women of color through her concept of the "outsider within." Collins originally developed this concept to describe the experiences of Black women working in white households, but she expands it to shed light on the marginalized individuals who are part of dominant institutions, but are not allowed to fully participate (Collins, 1986). Through their positionality as outsiders within, women of color are able to see the inner workings of power structures, but are simultaneously being denied access to their benefits. This experience gives women of color a unique perspective on these dominant institutions. Applying this concept to environmental

justice, women of color have a critical perspective created by their proximity to environmental infrastructures and their personal experiences with systemic exclusion. Anger emerges from the outsider within position from the clarity and awareness of exclusion, exploitation, and harm.

2.5 Care

The politics of care provides a transformative feminist framework for understanding the lived experiences of women of color. The foundation of care theory is deeply rooted in gender and has important implications for what men and women's roles are in our society (Himmelweit & Plomien, 2014). This is not to make the essentialist claim that women are naturally better caregivers because they give birth, but rather that the construction of our society today allows men to avoid taking responsibility for care (Tronto, 2013). This framework highlights how care labor – both paid and unpaid – disproportionately falls on women, and more specifically women of color (Himmelweit & Plomien, 2014). It allows for a deeper understanding of how women's experiences shape their motivations and actions in environmental justice movements.

In her book *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*, Joan Tronto argues that care is not a private, individual practice, but a vital part of democratic life that must be incorporated into political structures. She critiques the common tendency to overlook care work that is primarily performed by women, often in marginalized communities. Care work is more often than not associated with women because of the societal idea that women are naturally better at it (Tronto, 2013). By understanding these gendered norms, Tronto emphasizes how gendered and racial inequalities are worsened by the underappreciation of care labor (Tronto, 2013).

Ai-jen Poo's *New Paradigm for a Resilient Care Economy* connects care work to broader economic and environmental systems, providing a framework to understand the intersection of care, labor, gender, and environmental studies. Poo adds that women of color, particularly immigrant women, are overrepresented in care labor and face exploitative conditions, yet their contributions are undervalued (Poo, 2022). Not only do women face economic exploitation in their paid labor, they also face the social undervaluation of their unpaid care work in the home. Care labor is a site of exploitation and danger, and therefore is a site of politics (Poo, 2022). To combat these structural inequities, Poo offers her vision for a care economy that recognizes caregiving as a vital infrastructure (Poo, 2022).

Robert Gottlieb builds on Joan Tronto's ideas in his *Care-Centered Politics: From the Home to the Planet*, framing care as a social ethic and political practice that is essential for addressing systemic injustices. Gottlieb uses Poo's idea of a care economy and expands upon it, stating that a care economy combines aspects of both a foundational and solidarity economy. He describes a foundational economy as one that prioritizes goods and services necessary to human well-being, but has the possibility of leading to deep inequalities as it fails to move away from neoliberal economics (Gottlieb, 2022). A solidarity economy prioritizes cooperation, mutual aid, and community work (Gottlieb, 2022). Within this care economy, Gottlieb emphasizes care as a reciprocal process, "caring with" rather than "caring for" (Gottlieb, 2022).

Using a feminist framework highlights the solidarity and mutuality that is inherent in care, which is often visible in the community-oriented approaches that women of color often bring to environmental justice activism. Women's roles as caregivers – both in

familial and professional contexts – shape their grassroots activism for environmental justice in their communities.

This perspective can be seen in environmental justice movements, such as Mothers of East Los Angeles. Formed in the 1980s in the Boyle Heights neighborhood to combat the proposed plans to build a state prison, this group of Chicanas’ experiences as mothers motivated and framed their activism against environmental hazards in their communities (Sahagun, 1989). Through the experience of care work, many of the women of MELA already prioritize the health and wellbeing of their families and their communities. As the primary caregivers in their households, these women of color are societally positioned to understand how environmental harms impact daily life.

2.6 Anti-Sexual Violence

The politics of anti-sexual violence provide a critical feminist framework for understanding women’s unique motivations and perspectives in the environmental justice movement, particularly for Indigenous women and women of color. Scholars discussed in this section highlight how violence, colonialism, and environmental injustices are gendered and interconnected. Systems of power rely on intersecting oppressions to maintain dominance, often through sexual violence of women of color and Indigenous women (Said, 1978; Voyles, 2015).

In the context of uranium mining in her book, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country*, Traci Brynne Voyles argues that Native women activists have engaged with environmental justice struggles at the intersection of reproductive justice, environmental degradation, and racism, all while exposing the gender and sexual implications of colonization (Voyles, 2015). She defines her term “wastelanding” as

“...the degradation of targeted environments and their human and nonhuman denizens” (Voyles, 2015). Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga elaborates on this idea in an interview conducted by literary scholar Priscilla Solis Ybarra, stating, “Injustices started when we began to lose our relationship to nature and treat it just as a resource to be commodified. And with the ownership of land came the ownership of women, since the earliest notions of ‘property’” (Moraga, 2020).

Indigenous feminist scholars argue that rather than a byproduct of colonialism, sexual violence is a central mechanism. Indigenous Studies scholar Luhui Whitebear, in an essay on feminist resistance, highlights how systems of oppression are deeply interconnected. Both Indigenous women and land are treated as resources to dominate and exploit (Whitebear, 2020). Similarly, anthropologists Lynn Stephen and Shannon Speed demonstrate that violence against Indigenous women occurs in “heightened states of injustice,” showing how these harms are produced and sustained by state and institutional power (Stephen & Speed, 2021). As Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack have argued in the introduction to *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*, Indigenous feminism must therefore simultaneously confront colonial gender violence and the erasure of Indigenous political sovereignty in their writing (Huhndorf & Suzack, 2010). In Rebecca Hall’s *Feminist Strategies to End Violence Against Women*, she further argues that feminist strategies to end violence must center colonialism as a root cause, linking the struggle against gendered violence to broader movements for decolonization and environmental justice (Hall, 2019). Collectively, these scholars

demonstrate that environmental and gender-based violence are not separate issues, but intertwined struggles that must be addressed together¹.

Pioneering literary scholar Edward Said's *Orientalism* provides crucial insights to expand on this idea, exploring the ways that colonial narratives construct gendered and racialized hierarchies. Gendered and violent language is used to by colonial regimes to discuss expansion, embedding sexual violence into the systems of power being created (Said, 1978). Indigenous women are framed as passive and available for domination and Indigenous land is portrayed as untamed and requiring control and extraction, allowing for colonial powers to continue their empires (Said, 1978). This connects Indigenous women to their land, creating the unique relationship between women and the natural world.

