

# From Maternalism to Activist Mothering

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## The Evolution of Mother Activism in the United States Environmental Movement

*This paper examines mother activism throughout the three phases of the environmental movement beginning in the late nineteenth century to ascertain the motivations and evolution of maternal activism. After discussing three models of maternal activism (liberal feminism, maternalism, and feminist care theory) and the debate around maternalism as a framing of activism, two recent theories are utilized to ground this reading of mother activism. The first, matricentric feminism developed by Andrea O'Reilly as a framework for maternal activism in the twenty-first century proposes that the three models of maternal activism are complementary and should be viewed together rather than seen as competing models. The second framework as described by Natalie Wilson argues that maternalism should be viewed on a continuum with activist mothering, a form of activism that is launched from mothering but is embedded in a political awareness and a broader context of social justice. Reading the history of environmental mother activism via the combination of these two frameworks enables documentation of the multifaceted nature of maternal activism and the ways in which the framing of mother activism has evolved over time from a solely maternalist framework to a multidimensional grounding. The paper provides support for the necessity and utility of matricentric feminism in understanding historic and current activism, and concludes that the evolution towards activist mothering began in the later half of the twentieth century.*

### Introduction

There is a long history of women, many of whom were mothers, playing a critical role in the environmental movement. This is not surprising since motherhood has often radicalized women to fight for social justice and the betterment of society (Rowe-Finkbeiner 150; Tucker “Motherhood Made

Me” 20; Wilson 232). Throughout history mother activists have utilized the symbolic power of the mother archetype to legitimize their activism, garner public support, and motivate others to join their causes. In addition to being used strategically, environmental activists across time describe being inspired by their roles as mothers to become activists (Bolen 15; Culley and Angelique 454; Logsdon-Conradsen and Allred 141-142; MacGregor 64; Pardo “Environmental”). Despite the salience of motherhood for some activists, when they use “a specific and deliberate maternal stance” their activism “is often not recognized as such or is dismissed as not ‘real’ activism” (O’Reilly 3). This is due to the fact that “women’s collective action has been traditionally treated as an extension of their domestic responsibilities rather than as legitimate political activity motivated by race, ethnicity, class, or economic concerns” (Prindeville and Bretting 4). Since it is seen as their maternal duty to take care of their children their activism is often assumed to be emotionally motivated and not located within a sociopolitical context. As Sherilyn MacGregor summarizes, mother activists are criticized for being a “very simplistic portrayal of women’s empowerment as a process that rarely involves consciousness-raising or self-reflective political resistance” (69). Today there “is still a cultural tendency to give mothers very little credibility and to sentimentalize their actions, to in effect, use the maternalist frame to limit and belittle activist mothering” (Wilson 249, 250). This is a double bind for mother activists. If they acknowledge the prominent role of mothering in their activism, their activism is discounted or minimized. However, if they do not, then they not only lose out on utilizing an often successful appeal to other mothers to join in their cause, but they have to adopt an inauthentic framing of their activism and silence their maternal voice in order to be judged “real” activists.

Prior to examining maternal activism within the history of environmental movement, the main crux of this paper, this issue must be discussed further since this cultural tendency to belittle activist mothering influences both historical and current understandings. Accordingly, the first section of this paper will briefly summarize theoretical issues related to understanding mother activism in general and the debate around maternalism, connecting these issues throughout to the the specific context of environmental activism. The second section will then go into the core of the paper, reading the activism of mothers throughout the environmental movement using current theoretical frameworks to ground this examination.

## **Theoretical Frameworks of Maternal Activism**

### *Liberal Feminism, Maternalism, and Feminist Care Theory*

Judith Stadtman Tucker discusses three theoretical frameworks for under-

standing the current activism around motherhood: “liberal feminism, maternal feminism, and feminist care theory” (“Motherhood and its Discontents” 2). Liberal feminism directly challenges dominant patriarchal ideology and emphasizes egalitarianism and individualism, stressing that everyone should have the same rights and freedoms. This theory “offers a vocabulary of rights, responsibilities, justice, equity, empowerment and identity” (“Motherhood and its Discontents” 2). Maternalism emphasizes women’s essentialist nature as caring and compassionate, women’s innate desire to improve the world of their children, and the transformative power of maternal love, and thus conforms to gendered beliefs about mothers as the best and natural caretakers. This framework “overlaps with what has been called ‘difference feminism’ – particularly the idea that women are ‘naturally’ or intuitively more empathic, less exploitive, and more closely attuned to relational ambience than men” (“Motherhood and its Discontents” 2). The third framework, which Stadtman Tucker advocates, is feminist care theory that neither conforms nor refutes the dominant ideologies of gender or individualism. Instead it emphasizes that the importance of caring for all people in our society, including children, is of utmost value and a collective social responsibility rather than solely a maternal duty (“Motherhood and its Discontents” 2). This theory “introduces the language of care as a public good” and “describes maternal care as a process that flows from a deliberate practice rather than emotional impulse” (“Motherhood and its Discontents” 2).

As I have argued elsewhere, these frameworks can be applied to describe different pathways to becoming a mother-activist (4). I argued these frameworks helped explain motivations for anti-violence mother activists, but they are equally applicable to environmental mother-activists. For instance, a belief in the right of all individuals to have basic needs of clean air and water, safe food, and access to green space can be framed within the liberal feminist framework’s focus on individual rights, equity and justice. In fact, this framework corresponds in particular to the environmental justice movement, a type of environmental activism led primarily by mothers that demands retributive justice for toxic exposure and environmental racism. This paradigm formed in the 1980s out of the growing awareness of the disproportionate amount of toxic waste and facilities in low income communities and communities of color; it is described as a fusion of environmentalism and civil rights (Pardo “Environmental”). As Dorceta Taylor describes, “the environmental justice movement fights the most vicious and pervasive kinds of inequalities in the country, including inequalities or discrimination based on race, gender, and class” (“Women” 41). This agenda is essentially liberal feminism applied to environmental issues.

The maternal framework’s reliance on mothers as natural caretakers and protectors of their children can encourage women to set aside traditional pas-

sive gender norms and use strong political voices to demand a safe and healthy world for their children. The role of maternal love/nurturance and the desire to protect one's child can be a powerful motivator and serve as rallying call around numerous environmental issues including protesting toxic landfills and phthalates in baby bottles. Maternalism can also be used strategically to appeal to a diverse group of mothers to come together around a common goal despite differences in race, class, religion, or political ideology.

Lastly, feminist care theory with its emphasis on caring for all individuals as a social responsibility and the need to protect and advocate for those with less power, corresponds to both local activism and global activism. The call to care for others as a public good can be applied to broad environmental agendas such as global warming, ocean perseverance, or sustainable market policies for both current and future generations. Further, the feminist care theory emphasizes the need for everyone to engage in civic activism and places the role of emotion (whether love or anger) as a valid and deliberate motivator for activism.

As one can see there is a great deal of potential overlap between the three frameworks, e.g., anti-toxic activism could be explained by one, or all, of the frameworks. In fact, "these three frameworks are more complementary than oppositional" and "they allow for a multitude of perspectives on any given motherhood issue" (11). The benefits of looking at the confluence of these models will be discussed shortly. However, due to the long and controversial history surrounding one of these models, maternalism, it is necessary to discuss this particular model of maternal activism more thoroughly.

### *The Debate on Maternalism*

As Andrea O'Reilly states, "if any debate has defined current discussions on maternal activism it is the role maternalist politics should or should not play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century motherhood movement" (O'Reilly 11). The main reason for this debate is that maternalism's emphasis on women's 'natural', or essentialist, nature as compassionate and loving caregivers corresponds to traditional gender roles and the cultural ideology surrounding 'good mothers'. Namely, the Western ideal that mothers are kind, warm, self-sacrificing, compliant, loving, patient, and peaceful, who tend to their homes and their children (the private sphere) and find their greatest fulfillment in this capacity. Scholars have argued persuasively and strongly on both the merits (e.g., serves as way to enter public sphere, is empowering, challenges gender norms of women as passive and apolitical) and pitfalls of maternalist activism (e.g., perpetuates dominant gender roles and inequalities, reinforces women's second status, emphasizes emotionalism) (e.g., Connolly 55; Hewett 40; Krauss 249; Merchant 141-151; O'Reilly 11-26; Rome 540; Stearney 154-157; Tucker "Motherhood and its Discontents"). Recent scholarship has emphasized that it is important to

acknowledge that maternal activism in itself disrupts gendered expectations. As O'Reilly describes, "maternal activism, in rendering the personal political, blurring the boundaries between the private and the public, and in inverting traditional gender roles, both disrupts and dislodges the gender essentialism (the naturalized opposition between the masculine/feminine, the private/public) that grounds and structures modern patriarchy" (24).

This debate on maternalism and essentialism has been particularly problematic for environmental activists since there is a long history of discourse about women's "privileged epistemological approach to nature" (Littig 133). Numerous theories discuss women's 'natural' connection to nature including how both are oppressed by patriarchy (ecofeminism), how women have differential access and control to resources (feminist political ecology), and that women have a unique understanding of nature due to a variety of biological and social factors (e.g., reproduction, work harvesting the land, caregiver role, feminine spirituality) (Hutner; Isla and Filan 465; Littig 14 and 133-4; Merchant 151; Mortimer-Sandilands 306). However, there are also numerous critics of this essentialism within ecofeminism (e.g., MacGregor 57; Mortimer-Sandilands 305; Reed 382; Stearney 154-155). For instance, the supposition that women are naturally drawn to protect the environment out of their essentialist caring nature ignores mothers who engage in activism that opposes environmental activism. For example, Maureen Reed found in her qualitative study of pro-forestry activists that these mothers justified their pro-forestry activism with the same rhetoric of caretaking of their families and communities, thus directly challenging the idea that 'social mothering' would inevitably lead to pro-environmentalist attitudes (382).

### *The Multifaceted Nature of Maternalism*

In light of this ongoing debate about maternalism, it is particularly important to discuss how maternalism itself is multifaceted. In her recent book *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Motherhood Movement: Mothers Speak Out on Why We Need to Change the World and How To Do It*, O'Reilly discusses the "challenges and possibilities of maternalism" and argues "that maternalism, as both politic and practice, is more nuanced and multifaceted" than many scholars propose (4, 15). Even instances that on the surface may appear to be purely maternalist have "a particular context (historical, strategic, political) that suggests something other than gender retrogressive goals" (Mortimer-Sandilands 307). For example, mother activists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may utilize the 'everymom' persona strategically to appeal to others to join their cause but a closer reading of their stories reveals how they have departed from "traditional ideas of motherhood" (Wilson 234 and 243).

Recently Wilson has argued that in the last two decades "activist mothers

have shorn the limiting maternalist frame” (231). She proposes that it is best to look at mother activism along a continuum with maternalist framing occurring in the earlier movements at one end and what she terms “activist mothering” of the early twenty-first century at the other end (232 -234). Maternalism and activist mothering are gradations on a continuum rather than disparate types, with two major points differentiating the two (234). First, maternalism uses essentialist ideas of women as the “natural” caregivers of children to provide the basis and justification for mother’s activism; activist mothering uses “motherhood as a launch point rather than a basis” (Wilson 233). Second, maternalist activists use their status as mothers as the justification and sole rationale for their activism; activist mothering may begin through their roles/identities as mothers but their activism is grounded in a much broader context of social injustices (Wilson 233).