This particular relationship was used as a foundation in the Standing Rock movement by women leaders. The Standing Rock movement in North Dakota in 2016 and 2017 protested the construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline that threatened the land and water supply of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Tabor, 2016). Women often led the struggle in this protest through their intimate connection with water and the treatment of the earth (Taub, 2016). Since their lands were stolen in the colonial era, women have experienced mirrored and connected sexual violence as their land and water, creating a special bond.

¹ Whitebear and Hall both cite and build on the scholarship of Andrea Smith. Smith has argued that sexual violence is a central tactic of domination through her idea of the "rape of the land" (Smith, 2015). However, Smith has been and continues to be a figure of scholarly controversy. Her book, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, relies on deeply personal stories that Native women shared with Smith with the belief that she was also a Native woman; however, her Indigeneity has been called into question. My intent is to focus on the central idea that violence against Indigenous women is fundamental to the expropriation of land, an argument made by some scholars who cite Smith and others who do not.

2.7 Conclusion

This reviewed literature highlights the foundational principles of environmental justice, which seeks to address systemic inequalities that disproportionately burden marginalized communities with environmental harms with a main focus on race and class. Recently, environmental justice has evolved into its second generation, critical environmental justice. This evolution broadens the framework to encapsulate different marginalized identities, but significant gaps remain in the literature as it is a new and upcoming subject. The primary framing of environmental justice should be critical. Women of color have been at the forefront of the environmental justice movement since the inception, as seen in the case studies. These women leaders should be acknowledged, represented, and centered in environmental justice discussions. Feminist frameworks highlight ways to understand the intersections of race, gender, class, and environmental oppressions as experienced by women of color. Using anger, care, and anti-sexual violence as such frameworks, women of color feminists detail their unique insights on systemic oppressions. Not only do their perspectives motivate their activism in the environmental justice movement, but women of color's lives at the intersection of oppressions allow them to critique and remedy the systems that create this marginalization.

Chapter 3 - Background

3.1 Warren County Citizens Concerned

This section draws mainly from the University of North Carolina Library online exhibition, “We Birthed the Movement,” (2022) as a comprehensive account of the Warren County protests. Other sources used include a shared recollection of the movement, including news sources (Abdelfatah et al., 2023; Athans, 2024; Atwater, 2022; Kutz, 2022) and nonprofit organizations (Labalme, 2022).

In 1978, the state of North Carolina made a controversial decision to address a growing environmental crisis caused by the illegal dumping of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a toxic substance known to cause cancer. The Ward Transformer Company purposefully dumped PCB fluid along hundreds of miles of roadways, contaminating soil across 14 counties (Labalme, 2022). State officials determined that a toxic waste incinerator was necessary to manage the cleanup. The plan involved collecting 60,000 tons of PCB-laced soil and dumping it into an existing hazardous landfill, along with expanding the landfill and building a new incinerator in Warren County, with the Environmental Protection Agency giving the green light. The decision to grow the toxic waste site in a predominantly Black and low-income community raised concerns of racial and environmental injustice.

In Warren County, the landfill and incinerator were more than just an immediate environmental threat. This was yet another example of a community of color being disproportionately targeted and burdened with environmental hazards. The community did not stand for it. They rallied behind a shared belief that they were picked as a dumping ground for hazardous waste based on their race and class.

The decision to place the landfill in Warren County was met with outrage in the forms of mass mobilizations, nonviolent protests, and civil disobedience. Community members, environmental activists, and civil rights organizations – including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – organized to resist the state’s plan. Over seven weeks in 1982, community members blocked trucks transporting the PCB-contaminated soil to the landfill site. The protests drew national attention, with over 500 individuals arrested.

Despite their efforts – and the legal and scientific challenges posed – the state ultimately dumped 7000 truckloads of contaminated soil into the community, permanently altering the environment of Warren County. However, the legacy of the Warren County protests also permanently altered the way in which people view environmental injustices. The activism in Warren County is often credited as the beginning of what is now the environmental justice movement. The landfill underwent decontamination in the 1990s and was finally closed in 2002, but protests continue to be a symbol of resistance and resilience, demonstrating the power of grassroots organizing (Exchange Project, 2006).

3.2 Mothers of East Los Angeles

This section draws upon a National Park Service article, *Mothers of East Los Angeles*, and Louis Sahagun’s Los Angeles Times article, *The Mothers of East L.A. Transform Themselves and Their Neighborhood* for an extensive history and background of the Mothers of East Los Angeles group. These two sources generally agree on the details of their activism.

The Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) emerged in the 1980s as a grassroots coalition to oppose a state prison planned for Boyle Heights, a historically Chicano neighborhood in Los Angeles. Boyle Heights had already experienced a long history of environmental injustices, including displacement, air and noise pollution, and other industrial developments that disproportionately impacted residents. Brought together by Father John Moretta of the Resurrection Church, this group of local women used their lived experiences and collective identity to fuel their passionate activism against the prison project.

The women of MELA viewed the proposed prison as not only a potential safety threat to their families but also a symbol of how their community was continually treated as expendable. Many members had firsthand experience with displacement as children, witnessing their families forced out of their homes due to urban redevelopment projects. These projects often prioritized infrastructure, highways, and industrial facilities over the well-being of Boyle Heights residents. This history, coupled with their concerns about the dangers of the prison to local families, motivated the women into action. Prisons, themselves, are also environmental threats, seen in the “water contamination, hazardous industrial wastes, air-borne toxins, and excessive heat...that are rampant inside US prisons” (Pellow, 2019). Through mass incarceration, prisons incentivize further industrial development, increasing industrial emissions (McGee et al., 2020).

From protest marches, to letter-writing campaigns, to even lobbying in Sacramento, MELA used a range of strategies to fight the prison. As mothers, they were not only protecting their children, but they also were advocating for their entire community’s future. Using their identities as caretakers and their experiences with motherhood as

tools and motivators in their activism, they emphasized the human cost of environmental degradation. These strategies proved effective, as MELA successfully stopped the prison project.

Building on this success, MELA broadened its focus to address other environmental threats to Boyle Heights, including the construction of a toxic waste incinerator and an oil pipeline. After their victories, it was clear that they had grown from a group of “shy housewives,” as early members described themselves, to a powerful group of environmental activists. Father Moretta played a pivotal role in shaping MELA’s identity. His decision to emphasize the activists’ identities as mothers was a deliberate strategy. He explained, “I trusted women to be cooler and calmer than men in the inevitable demonstration situations” (Pardo, 1990). The mothers themselves leaned into this framing, broadening their fight to protect their families and future generations.

3.3 Standing Rock

This section’s information mainly derives from Shannon Kring’s documentary, *End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock*. Supplemental details and information were supplied by Selia Hu’s article on the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)’s website, *The Dakota Access Pipeline: What You Need to Know*, Rebecca Hersher’s article on NPR, *Key Moments In The Dakota Access Pipeline Fight*, and an article from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, *Treaties Still Matter: The Dakota Access Pipeline*.

In 2014, Energy Transfer Partners proposed the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) project. The intended pipeline would be 1172-miles long and span from North Dakota to Illinois, transporting crude oil (Hersher, 2017; Hu, 2024). The initial proposal had the

pipeline crossing the Missouri River, but the US Army Corps of Engineers rejected the proposal after opposition from largely white communities of Bismarck, due to the route's proximity to the city's water supply (Hu, 2024; Smithsonian, 2018). Despite this, the Corps ignored Standing Rock's similar opposition to the current route (Hersher, 2017; Hu, 2024). The pipeline was also a bunch of little parts put together, allowing for leaks that are legal, undetectable, and easily mixed with water plant water (Kring, 2021).

LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, a Standing Rock Sioux tribal member, established the Sacred Stone Camp on her land in April of 2016 (Kring, 2021). This marked the beginning of a grassroots movement to block the pipeline construction. Indigenous leaders and allies joined this camp in solidarity under the mantra "Water is Life," or Mni Wiconi (Kring, 2021; Smithsonian, 2018). As construction began, thousands of Indigenous people, environmental activists, and even celebrities joined at Standing Rock in solidarity.

Despite these protests, construction crews destroyed sacred burial grounds near the reservation in August 2016. Sparking outrage, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe filed a lawsuit against the US Army Corps of Engineers (Hersher, 2017; Hu, 2024; Kring, 2021). They argued that the pipeline was violating tribal sovereignty and environmental laws. A month later, the water protectors gained national and international media attention when video footage showed private security guards using attack dogs and pepper spray. Law enforcement escalated their response by deploying water cannons, rubber bullets, and tear gas against the protectors, who were already enduring the harsh conditions of winter.

In December of 2016, the US Army Corps of Engineers denied an easement for the pipeline to cross under the Missouri River and called for an environmental impact review.

After this significant, but short-lived, victory, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to expedite the DAPL project (Hersher, 2017; Hu, 2024; Kring, 2021). This decision canceled the environmental review and continued the construction. The remaining protest camps were cleared by law enforcement and the pipeline was completed. Oil is still flowing through the DAPL pipeline to this day, despite continued legal battles. The legacy of resistance and call to action by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has inspired other Indigenous-led environmental movements.

Chapter 4 - Anger

4.1 Introduction

The Warren County protests were rooted in the Civil Rights Movement.

Organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ), which played crucial roles in dismantling segregation and advocating for voting rights, also helped lay the groundwork for future environmental justice struggles (UNC Library, 2022). These groups, alongside local activists, used legal battles and community organizing to advocate for the rights of marginalized communities.

After the announcement of the plans to build the toxic landfill in Warren County, concerned locals initiated legal and scientific challenges against the toxic aggression. After Warren County Citizen Concern (WCCC)'s legal efforts failed in 1982, they reassessed their strategy and enlisted the support of civil rights organizations that were experienced in nonviolent protests. Local Black leaders, such as Reverend Ben Chavis, brought in national figures like Reverend Joseph Lowery of SCLC, reinforcing the movement's connection to broader racial justice efforts (UNC Library, 2022). Both Chavis and Lowery were experienced civil rights activists. Chavis, the creator of the term "environmental justice," was the youngest Executive Director and CEO of the NAACP (Commission for Environmental Cooperation, n.d.). Lowery was known as the "Dean" of the Civil Rights Movement, being an active part of early civil rights movements until he passed away in his 90s (Elliott, 2020). The participation of these civil rights legends, along with others, expanded the movement beyond concerns over the

health and economic impact on a single community to a broader critique of the systemic environmental injustices faced by Black communities. The involvement of the NAACP, SCLC, and the CRJ was pivotal in reframing the struggle as a national civil rights movement.

4.2 Audre Lorde and Anger as a Catalyst for Change

Black feminist poet Audre Lorde's work emphasizes anger as a necessary response to oppression. In 1981, she delivered her keynote speech, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, confronting the racial exclusion within the feminist movement itself. She was addressing a room of mostly white feminists who, she felt, too often responded to Black women's critiques with guilt or silence, rather than engagement and solidarity. For Lorde, anger is not equal to hatred. Instead, she defines it as a source of insight, or a way to make visible the injustices that others are often unwilling or unable to name. As she states, "...anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification..." For her, anger exposes injustice and provides both the energy and the information needed for change. Lorde critiques the suppression of Black women's voices, arguing that the refusal to acknowledge their justified anger minimizes progress. She says, "Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger, potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change." Here, she calls for a refusal to deny anger. Her work suggests that anger is not merely reactive, but generative.

Building on Lorde's framework, philosopher Myisha Cherry coined the term "Lordean rage" to describe a form of anger that is not just personal, but transformative for everyone (Nast, 2021). Rather than a fleeting emotional outburst, Lordean rage is deliberate and sustained. It is virtuous and necessary to bring about a better world. As scholar Sara Ahmed explains, "...anger is not simply defined in relationship to a past, but as opening up to the future. In other words, being against something does not end with 'that which one is against.' Anger can open up the world" (Ahmed, 2012). In this way, anger becomes a horizon for justice, not just a reaction to harm. It is a declaration that something better is both necessary and possible. Anger is not simply a reaction to oppression. It exposes structural injustices and makes them undeniable. This form of anger draws upon the histories of racism and activism to envision and work toward a better future. Anger helps clarify the future. Lorde's work provides a framework for understanding how the women of Warren County channeled their rage into sustained activism. They were responding not just to toxic waste, but to centuries of racialized neglect and dispossession. Their anger, like Lorde's, was not irrational or excessive. It was grounded in lived experience, informed by a deep historical memory, and strategically directed toward collective change.

Dollie Burwell's own words reflect this transformation. She states, "I remember the exact date. I was first just totally feeling sad and helpless. I cried. And then I got angry" (Abdelfatah et al., 2023). Burwell, like Lorde, understood that feeling the anger was not enough. That anger had to be harnessed and directed towards collective action. Alongside the national and local activists, Burwell helped organize protests, demonstrating the power of sustained, organized resistance. This movement was not

simply about rejecting a landfill, it was about rejecting a system that devalued Black lives and communities.