Wilson developed this in reference to anti-war activism, but it is a useful framework to understanding the evolution of mother activism in the environmental movement as well. This framework allows for the valuing of the importance that many environmental mother activists place on their mothering role, showing how their role as mothers was the catalyst for the development of a political identity, but that they are not limited by, or to, this mothering identity. Rather, the mothering role serves as the mechanism that leads to greater politicized understanding of the situation and serves a vital role in sustaining their activism. Wilson proposes that the maternalism of earlier activists “can be read as a gestation period in which mothers nourished various budding forms of female activism” (234). Therefore, applying this idea of a continuum to the environmental movement would suggest that the earliest activists operated from a maternalistic framework and over time components of activist mothering began to develop.

### *Multifaceted Nature of Mother Activism: Matricentric Feminism*

In addition to acknowledging the complexity of maternalism, recent scholars have also argued persuasively that the activism of mothers is not limited by one theoretical framework (i.e., maternalism) and is best described as encompassing aspects of the different frameworks (O’Reilly 15; Tucker “Motherhood and its Discontents” 2). For instance, Judith Stadtman Tucker illustrated how the three frameworks “blend and mingle in the political construction of mothers’ issues” ( “Motherhood and its Discontents” 3) in three mothers’ rights groups in the twenty-first century. This corresponds to recent scholarship on environmental maternal activism, proposing that it is more multifaceted than the claims that it is solely essentialist or maternalist (Krauss 251; Mortimer-Sandilands 305; Reed 382).

In recognition of the multifaceted nature of mother activism, O’Reilly

proposes a new theoretical framework of maternal activism which combines maternalism, liberal feminism, and the feminist care theories into “a distinct motherhood politic and theory specific to its twenty-first century context” that she terms matricentric feminism (24, 25). O’Reilly continues, “the three models of motherhood activism—maternalism, equal rights, and an ethic of care—must be understood as complimentary. Rather than being seen as competing strategies for maternal empowerment, they must coalesce to form a specific feminist theory and practice, that of matricentric feminism” (25).

### *Purpose of this Paper*

Joceyn Fenton Stitt and Pegeen Reichert Powell call for a “move beyond critique and into other productive forms of analysis” and for an “activist agenda of reclaiming a past history of mothers with agency” (5, 6). This paper is a step towards answering these calls. The purpose of this paper is to read the history of maternal activism in the environmental movement in the United States using O’Reilly’s matricentric feminism as a theoretical framework and simultaneously looking for evidence of an evolution of maternalism along a continuum as proposed by Wilson. Thus the ways in which maternal environmental activism has conformed to, utilized, and contested maternalism over time is presented. Such a reading demonstrates that a matricentric feminist framework is ideally suited to analyze not just current mother activism but earlier activism in order to reveal its complexity. Furthermore, it demonstrates the ways in which environmental mother activism has changed over time from an unabashedly maternalist approach in the conservation movement, to one which began incorporating different models of maternal activism in the 1960s–1980s, and ultimately transition into the activist mothering of the twenty-first century, an activism which still incorporates the salience of the mothering identity but is not constrained by it.

## **The Environmental Movement**

### *First Phase: Conservation and Preservation*

According to Littig, there are three phases of the environmental movement in Western industrial countries (123). The first phase occurred during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, and consisted of preserving nature via conservation societies (123). This initial environmental mobilization focused on protecting flora and fauna (preservationists) and conserving resources (conservationists) (Littig 123; Taylor, “The Rise” 25), and consisted of primarily white middle-class activists (Pardo “Environmental”). The major role women played in this era has been widely overlooked by historians, but it is the women’s involvement that changed it from an elitist

male endeavor into a widely successful movement that protected hundreds of local areas, obtained anti-pollution legislation, protected endangered species and reforested watersheds (Merchant 109). Carolyn Merchant states, “nowhere has women’s self-conscious role as protectors of the environment been better exemplified than during the progressive conservation crusade of the early twentieth century” (109).

Although details are often sparse on women’s contributions in this era, similar to women activists for other causes of this time (e.g., suffrage or prohibition), the activists operated from an explicitly maternalistic framework and relied heavily on the symbolism surrounding mothers as nurturing, honorable, and pure to justify their activism and frame their demands (Merchant 128; Wilson 231). The need to adopt an explicitly maternalistic framework was particularly important during eras in which women could not vote and were constrained to the domestic sphere; it was their authorities as mothers and the accepted (and expected) role of caretaker that was the mechanism that allowed them entrance into the public arena and legitimized their demands.

These earliest environmental activists deliberately evoked these norms, describing their lobbying efforts for clean air and water and protection of land and wildlife as “municipal housekeeping” and “civic mothering” (Rome 535). Clearly they conformed to societal expectations and strategically utilized maternalism in their activism. However, since their activist voice was solely due to their motherhood status, “they had to play the patriarchal game that constructed them as domestic and nurturing, as women who put their families, and particularly their children, first” (Wilson 233). Indeed, their activism was “legitimated by the separate male/female spheres ideology of the nineteenth century aimed at conserving ‘true womanhood’, the home, and the child” (Merchant, 109). From the little information provided on these earliest activists, it appears that they seem to fall solely under maternalism, supporting Wilson’s hypothesis that earlier activists served as a “gestational period” for the more activist mothering to come (234).

However, it is important to note that there may have been mother activists that were operating from a more multifaceted framework that history has not recorded. For instance, Rosalie Edge [1877-1962], a mother of two, was known in her time as “the greatest woman conservationist” and “the most honest, unselfish, indomitable hellcat in the history of conservation” whose activism led to the establishment of two National Parks, the first preserve in the world for birds of prey, and the vital collection of data on raptor migration; however, she has been left out of most historical accounts (Furmansky “Getting Over”). This may be since she not only did not use maternal rhetoric or framing in her activism, but she adamantly refused to abide to the strict gender or cultural norms of her day. Edge was extremely outspoken in her criticism



of conservation organizations and exposed the personal interests and profit motivations of board members. For example, she penned a pamphlet describing how: “appropriations are all that it [The Biological Survey] is interested in, and it seems quite willing to wipe out of existence the wild life, which it was established to protect, if it can get appropriations for doing so” (Furmansky 129). In 1931 she “shocked the conservation world” by filing a lawsuit against the Audubon Society since “among conservationists, going to court to save nature may have been a precedent set by Rosalie Edge” (Furmansky 128). It was only recently through the work of Dyana Furmansky that the contributions of Edge have been reclaimed. It is important to consider that it is possible that the perception that ‘all’ mother activists relied on maternalism in this era is skewed by the absence in history texts of other similar mothers who defied convention and refused to perform their activism within the constraints of the maternal voice.