The anger that fueled the Warren County protests was not just personal, it was deeply political. It exposed the structural racism that allowed hazardous waste to be dumped in predominantly Black communities while wealthier, whiter neighborhoods remained unaffected. The protests were carefully planned acts of civil disobedience, not spontaneous outbursts of frustration. They echoed the tactics used during the Civil Rights Movement, but women had a crucial role in organizing, strategizing, and maintaining momentum. Their anger was channeled into action, ensuring that their voices would not be ignored.

Burwell and other women involved in the movement understood that their struggle was part of a larger pattern of environmental racism. By linking their anger to a broader critique of racial injustice, they transformed the Warren County protests into a national discussion about who environmental harm truly affects. Environmental harm is a step in the right direction, but it is missing the key component of the gendered nature of the impacts. For the women of Warren County, their gendered roles shaped both their exposure to environmental harm and their response to it. Anger was not just an energy that propelled them into activism, though it did that as well. Anger is also a horizon to aim for. The activists in Warren County's work laid the foundation for future environmental justice activism, demonstrating that anger, when mobilized effectively, can lead to systemic change.

4.3 The Women of Warren County: Transforming Anger into Action

The protests in Warren County were not only about stopping a toxic landfill, they were also about confronting a long history of systematic neglect and environmental harm in Black communities. As Reverend Luther G. Brown told *The Washington Post* during the demonstrations, “We know why they picked us...It’s because it’s a poor county – poor politically, poor in health, poor in education and because it’s mostly black. Nobody thought people like us would make a fuss” (Russakoff, 1982). This sense of being repeatedly targeted deepened the community’s anger and shaped their resistance. Over the course of six weeks, more than 500 people were arrested in acts of civil disobedience, making it one of the largest nonviolent protests since the Civil Rights Movement. Many of those arrested were women, who not only led organizing efforts, but also put their bodies on the line to block trucks and draw national attention.

One of the defining moments of the protests was the arrest of dozens of demonstrators, many of whom were Black women. Burwell and others deliberately placed their bodies in the path of the trucks carrying contaminated soil, knowing that their arrests would draw national attention (Krauss, 2009). She recalled,

We had a protest where we made a conscious decision that only women would be arrested. Five women went to jail because we felt that not enough attention was paid to the fact that women and children were the most impacted by the dump. I don’t know why there are more women ... but since slavery, women have had to look out for their children ... This is the reality of my community’s church. The media could have defined this differently by showing the women and children who blocked the trucks. But the media wouldn’t focus on it ... we were viewed as ornaments rather than leaders (Krauss, 2009).

This act of resistance exemplified how Black women in the movement used their physical presence and voices to demand change, demonstrating that their anger was not just emotional, but political and embodied. It highlighted the gendered nature of

environmental justice. Scholar Michael Mendez defines climate embodiment as “a holistic understanding of the multiple harms that pollution and a changing climate have on human bodies in specific local settings” (Méndez, 2020). Women were not just passive victims; they were leaders at the forefront of the movement. However, their contributions were often overlooked, with mainstream narratives and even men within the Black community failing to recognize the centrality of Black women’s activism, which also demonstrated the intra-racial reality of oppression.

Burwell and other women recognized that they would bear the burden of the landfill’s consequences, stating that “We knew women would be affected more than men with a dump. If this dump leaks, women will be the caretakers. We already had a high cancer rate, we didn’t have a hospital, we didn’t have a pediatrician in the county, so we knew it would be women who had to get children to a doctor...” (Krauss, 2009). For these women, activism was about more than just environmental harm; it was about their positionality at the intersection of race, gender, and environmental injustices. Their fight reflected what Mendez describes as a form of embodiment in which “...the human body cannot be divorced from its environment and where environmental solutions cannot be isolated from the human body” (Méndez, 2020). The recognition that women, particularly Black women, would be left to embody the impacts of environmental racism added another dimension to their anger.

4.4 Conclusion: Reframing Environmental Justice as a Deeply Feminist Issue

The Warren County protests exemplify how environmental injustices are deeply gendered and racialized, which Black feminist scholars have long argued through their activism at the intersection of multiple oppressions. Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of the

“outsider within” describes this positionality of Black women in the environmental justice movement. She writes, “I now use the term *outsider-within* to describe social locations or broader spaces occupied by groups of unequal power... Thus, outsider-within identities are situational identities that are attached to specific histories of social injustice – they are not a decontextualized identity category divorced from historical social inequalities that can be assumed by anyone at will” (Collins, 1999). In Warren County, the women embodied this perspective. They were racially insiders within their own communities, aware of the health risks, economic struggles, and history of their town, but outsiders in the dominant environmental and political spheres where the major decisions were made about their lives without their consent. This dual position, along with anger fueled by historical knowledge and lived experience, allowed them to articulate injustices that others ignored or dismissed.

The Black women of Warren County, outsiders within, understood the environmental implications as more than just an issue of toxic pollution. They did not see the landfill as only a physical threat, but rather as part of a larger pattern of systemic disregard for Black life. While white-led environmental organizations focus primarily on conservation and pollution control, the women of Warren County framed their struggle as one of survival, health, and racial and gender justice. This broader vision set the foundation, reflected in the larger movement today, for the modern environmental justice movement, which explicitly links environmental issues to structural inequality.

By reframing environmental justice through a Black feminist lens, the Warren County activists demonstrated the necessity of an intersectional approach. Their work laid the basis for a more inclusive environmental justice movement, one that acknowledges that

the fight for climate justice cannot be separated from broader struggles for racial, gender, and economic justice. Their status as outsiders within allowed them to see the injustices that others refused to acknowledge and to transform their anger into a force for systemic change.

The Warren County protests were never just about PCB contamination. They were about a predominantly Black community standing up against systemic racism and environmental degradation, and the ways they differentially impacted members of the community based on race, class, and gender. The toxic landfill and incinerator were only an example of a broader pattern of environmental racism. The women who led the fight transformed their anger into action, using their lived experiences and community knowledge to mobilize against injustice. This resistance underscores the importance of Black feminist theory and understanding the environmental justice movement as a feminist issue.

If anger is transformative, what happens when we silence the anger of those most affected? The answer can be found in the long history of environmental, racial, and gender justice struggles. When Black women's voices are ignored or erased, the movements they help build risk losing their intersectional perspective, weakening their ability to actually address injustice at its roots. Silencing anger does not eliminate injustice, it allows it to grow. The Warren County protests remind us that anger, when harnessed, can be a force for radical change. The women who marched, organized, and were arrested understood this. They refused to let their anger be silenced.

Chapter 5 - Care

5.1 Introduction

The Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) is a powerful case study of how care can be used as a motivator in activism. MELA was formed in a predominantly low-income, Latinx community, seen as expendable by the state's plans to build a prison, a toxic waste incinerator, and an oil pipeline. MELA used motherhood and place-based resistance to protect not only their children, but the entire community. They centered care in contrast to capitalistic consumption to organize collectively against the environmental harm being framed as an economic opportunity for growth. Their work challenges conventional assumptions about who participates in environmental justice movements. MELA's activism reveals a feminist way of thinking that redefines motherhood as both deeply personal and political, capable of transforming care into a radical tool for resistance.

This politics of care was a direct reproach to the market-based logic offered by political leaders like Senator Robert Presley, who attempted to justify siting a prison in East Los Angeles by promising jobs, economic "development," and beautification of surrounding streets (Sahagun, 1989). Presley's argument states that poor communities should accept harmful projects in their neighborhoods for economic gain. MELA refused this neoliberal logic, responding that their community's value was not just monetary or found through development. They prioritized the health and safety of the community that was living there. MELA activist Aurora Castillo's retort to Presley's claim – "If Presley wants it so bad, he can put it in his own backyard" – captured the passion of their resistance (Sahagun, 1989). This statement was not merely NIMBY ("Not In My Backyard") in the white, upper-class, property-value-protecting sense. It was NOPE: Not

on Planet Earth. MELA's struggle was not about protecting property, but about protecting life itself. No human life should be seen as expendable over another.

5.2 Caring as Resistance

Drawing from Joan Tronto's foundational work, care can be understood as "everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto, 1998). Through a feminist lens, care is not just an emotion or individual act of kindness. It is "...the labor through which society is maintained and thrives" (Sneeden, 2024). It is about caring for everyone, across differences of gender, race, and class.

Rather than prioritizing collective prosperity for everyone like care, capitalism directly contrasts this by valuing human worth through productivity and contribution to market growth. Within this system, communities of color are often sacrificed in the name of economic "progress." As writer Caleb Sneeden states, "The problems of care work under capitalism are many but relatively clear: necessary, sustaining, potentially enriching work has been feminized and racialized, so it might be cast aside and profited from" (Sneeden, 2024). A politics of care that centers health and collective well-being is a radical challenge to capitalistic values of never ending growth, the production and maintenance of hierarchies, and extraction.

The stark difference between care and capitalism were made painfully clear at a community meeting held by MELA, where residents confronted representatives of several oil companies over a pipeline project threatening their neighborhood. As Mary Pardo, a Chicana Studies Professor closely involved with MELA, described the situation,

Another woman stood up and asked, 'Why not place it along the coastline?' Without thinking of the implications, the representative responded, 'Oh, no! If it

bursts, it would endanger the marine life.’ The woman retorted, ‘You value the marine life more than human beings?’ His face reddened with anger and the hearing disintegrated into angry chanting (Pardo, 1990).

This moment solidified the disposability of communities in the face of economic gain, which a politics of care rejects. The oil representative's reaction exposed the violent logic of capitalist environmentalism. Marine life mattered only because it posed a liability risk to the company. Human life, specifically poor and working-class people of color, was treated as expendable. The woman's question – “You value the marine life more than human beings?” – was not a rhetorical question. It directly displayed the hierarchies of value imposed by extractive industries and the economic system that upholds them.

By centering care, MELA directly rejected capitalism's prioritization of profit and development over human lives. Their organizing shows that care is foundational to environmental justice, and that environmental justice is a deeper political challenge to systems that devalue all life. Feminism, particularly feminism of color, helps us understand that care is not separate from politics – it is politics. It teaches us what solidarity looks like. Through MELA's story, we see that caring for one another is a radical act of resistance against environmental racism, mass incarceration, and the violence of capitalism itself.

5.3 The Women of MELA: Defending Community through Care

The activism of the Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) powerfully demonstrates how care can operate as a method of resistance. MELA was formed in response to proposed threats to their neighborhood, which reflected the broader pattern of siting harmful projects in poor, racialized communities. Many of the women had previous experiences with displacement, like Lucy Ramos. A mother of five children and a

spokesperson for MELA, Ramos was one of the 10,000 people displaced from their family homes in East Los Angeles in the 1950s to make way for a freeway (Sahagun, 1989). This is not only an example of displacement, but also of environmental injustice in itself. As scientist and activist Robert Bullard writes, “Transportation provides access to opportunity and serves as a key component in addressing poverty, unemployment, and equal opportunity goals while ensuring access to education, health care, and other public services. Transportation equity is consistent with the goals of the larger civil rights movement and the environmental justice movement” (Bullard, 2003). This previous, deeply personal experience motivates the women to protect their children from this happening to them. Unlike the logic used by developers and politicians, which prioritized economic growth and job creation, MELA’s resistance centered around protecting the health, safety, and future of their children and their community.

For MELA, motherhood extended to the entire community. Care was an ethic that connected families to one another through a shared struggle. They organized as a collective, building solidarity through their shared place-based experiences. MELA also broadened the definition of “motherhood” further than the biological definition. At one meeting, a young woman expressed her support for the group, but almost apologetically identified herself as a “resident,” rather than a “mother,” because she had no children. The mothers responded, “When you are fighting for a better life for children and ‘doing’ for them, isn’t that what mothers do? So we’re all mothers. You don’t have to have children to be a ‘mother’” (Pardo, 1990). Solidarity for MELA was both ethnic- and place-based, but most crucially, it was built through practices of care; through

motherhood, neighborhood protection, and mutual responsibility for each other's survival.

Their resistance directly challenged the capitalist and neoliberal logic being imposed on their community. When Robert Presley promoted the prison as a positive economic development that would offer jobs and beautify the neighborhood, MELA rejected this narrow market-based reasoning (Sahagun, 1989). They recognized that the prison was not just a building. It would be a site where Chicano men and boys would proportionately end up incarcerated. They understood that this incarceration was another form of racialized violence, not a neutral or positive development for their community. For MELA, the concern was not about the job opportunities or the aesthetics of new parks and streets, but about the deeper dangers of violence, surveillance, and loss of community life.

In pushing back against the prison – and other environmental dangers proposed in their neighborhood, MELA articulated a broader vision of care that fundamentally opposed the values of capitalism. They refused to accept the idea that economic opportunity should come at the cost of their families' safety or health. Their activism embodied a feminist politics where care was not peripheral, but central to political struggle. In saying "Not in My Backyard", and even more expansively, "Not on Planet Earth," MELA made clear that the issue was not about protecting private property values as it often was in wealthier, white communities. Instead, their activism was about protecting future generations.