### *Second Phase: Anti-toxics, Anti-pollution, and the Environmental Justice Movement*

The second phase began in the 1950s and 1960s and lasted until the 1980s; it is described as the “phase of ecological movements” and included the formation of institutions, international policies, governmental initiatives, and a focus on how industrialization was connected to destruction of the environment (Littig 123). Women in particular played a critical role in raising awareness of local environmental issues leading up to the emergence of the ‘official’ environmental movement in the 1960s (Merchant 141). The birth of the modern environmental movement is widely associated with the publication of Rachel Carson’s [1907–1964] book *The Silent Spring* in 1962, which brought public attention to the dangers of chemical pollution and pesticides such as DDT and argued that such chemicals should be strictly limited using extensive scientific accounts to back up her claims (including data contributed by Rosalie Edge). Carson was a scientist and an ecologist who worked for 15 years at the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, becoming the Editor-in-Chief of all of their publications (Lear). Despite her scientific credentials she was discredited by the chemical industry and some governmental authorities and deemed “an alarmist,” but she continued to speak out (Lear). In 1963 she testified before Congress, and her work led to the banning of DDT in many countries and the landmark U.S. Clean Water Act (Cafaro). The modern environmental movement had now expanded its agenda to include human welfare rather than solely flora and fauna (Taylor “The Rise” 527).

Most of the women that were active in the environmental movement in the 1960s were white, well educated, in their thirties and forties, married mothers who lived in metropolitan areas and saw being active in the environmental

movement as a natural extension of their domestic sphere, i.e., as protecting “the sanctity of the home and the well-being of the family” (Rome 538). This theme was prominent in popular women’s magazines at the time, which ran articles about the need for women to protect their family from environmental threats (Rome 539). The similarity to the earlier three aims of the activists in the progressive era, i.e., “conserving ‘true womanhood’, the home, and the child” that Merchant described (109), is clear. However, the lack of emphasis on “true womanhood” as integral to environmental activism foreshadows the coming changes in maternal activism.

During this era environmental mother activists continued to strategically emphasize their maternal identities and operate under a primarily maternalist framing. For example during a strike against pollution from nuclear testing in 1961, marchers held photos of their children or pushed strollers (Rome 536). This act of pushing a stroller is a good example of the activists practicing what O’Reilly describes as role-playing “normative maternity in order to make possible their successful maternal activism” (18). Taking a child for a walk in a stroller is what is expected of ‘good mothers’, walking to protest nuclear pollution is not. As Adam Rome describes, “instead of cooking and cleaning, the women lobbied elected officials, picketed nuclear installations, and marched in the streets” (536). When one of the protesters at the strike was interviewed she said “this movement was inspired and motivated by mother’s love for children...when they were putting their breakfast on the table, they saw not only the Wheaties and milk, but they also saw strontium 90 and iodine 131” (Rome 536). This is a classic example of maternal nurturance being invoked to justify activism. Further, while by their actions the mothers were defying the traditional gender role of staying within the home, they were voicing how they were complying with gendered expectations.

Another example of this time is the work of Hazel Henderson [1933-]. Today Henderson is a “world-renowned futurist, evolutionary economist, globally syndicated columnist and consultant on sustainable development,” but her entry into decades of civic activism began when she was a ‘ordinary housewife’ and mother in the 1960s (Daikoku). It arose from personal observations—her daughter was covered in soot everyday after playing outside that required scrubbing to get off every night, Henderson herself had a persistent cough, and the air smelled bad (Daikoku). Henderson then made the personal political. Motivated by her worry about the impact of the pollution on her child, she began talking to other mothers at her local park and they formed Citizens for Clean Air in 1964 (MacAdam). The group devised a brilliant, and ultimately successfully, strategy (involving the FCC and network executives) to get air pollution indexes included on televised weather reports. After she “faced a lot of hostility from top executives at polluting industries” Henderson realized that

she needed to “sensitize not just the consumers, but the stockholders too” and convinced an advertising agency to voluntarily create a “truthful advertising campaign” about the dangers of air pollution; this campaign greatly raised public awareness and support (Daikoku). Henderson’s first civic activism, launched by her maternal desire to protect her daughter, ultimately contributed to New York enacting two air pollution laws and “shortly thereafter the United States Congress passed the *Federal Clean Air Act* in 1970” (Daikoku). This successful experience led Henderson to start “taking part in civic movements in other fields” (Daikoku).

Reading the initial activism of Henderson, who has now been an environmental activist for over four decades, shows how even in the 1960s it was more multifaceted than maternalism alone. Her entry into activism was her daughter’s health, but as Lalita Daikoku’s case study of Henderson indicates, this maternal nurturance expanded to include providing clean air to other children, i.e., into a feminist care ethic. As Daikoku states, “the simple desire to have her daughter and other children breathe clean air, alone gave her and the group the strength to endure the numerous persecutions and keep pushing ahead.” Henderson’s move beyond solely maternalism is also evident in an article Henderson wrote for *Parents’ Magazine* in 1966 discussing how her work as an activist was fulfilling on many levels for a “young mother”:

You are exercising the responsibilities of citizenship, and you are setting an example to your children, at the same time that you are working for their health and welfare. Best of all, you are learning firsthand about one of the most exciting frontiers of our growing knowledge and technology—how to manage our natural heritage so that it can support the needs of our increasing population, and at the same time remain orderly and beautiful, a fitting and joyous setting for future generations. (qtd. in Rome 536)

Her words show she finds it meaningful to work toward the welfare of her children (maternalism) and for future generations (a feminist care ethic); however, the emphasis of her response is on many other ways in which it is fulfilling. Her wording “best of all” points out her joy in learning about technology (a non-traditional gender norm of that time) and implies this is more rewarding than maternal care-taking. Altogether a reading of her work in the 1960s utilizing a matricentric feminist framework shows how her activism comprised at least two models of maternal activism.