MELA's activism also transformed everyday home life for families. As organizing became central to their lives, children began asking, "Where is the meeting?" instead of

“What is for dinner?” – a shift that reflected how care extended beyond the home into collective action (Sahagun, 1989). MELA member Juana Beatriz Gutierrez’s grandson recalls one of his first vivid memories as being pushed in a stroller during a protest march (Guzman-Lopez, 2025). Fathers, while often relegated to “babysitting,” were generally supportive, even as the women took on new leadership roles that challenged traditional gender norms (Sahagun, 1989). Many MELA members had originally connected through conventional maternal responsibilities, such as engaging with their children’s schools, attending PTA meetings, and organizing community events (Pardo, 1990). These roles, often dismissed as motherly tasks, became the foundation for a successful activist group motivated by mutual concern for their children’s futures. Their activism made the labor and knowledge hidden within domestic spaces visible.

MELA’s work also subverted hierarchical gender roles in other subtle ways. While the priest and nuns suggested that a father serve as president of the mothers’ group in order to get the men involved, it was ultimately the women who organized, strategized, and led on the ground (Pardo, 1990). One of the members of MELA, Erlinda Robles, reflects, “At the time we thought it was a ‘natural’ way to get the fathers involved because they weren’t involved; it was just the mothers. Everyone [the women] agreed on them [the fathers] being president because they worked all day and they couldn’t be involved in a lot of daily activities...” (Pardo, 1990). Robles’ recollection highlights how the women navigated social expectations while still maintaining control over the group’s daily operations and direction. As Mary Pardo has shown, MELA expanded the meaning of motherhood to include militant resistance, collective care, and a radical defense of community (Pardo, 1990). MELA’s work demonstrates how mothering, as both a

practice and identity, can serve as a powerful form of feminist and environmental justice organizing.

5.4 Conclusion: Reframing EJ as a Deeply Feminist Issue

In order to fully understand environmental justice, care must be framed with a feminist lens to be seen as a political method, not a just domestic task or personal feeling. Environmental justice is not just about pollution or exposure to toxins, it is about whose lives are considered disposable and who is systematically forced to live near environmental harm in the first place. Feminist theories of care help illuminate how environmental violence is often layered with gendered, racial, and class-based violence. In her work organizing domestic workers and caregivers, Ai-jen Poo reframes care as “essential infrastructure.” She writes that care is foundational to our economy and our democracy, yet it is undervalued and made invisible (Poo, 2022). Through this lens, care becomes a radical political claim. It insists that survival, health, interdependence, and mutual thriving are more important than profit, property, or the market.

When communities like MELA organize around care, they do so not just to protect individual families, but to defend a way of life. Their resistance to prisons, incinerators, and pipelines was grounded in the belief that the well-being of children, elders, and neighborhoods should take precedence over capitalist development. This is where feminism and environmental justice converge. Both demand a reorientation of what we value. As Robert Gottlieb has argued, environmentalism must move beyond conservation and regulation and into the realm of justice, equity, and care (Gottlieb, 2022). Capitalism extracts labor and disposes of communities. Care centers bodies,

health, emotions, and relationships. In this way, care becomes a challenge to the very foundation of the systems that produce environmental injustice.

Reframing environmental justice through feminist care politics, then, is not just a theoretical exercise – it is a call to action. It urges us to resist the frameworks that prioritize economic growth over well-being, to rethink what justice looks like, and to build coalitions rooted in mutuality and shared responsibility. Scholars like Tronto, Poo, and Gottlieb all help us see that care is essential to survival and transformation. Feminism helps us understand what care means and what solidarity can look like. Environmental justice, reframed through this lens, becomes not only about resisting harm, but about building the world we want.

MELA was more than simply a group of mothers protecting their children against environmental destruction. It was a group of women who came together under common ground of motherhood and shared understanding of care for their neighborhood. Their motivation went deeper than just stopping a prison or an oil pipeline or a toxic waste incinerator. They were defending their right to raise their families in a safe, healthy environment. They also made it clear that the worth of their community – or any community at all – cannot be measured in property values. These women refused the idea that low-income communities of color should be sacrificed in the name of economic progress.

MELA treated care as “essential infrastructure” and as the foundation for political struggle, rather than as a passive afterthought. They expanded the everyday labor of raising children and looking out for their neighborhood to a collective fight for survival in opposition to state violence and economic exploitation. When care is dismissed or

devalued, so are the lives of the people most impacted by environmental harm.

Sometimes the most radical action is caring and refusing to back down when your community is on the line.

Chapter 6 - Anti-Sexual Violence

6.1 Introduction

Standing Rock was a protest against an oil pipeline; but it was also a deeply feminist struggle against a long-standing colonial history of violence against Indigenous people. This resistance is deeply connected to the legacy of events like the 1863 Whitestone Massacre, in which the U.S. Army brutally attacked the Hunkpapa Lakota and Yanktonai Dakota people during the U.S. government's campaign of targeting Indigenous peoples who dared to fight back against the U.S. settler colonial violence and conquest (Minnesota Historical Society, 2012). The massacre exemplifies the early patterns of colonial violence against Indigenous women. Standing Rock is a continuation of Indigenous resistance against settler colonialism, informed by this history.

The Treaties of Fort Laramie (1851 and 1868), which established the Great Sioux Nation, laid the legal groundwork for Indigenous land rights in the region, yet the U.S. repeatedly violated these agreements, reflecting a persistent denial of Indigenous sovereignty (Hu, 2024). These treaties that allowed white property to replace Indigenous land were only arrived at after severe war and violence. These were wars and treaties of dispossession that undercut Indigenous sovereignty conceptually and materially. They not only aimed to destroy Indigenous connections to the land, – and therefore their nation and peoplehood – but they also displaced them and the lack of access to water made it more difficult for them to live on the land.

A small group of Native American women, self-titled “water protectors,” began the Standing Rock movement by setting up a tent on the proposed pipeline route and forming a prayer circle for the land (Taub, 2016). At the heart of the Standing Rock movement

was the sacredness of water – a core belief in many Indigenous cosmologies that connects women to water as life-givers and protectors (Smithsonian, 2018). The phrase “Mni Wiconi” (“Water is Life”) was more than a slogan; it embodied a cultural, environmental, and bodily defense of survival. This mantra embodied the battle. Zintkala Mahpiya Wi Blackowl gave birth at one of the camps, naming her baby girl Mni Wichoni to symbolize “...not only what this battle was about, but many other underlying issues, such as Lakota women’s fight against assimilation and colonialism” (Colorado, 2018). This baby symbolized the hope of what could be accomplished from this stand against the pipeline and her name lies at the heart of the protection of what is sacred. On top of this, the mother stated, “Having babies is my act of resistance; our reproductive rights as Native women have been taken away from us in so many ways” (Newman, 2016). One of the midwives, Carolina Reyes, added, “Sovereignty for Indigenous people is only going to come about through the support of women and women's health, in the same way that we defend and protect Mother Earth is the same way that we need to defend and protect women and the next generations of children being born” (Newman, 2016). The broken treaties are political betrayals and acts of gendered violence, as Indigenous women have historically played vital roles in maintaining sovereignty, both spiritually and politically. This movement was led by the very women whose existence and leadership challenge colonial structures of power.

6.2 Gender, Empire, and EJ

Settler colonialism can be viewed as a gendered and racialized project. It is a system that relies on the control and subjugation of Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous women. Shannon Speed and Lynn Stephen remind us that “gendered violence has always

been a part of the genocidal and assimilationist projects of settler colonialism. The racial and gender logics that underpinned Native dispossession...are structuring logics inherent to those systems” (Stephen & Speed, 2021). In other words, the violent removal of Indigenous people from their lands cannot be separated from the sexual violence and gender hierarchies that made such removal possible and justifiable within settler frameworks. As Tracy Rector, a Seminole filmmaker, states, “The way we treat the earth is inseparable from the way our society treats women” (Taub, 2016). Settler colonialism constructs Indigenous women as targets of multiple forms of violence because their bodies, roles, and knowledge systems threaten the settler state’s authority and legitimacy.

Environmental historian Traci Brynne Voyles builds on this logic, asserting that “remaking Native land as settler home involves the exploitation of environmental resources,” but also a remapping of Indigenous places as “wastelands” (Voyles, 2015). This physical and symbolic violence mirrors how Indigenous women’s bodies are treated under settler logic: as disposable, open for extraction and domination. Voyles draws from Deborah Bird Rose – an Australian-born ethnographer of Aboriginal peoples – to emphasize that Indigenous peoples “got in the way” of colonial expansion “just by staying at home,” because home, kinship, and place-based belonging are exactly what colonial power seeks to erase (Voyles, 2015). This erasure is deeply gendered. Colonialism not only disrupts territorial sovereignty, but it also targets familial and gendered dynamics that are core to Indigenous life. Gendered violence functions to disrupt Indigenous systems of governance, kinship, and land stewardship as roles are often filled or led by women. The act of staying becomes a radical form of resistance

against a colonial system that relies on displacement and erasure. The construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline is thus not only environmental, but also bodily.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism helps frame how settler colonialism racializes Indigenous women as primitive and eroticized. He contrasts the West's self-image as modern and superior with the backward and inferior way that the West viewed "the Orient" (Said, 1978). This idea of difference justified imperial domination because it reduced entire cultures to lesser beings, needing to be developed. Settler colonists viewed Indigenous women as such, dehumanizing them and enabling the violence of sexual harm. Indigenous women and land were connected through this view, both seen as objects to conquer in the name of EuroAmerican progress. This idea came to life in September 2016, when the pipeline's construction workers began to bulldoze sacred ground. When the water protectors, many of whom were women, arrived to try and preserve any land left, "...attack dogs were set on them, a painful reminder of similar occurrences during the Civil Rights era, though nothing that would surprise the long-suffering Indigenous population who see their rights being violated and ignored on a daily basis" (Colorado, 2018). This moment reveals the continuation of violent colonial tactics. Sacred lands and sacred bodies are both treated as obstacles to "progress." The use of violence against unarmed protectors defending the graves of their ancestors reinforces the colonial logic that Indigenous presence is inherently threatening because they refuse to leave their land. As Pearl Daniel-Means, co-producer of the documentary, *End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock*, states, "That's all we've ever wanted, is to be respected, left alone. A nation isn't defeated until the hearts of the women are on the ground" (Kring, 2021).

In an interview done with Priscilla Ybarra, Cherrie Moraga critiques the patriarchal logic of property, saying “Injustices started when we began to lose our relationship with nature and treat it just as a resource to be commodified. And with the ownership of land came the ownership of women...” (Ybarra, 2020). Moraga directly makes the connection between land and Indigenous women’s bodies as properties that were subjected to control under colonial rule. Within a system of colonial and patriarchal domination, they were turned into possessions. Indigenous feminist thought, as articulated by Moraga, rejects this logic by centering ways of thinking that honor land and kinship.

6.3 The Women of Standing Rock: Confronting Sexual Violence as an Environmental Injustice

The Standing Rock resistance was led by women as organizers, spiritual leaders, and protectors of water. *End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock* highlights how central women were to every layer of the movement, from establishing and maintaining prayer camps to shaping legal strategies to standing on the frontlines in the face of militarized police (Kring, 2021). Women, like LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, were instrumental in starting the movement. Allard’s connection to the land was deeply personal. Her son is buried on the very land that was threatened by the Dakota Access Pipeline (Goodman, 2021). That burial site, holding her child’s body, became both a sacred place of mourning and a symbol of what was at stake. The pipeline did not just threaten water, it threatened memory, kinship, and the sanctity of life laid to rest in that soil. As the film narrates, creation stories teach that people “emerge from the Earth,” and that “the Earth is their mother” (Kring, 2021). This cosmology links land, water, and body in ways that render environmental violence inseparable from violence against women.

The traditional governance structures of many Indigenous nations, which place women in leadership roles, were reflected in the resistance camps. Women were not just participating; they were guiding the movement through ancestral knowledge. For example, women led water ceremonies each morning, reminding everyone that the movement was not only a political battle, but a sacred duty to protect life. In an interview with Grandmother Mary Lyons, an Ojibwe water protector, she states, “In ceremony we are guided by our ancestors that have already walked on. Water has memory, and if we disregard the water’s memory, we disregard life. So within these prayers we talk to that water, as if it were the umbilical cord that connects both worlds because their spirit lives within ‘this body’ that is made up mostly of water” (Buchanan, 2020).