Hazel Henderson also demonstrates how the motivation for her activism grew to include a much broader socio-political analysis. While examining the causes of the pollution in New York, she began “to investigate the links between

the economy and pollution” (MacAdam) since the “response of politicians and experts to her appeals for cleaner air was always the same: it costs too much money; we can’t do it” (Daikoku). According to Daikoku, “lurking behind such responses she often sensed contempt: What does a housewife like you know about the way the world really works?” Murray MacAdam elaborates:

Though her fledgling group attracted 20,000 members in a few weeks, she wasn’t getting much respect from those in power. “She’s a nice lady,” was the common response. “But she doesn’t understand the economy.” That steeled her resolve. She went to work mastering market economics and became a razor-sharp critic in the process.

This illustrates how once in the public arena, Henderson like many activists, began to lose her “naiveté” and develop a “politicized understanding of environmental issues.” (qtd. in Mortimer-Sandilands 311)

Currently Henderson is a recognized “expert on the economy and its social and environmental effects” and advocates revolutionary changes including changing how the global economy is measured (e.g., using the Calvert-Henderson Quality of Life Indicators instead of the Gross National Product) (Malon). While her activism has evolved from local activism to global economic environmental activism, and clearly is politically aware and grounded in economics, Henderson continues to cite the importance of maternal nurturance. In an interview in 1988 she said she began out of concern with her daughter but now continues out of concern for her grandson, “When he talks of endangered species, I say to myself: ‘My God, what are we leaving them? What on earth are we doing?’” (MacAdam). By reading her activism with a matricentric feminist framework, it is evident how maternalism and feminist care theory have blended.

In the 1970s the activism of another lifelong mother activist, Hazel Johnson [1935-2011] known as “the Mother of the Environmental Justice movement”, was launched. Johnson was a highly regarded activist known for her “relentless pursuit of environmental justice for low-income black residents” who received the President’s Environmental and Conservation Challenge Medal (“Crowning Women”; Miller; “Unsung Sheroes”). Johnson was spurred into action after hearing a news story about how her neighborhood had the highest incidence of cancer of any area in Chicago shortly after her husband had died suddenly from lung cancer (Getlin; Miller). After asking the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to mail her a complaint form, she turned around and made over a 1000 copies of it and canvassed the neighborhood, getting her neighbors to fill them out and document the health problems caused by the polluting industries surrounding their community of Altgeld Gardens (Getlin). In 1978 Johnson founded the People for Community Recovery (PCR) which over the

years worked to shut down incinerators, remove asbestos from housing, test the well water (which found cyanide and other toxins) and prevent a new landfill project (Miller; Ramirez).

Reading the accounts of Johnson's activism shows how intertwined the frameworks of maternalism, liberal feminism, and feminist care ethics were in her motivation and conceptualization of her activism. From the beginning, her fight was for the right of all people to have clean air and water and lives free of disproportionate exposure to toxins. Johnson has repeatedly demanded a focus on environmental problems in inner cities, saying for instance "It's all very well to embrace saving the rain forests and conserving endangered animal species, but such global initiatives don't even begin to impact communities inhabited by people of color" (qtd. in Ramirez). Although her focus on environmental justice (liberal feminism) is primary, the salience of maternalism is evident as well. In describing her perseverance and motivation, Johnson has said "we have to fight for our children" ("Voices") and "if we want a safe environment for our children and grandchildren, we must clean up our act, no matter how hard a task it might be" (qtd. in Ramirez). Again this fight for future generations aligns with feminist care theory and the belief that caring is a public good, or in Edge's wording, a civic duty.

Beyond this voicing of maternal nurturance as a motivator, Johnson did not publicly conform to essentialism or gendered norms of good motherhood. She refused to stay within her private realm and quietly wait for the authorities to do something, instead she questioned male authority and took a very active public stance. Johnson described herself as "outspoken" and "independent" and said that "the people who made this mess know me, and I won't give 'em a minute's peace" (Getlin); "I'll do whatever it takes to get it done" (Miller). Her determination and willingness to loudly demand that authorities be held accountable, as well as engage in civil disobedience, to achieve her activist goals is shown in these words:

Every day, I complain, protest, and object. But it takes such vigilance and activism to keep legislators on their toes and government accountable to the people on environmental issues. I've been thrown in jail twice for getting in the way of big business. But I don't regret anything I've ever done, and I don't think I'll ever stop as long as I'm breathing. (qtd. in Ramirez)

Johnson's references to legislation and the role of the government also demonstrate how her activism was located in a socio-political context and politically aware.

Similar to Henderson, Johnson educated herself to become more knowledge-

able, but she refused to believe that only this type of knowledge was valuable and in fact directly challenged the authority of individuals deemed experts by the government and demanded that the knowledge of the activists be heard and valued. Johnson stated, “We have educated ourselves.... We have not waited for government to come in and determine the ‘cause’ of our illnesses. We may not have Ph.D. degrees, but are the 147 ‘experts’ on our community” (“Voices”). Johnson did not rely on her maternal voice as the authority for her demands; the liberal feminist framework of social justice and ending racism and classism in toxic waste disposal was her primary rallying call. Thus this reading of Johnson’s work as an activist suggests that Johnson would fit under Wilson’s definition of activist mothering: Johnson did not use her mothering identity as the sole basis for her activism and she grounded her activism in a broader context of social injustices (233). It also again indicates the usefulness of using matricentric feminism as a framework for understanding the activism of mothers leading up to the twenty-first century since it enables a simultaneous examination of different models of activism.

As one examines activism later in the second phase, the ways in which mother activists strategically use their mothering role continues to move away more from traditional, acceptable mothering behavior. For example, in 1979 mothers organized a demonstration against the scheduled spraying by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) of a controversial herbicide 2, 4-D, in Oregon. But instead of pushing strollers or holding up photos of their children, the women used their bodies in protest. Pregnant women were among the 100 demonstrators who camped out and continually occupied the area until the spraying season was over. They brought handcuffs with them and told reporters that they would handcuff themselves to the trees and BLM would have to spray the chemicals on top of them (Merchant 159). In this way, these pregnant activists risked putting their unborn children in danger, a clear violation of ‘good mothering’, to enact their activism. This use of their bodies in protest is an example of what Wilson terms “embodied activism” and describes as a component of activist mothering (235). This again illustrates that mother activists of earlier decades were expanding on essentialist maternalism and moving towards, if not always fully practicing, activist mothering.

Two other well-known environmental events happened during the late 1970s that rallied mother activists: the Three Mile Island Accident (TMI) and the fight over the toxic dump at Love Canal. The TMI occurred in Middletown, Pennsylvania in March 1979 and was “the worst commercial nuclear disaster in U.S. history,” releasing an undetermined amount of radiation into the surrounding community (Culley and Angeliq 448). Mother activists formed grassroots organizations after experiencing health problems in their families with the goals of preventing the restarting of the plant and imposing

higher safety standards. As with earlier activists, maternal nurturance played a prominent role in their activism. Many “described their roles as mothers in explaining why they could not give up” and one stated “We’re only a few moms who love our children and we can’t change the world, but we can at least do what we can to make this right [and] make a difference” (Culley and Angelique 453-454). The TMI activists also used their mother role strategically but in non-conformative ways. For instance, one activist described using “a favorite guerilla tactic” where she would bring the children to meetings with officials and have them eat chocolate and play with squeaky toys to stress the officials; she described it as “one way of me stickin’ my finger up their nose, ya’ know?” (Culley and Angelique 454). She intentionally, and visibly, played on her role as a mother, but in a subversive way. They were not nicely dressed, well-behaved, quiet children going along with the perfect nurturing mother image but she intentionally riled the children up as a way of getting under the officials’ skin.

As was the case with Hazel Henderson a decade earlier, as the TMI mother activists took the public stage as political actors and transgressed the norm of mothers remaining in the private realm, they experienced sexism and their credibility and knowledge was questioned. Several of the TMI activists described feeling that they were not taken seriously and were spoken to condescendingly (Culley and Angelique 452). This also led them to break another gender norm by educating themselves in the male dominated field of nuclear technology. Their narratives also show how they were broadening their conceptualization of the environmental threat to consider power dynamics and question authority. They described how they “developed mistrust for the government and industry officials because of their activist efforts. They described their transition from patriot ... to questioning skeptics ... and a novel recognition of power asymmetries, one that was set up in favor of the industry and the government” (Culley and Angelique 456). By becoming more politically aware and placing their activism within a broader context they once more exhibited components of activist mothering in this second phase of environmentalism.

The Love Canal was another historic environmental fight, led by mother Lois Gibbs [1951- ] in Niagara, New York. In 1978 Gibbs discovered that her neighborhood was built upon more than 20,000 tons of hazardous materials and she connected this to the unexplainable illnesses her children had been experiencing since moving to Love Canal. Gibbs asked the government to clean up the waste and relocate the neighborhood but they refused, so she organized her neighbors and formed the Love Canal Homeowners Association. In contrast to Johnson’s downplaying of maternal rhetoric, these activists strategically conformed to maternalistic ideology, portraying themselves as housewives and intentionally using their identities as mothers to help them

politically (Dickinson and Schaeffer 191). However, their outward conformity to this ideology did not prevent them from using confrontational tactics. In fact, the members also engaged in behavior that was definitely not ‘motherly’ including holding two EPA officials hostage after learning that a report documented that the residents had “chromosomal damage”; they held them until the state capitulated and agreed to relocate all of the residents in 1980 (Becher and Richey).

Accounts of Gibbs repeatedly emphasize how her activism was launched by being a mother. As Anne Becher and Joseph Richey state, “faced with the health threat to her family and community, Gibbs transformed from a shy housewife to the antipollution activist now known as the ‘mother of Superfund’” (referring to the federal program that was created to clean up toxic waste sites. Her own words indicate how her mothering role was a catalyst. When asked what was her initial motivation, Gibbs replied:

There were actually two things. My son, and my daughter, who were both living with me at Love Canal, got very sick. Michael was a year old when we moved in and Melissa was born there. [Michael] was healthy before moving into Love Canal. I went door to door when I found out that the children’s illnesses were related to the chemical waste that was buried three blocks away and next to the school where my son was attending kindergarten. The Board of Education called me a hysterical housewife and told me that they weren’t going to move Michael and that they weren’t going to do anything about the problem. And I realized as a mom—and I felt I was a very responsible mom—that if I was going to protect my children, I only had one choice, and that was to find other parents with sick children and to close the 99th Street School. That was our first effort. (“POV Fenceline”)

This description fits clearly with maternalism and invokes the normative behavior of being a “good and responsible” mother. Gibbs however redefines good mothering to include civic activism, emphasizing how “as a very responsible mom” she had no choice but to agitate for change. Gibbs has also described her initial motivation in this way, “they made me mad, and it wasn’t a matter of I’m going to go out and do good. I was just furious and frightened” (“Lois Gibbs”). Expressing anger is in itself not a traditional ‘good mother’ attribute, although if it is the context of protecting one’s child then it is ‘acceptable’, but she also points out that her original intent was not altruistic. In an interview in 2001 Gibbs acknowledges how anger, directed in a broader political way, has continued to play an important role in her activism against toxic waste: “it just makes me angry that here in the richest country in the world, and the



home of the free, it really isn't so. The poorer you are, the more of color you are, the less you get from society, and it just really makes me angry" ("POV Fence-line"). Gibb's words and her continued prominent role in helping grassroots organizations around the country demonstrate that the focus of her activism grew to become a fight for the good of others (feminist care ethic) and that her activism is embedded within a social justice framework (liberal feminism) that considers race and social class. Reading the activism of Gibb from a matricentric feminist perspective enables the discovery of the complementary role of the three frameworks.