Despite – or because of – this leadership, women were disproportionately targeted. Protest suppression included strip searches, sexual harassment, and physical brutality – all extensions of settler colonial logics (National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, 2017). The presence of man camps, or temporary housing for pipeline workers, brought increased rates of sexual violence to nearby communities, echoing patterns seen in other extractive zones (National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, 2017; Taub, 2016). Indigenous feminist scholars understand sexual violence as a deliberate tool of racism, colonialism, and patriarchy, used to sustain gendered colonial domination (Hall, 2019). Speed and Stephen write, “the gendered violence of colonization was constitutive of the modern settler state, and the state is structured on that violence, at once generating it and normalizing it. Thus, gendered violence has always been a part of the genocidal and assimilationist projects of settler colonialism” (Stephen & Speed, 2021). At Standing

Rock, resistance was rooted in community and ceremony. For example, one day, women gathered to hold a prayer song circle near the pipeline route. This peaceful act was seen as an immediate threat. Every police officer within a 100-mile radius responded to a “code red,” resulting in the arrests of 76 people (Kring, 2021). Indigenous womanhood and spirituality were perceived as threats to state power.

Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzack add to this, noting that colonization for Indigenous women has meant more than physical displacement. Their traditional roles as spiritual leaders were stripped away. They write, “for Indigenous women, colonization has involved their removal from positions of power, the replacement of traditional gender roles with Western patriarchal practices, the exertion of colonial control over Indigenous communities, through the management of women’s bodies and sexual violence” (Huhndorf & Suzack, 2010). This history demonstrates that colonialism also functions through Western gender norms and the normalization of violence against women. This gendered violence is instrumental to the settler colonial agenda, designed to dismantle Indigenous systems of relationality and governance by targeting women as central figures in the community.

6.4 Conclusion: Reframing EJ as a Deeply Feminist Issue

The women of Standing Rock demonstrated that environmental justice is inseparable from the feminist struggle. As Indigenous feminist scholars argue, the ownership over lands and bodies is interconnected through gendered violence and perpetuated by settler colonialism (Whitebear, 2020). Mainstream environmentalism has failed to incorporate this and therefore failed to protect Indigenous bodies and land. Therefore, violence against the land cannot be addressed without also addressing colonialism and sexual

violence. This requires a shift in the narrative of environmental justice to center women of color. Standing Rock teaches us that environmental justice is about protecting water and land, but also about restoring bodily sovereignty, fighting sexual violence, and healing communities. It is not simply an environmental movement; it is an Indigenous and feminist one.

Traditionally, scholarship about environmental justice lacks the analytical tools to address the intersections of gender, race, and Indigeneity. While they may address pollution or climate change, they frequently overlook how these issues are experienced differently across lines of race, gender, and Indigeneity. An intersectional framework, led by Indigenous feminists, reveals that environmental degradation is never just about land. It is also about whose bodies, histories, and sovereignties are disregarded.

Moraga reminds us that Indigenous feminism is not an additive layer to environmental justice – it is foundational. It does not come after racial or environmental analysis, but rather reorients the entire framework. As Moraga explains, “Traditionally, women have resisted the idea that land is property” (Ybarra, 2020). This resistance is not symbolic. In resisting the notion of land as property, Indigenous women challenge the very foundations of settler colonialism. Moraga’s assertion reflects a long-standing political refusal to participate in systems that separate people from place, that extract rather than relate, and that see both land and women’s bodies as things to be owned, traded, and controlled. Within this framework, caring for the land is not a policy position. It is a sacred responsibility, entwined with justice for communities and future generations.

Standing Rock was more than just a struggle against a pipeline; it was a defense of life, memory, and sovereignty led by Indigenous women. The roles of these women have long been targeted by settler colonialism. The water protectors demonstrated that environmental justice is inseparable from the fight against sexual violence and the structures that enable it. Resistance must be rooted in both land and body.

This resistance demands a reframing of environmental justice as a deeply feminist issue; one that honors the experiences of women of color and recognizes that justice cannot exist without bodily, cultural, and ecological sovereignty. As a speaker in the *End of the Line* documentary states, “Every time we deny the earth the right to be who she is, we’re denying women all around the world the right to be who they are” (Kring, 2021). As long as extractive violence continues to threaten both the land and the lives of women, especially Indigenous women, the struggle for environmental justice remains incomplete. It is their stories, their voices, and their leadership that must guide the path forward.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

This thesis has explored the central question: How do the unique lived experiences of women of color position them to critique and challenge the systems that produce environmental harm in marginalized communities? Through an analysis of Warren County Citizens Concerned, Mothers of East Los Angeles, and the women of Standing Rock using the feminist theories of anger, care, and anti-sexual violence, this thesis has shown that environmental justice is a fundamentally feminist issue. Centering the voices of women of color is crucial for understanding how to address the roots of environmental injustices because these women exist at the intersections of multiple oppressions, giving them unique lived experiences. Focusing on the most marginalized voices and recognizing their leadership is of critical importance for any effort to achieve a just and sustainable future. Approaching environmental justice without including gender leaves out the vital experiences of women, particularly women of color, and the political analyses and strategies that emanate from their perspectives. This exclusion minimizes, and even silences, the important roles they have played in shaping the movement, along with the powerful ideas and strategies they have contributed.

The intertwining of gender and environmental justice means that the movement cannot fully encapsulate and address issues without the leadership of women of color. Today, the environmental justice movement must shift to a feminist lens in order to make progress and real change. Environmental justice is a deeply feminist issue, and we must center these experiences of women of color in order to fully understand and address the challenge of environmental racism and injustice. The movement is not just fighting for

the protection of the environment, but also to protect the bodies and lives of those most affected by environmental degradation.

Anger, care, and anti-sexual violence are not the only feminist frameworks that can be used to analyze these movements. They are also not limited to their respective movements in this thesis. The women of Warren County are not reduced to anger as their only motivator, just as the women of MELA are not only defined by their care work and the women of Standing Rock are not only limited by their anti-sexual violence activism. In fact, one could take each of these frameworks and apply them to the other movements. The analytical research that centers women's experiences and activism in the protests in Warren County, East Los Angeles, and Standing Rock Sioux Reservation can be applied to environmental justice protests throughout history. There are grounds for solidarity across individualized experiences in environmental justice movements. By framing environmental justice movements using different feminist theory frameworks, the narrative shifts to highlight the intersectionality of social and environmental inequalities.

Women of color have been at the forefront of environmental justice movements since their inception. They were more than participants; they also offered powerful ways of understanding and responding to environmental harm. Their ideas, drawing from feminist theories of anger, care, and anti-sexual violence, come from real, lived experiences at the unique crossroad of race, class, gender, and environmental injustices. These frameworks are not purely academic, they derive from facing the impacts of pollution, displacement, and violence in their own homes and communities. Because of this, these women are able to name the systems at play – like capitalism and settler colonialism – and offer solutions that are rooted in community and resistance. They are

also able to see the problems as connected, spanning beyond just localized instances.

There is a politics created by these women that can move across locality and across specific moments in environmental justice history, allowing people the possibilities of coalitions and solidarities through understanding.

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