The work of Henderson, Johnson, the TMI activists, and Gibb were at the forefront of the environmental justice movement which grew in the 1980s. From the beginning mothers played a leading role in lobbying against toxic waste with most defining their activism as "part of the work that mothers do"; as one stated "if we don't oppose an incinerator, then we're not doing our work as mothers" (Krauss 252). Similar to Gibb, some of these activists described that the strongest motivating emotion behind their activism was not the socially acceptable one of maternal love, but anger. For instance, a Latina activist, when asked why she became a leader in the environmental justice movement in her community said, "because I got pissed. I came to a meeting and there were all of these people from the outside with their own agenda telling the people of color what was best for them ... and it got me very angry" (qtd. in Prindeville and Bretting). "You get so angry when you find out the government is not protecting you" stated another anti-toxic activist when describing what led her to take matters into her own hands (qtd. in Miller). As her words also indicate, environmental justice mother activists came to link the 'private' concerns of family health to a broader analysis of power dynamics in the 'public' sphere such as business and industry power. Similar to Gibb, Henderson, and Johnson, as activists came face to face with classism, sexism, and racism, and after learning how government and business are intertwined they "developed a critical perspective on sociopolitical events and came to understand power asymmetries in our culture" (Culley and Angelique 458).

Although there were many dedicated mother activists in the 1980s and 1990s, the stories of two prominent activists will be focused on to illustrate how using a matricentric feminist framework allows for exploration of how different organizations/individuals combine the models in ways that are the most authentic, and strategic, for themselves. Thus an example of a group (MELA) that conformed more to essentialist/maternalist ideology will be discussed followed by the work of another activist (Swearingen) that did not conform to gendered expectations about good mothers while still being motivated by maternal nurturance.

To begin, the Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) is a grassroots organiza-

tion often cited as an example of successful environmental justice campaigns. As Dianne Bartlow states, “the activism of the MELA represents a significant juncture and moment in time in which environmental justice was served up from the bottom in profound and significant ways” (781, 782). MELA grew to have over 400 families and in an eight-year period successfully worked against a state prison, a proposed toxic waste incinerator, and a proposed oil pipeline (Pardo “Juana Gutierrez”). Maternalism was strategically utilized by MELA and they were very intentional in linking environmentalism with public ideas about mothering (Dickinson and Shaeffer 191). In their weekly protest marches they wore white kerchiefs as signs of their commitment to nonviolence and used the familiar tactic of pushing baby strollers (“Mothers’ Group”). They also used maternal rhetoric as part of their outreach strategy to appeal to other mothers to join their cause, asking potential recruits ‘are you ready to defend and protect your family?’ (“Juana Gutierrez”). The motto of the MELA clearly shows their strategic use of essentialism: “Not economically rich, but culturally wealthy. Not politically powerful, but socially conscious. Not mainstream educated, but armed with the knowledge, commitment, and determination that only a mother can possess” (“Juana Gutierrez”).

One of the founding members of MELA is Juana Gutierrez [1932- ], the mother of nine children, who learned in 1984 of a proposal to build a prison near her house. Gutierrez “decided she had had enough” and “began knocking on her neighbors’ doors asking them to join her in taking action to protect her community,” ultimately leading to the formation of MELA (“Juana Gutierrez”). In an interview in *The New York Times* in 1989 she stated, “when the prison project came up, we were tired of them doing things without telling us. The reason I and other mothers became involved in this sort of thing was primarily for the children, for our families” (“Mothers’ Group”). Gutierrez’s words demonstrate the commonality among these activists of the motivation of maternal love; however, her discontent with official authority and her conscious decision to no longer be passively compliant are also evident. However even for this founding member of a group that intentionally invoked maternalism, this model alone does not fully explain her activism. Gutierrez locates her activism within a social justice/environmental justice framework, stating boldly in 1989, “We’re ready to fight against all the injustices that they try to dump on our community” (“Mothers’ Group”). This public fight for justice goes against not only societal gender norms but also the explicit messages she received in her family, where as a child she was told to ignore injustices and not get involved in community issues, and instead told that she should ‘stay in the house’ (Martinez; Pardo “Juana Gutierrez”).

There are similarities between Juana Gutierrez and the next activist of discussion, Terri Swearingen [1957- ] who has fought for decades against one of

the world's largest toxic waste incinerators, known as Waste Technologies Inc. (WTI), located in the low income Appalachian town of East Liverpool, Ohio. Both began their activism after learning about a proposed undesirable facility in their community, emphasized their desire to protect their children, defied gender norms and entered into the public arena to demand environmental justice, founded organizations, and won awards for their grassroots work. However, in contrast to the MELA, Swearingen did not strategically invoke essentialist rhetoric or maternalism as a strategy. Rather, Swearingen used the more agentic and controversial tactic of civil disobedience, which she believes is "an effective grabber of media attention for environmental rights" (Rembert). Her first arrest occurred when she organized over a 1000 residents in 1991 in a protest march against WTI, and she has been arrested over a dozen times since ("Terri Swearingen"). In 1993 she went on the Greenpeace Bus Tour of Communities Targeted for Hazardous Waste that visited 25 cities in 18 states and ended in front of the White House (Rembert). Swearingen describes the event: "we parked...right in front of the White House and refused to move. We chained ourselves to the vehicle and to cement blocks, and it took six hours to jackhammer us out" (Rembert). In this way, Swearingen follows in the footsteps of Hazel Johnson (jailed twice) and the pregnant protestors of BLM from 1979, and demonstrates the 'embodied activism' of activist mothering almost three decades ago.

The incinerator went up but her continued protests and her acts of civil disobedience garnered enough attention that the Clinton administration strengthened its regulations and Ohio Governor Voinovich halted future incinerator construction (Miller). Her acceptance speech for the Goldman Environmental Prize in 1997 provides an opportunity for a reading of her words from a matricentric feminist framework. Her opening words show how her mothering role served as a catalyst and provided her with authority, indicating the importance of maternalism:

I am not a scientist or a Ph.D. I am a nurse and a housewife, but my most important credential is that I am a mother. In 1982, I was pregnant with our one and only child. That's when I first learned of plans to build one of the world's largest toxic waste incinerators in my community. ("Activist Mom")

Her speech then goes on to demonstrate how her activism became embedded in a much broader analysis of society, political institutions, and human rights:

One of the main lessons I have learned from the WTI experience is that we are losing our democracy ... the definition of democracy no

longer fits with the reality of what is happening.... Public concerns and protests have been smothered with meaningless public hearings, voodoo risk assessment and slick legal maneuvering. Government agencies that were set up to protect public health and the environment only do their job if it does not conflict with corporate interests. Our current reality is that we live in a “wealthocracy”; big money simply gets what it wants. (“Activist Mom”)

Similar to Hazel Johnson, her words also show how she questions authority and demands a reconceptualization of expert knowledge. Swearingen states:

The third thing that I have learned from this situation ... is that we have to reappraise what expertise is and who qualifies as an expert... We have become the real experts, not because of our title or the university we attended, but because we have been threatened and we have a different way of seeing the world. We know what is at stake. We have been forced to educate ourselves, and the final exam represents our children’s future. We know we have to ace the test because when it comes to our children, we cannot afford to fail... This is a violation of human rights and common decency. As Martin Luther King said, “Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.” (“Activist Mom”)

As one can see from these excerpts of her speech, the importance of maternalism interweaves with equal rights. Swearingen calls for true democracy rather than a “wealthocracy” and specifically uses a social justice framework and the words of a famous civil rights activist, demonstrating the importance of liberal feminism. An ethic of care is also seen in her reference to the future of children, all children. Her words themselves flow in between the different models seamlessly, showing how for her they have combined and are intertwined exactly as O’Reilly’s matricentric feminist theory would predict.

To summarize, for all of the activists their entry into activism was instigated by a personal event that activated their maternal nurturance, and for the majority they utilized maternal rhetoric in their activism and their authority as a mother as the starting point for their entry into public activism. Upon taking the political stage they discovered that they could challenge male leaders, organize long term campaigns, strategize politically, and speak in public forums (Culley and Angeliq 453; Rome 540-1). While they invoked maternalist rhetoric to different degrees, their activism also generally utilized a liberal feminist framework or feminist care ethic, or both. Starting in the 1960s a fusion of maternalism and feminist care theory was more common, with the

inclusion of liberal feminism occurring more in the 1970s and 1980s. This gradual movement towards adding in other models of maternal activism on to the existing base of maternalism supports Wilson's theory of a continuum of maternalism to activist mothering. However, in contrast to Wilson's proposal that the full evolution of activist mothering occurred in the early twenty-first century, this reading places such an evolution in the later half of the twentieth century (231).

### *Third Phase: Local and Global Mother Activists*

Currently the environmental movement is considered to be in a third phase, which began in late 1980s (Littig 123). In addition to continuing the focus on environmental justice and the traditional goals of preservation and conservation, the current phase of the environmental movement is marked by the greater focus on global environmental issues and the global ecological crisis (Littig 123-32). Environmental justice continues to be prominent since communities of color and low income communities remain at a higher risk of exposure to environmental hazards within their neighborhoods. (Bullard; Elliott, Wang, Lowe and Kleindorfer 24). Mothers continue to take the leading role in local grassroots activism but have also joined in the global approach to environmental issues, and they utilize technology to manifest this environmental activism in various ways (Logsdon-Conradsen and Allred 143-145).

The power of maternal nurturance and the role of maternalism continues to be seen in the accounts of present day environmental activists. For example, actress and environmental activist Julia Louis-Dreyfus [1961 - ] said "as soon as I gave birth, I suddenly noticed issues in my own backyard. Motherhood changed everything for me" (Kennedy). Meryl Streep [1949 - ] also described her launching into environmental activism as related to motherhood, "I became interested in all these things when I was consciously feeding a baby and had a sense that everything you do is going to have an outcome further down the road" (qtd. in Gordon). Mother activists also continue to use maternalism and the ideology of good mothering strategically in their activism. For example, the strategic invocation of maternalism is expressed in the words of Megan Rice, who is currently lobbying for the Kid Safe Products Act in Maine:

I love my girls more than anything. I work hard everyday to do the best for them, but I can't do it alone. I need to know that when I pick something off of a store shelf that it doesn't have the potential to make my kids sick ... if I wasn't already committed to seeing this through, all I would have to do is look at the picture that was taken at the "Love ME" rally. I am speaking at the podium and my daughter ... is gazing up at me ... I look at it and think, "this is really what it's all

about. I have to do this. Welcome to the world of diapers, playdates, princesses ... and advocacy.” (Rice)

Her words outwardly conform to norms of good mothering while she is simultaneously engaged in a political act and lobbying the governor for legislative action.

To illustrate how environmental mother activists of the third phase are also seamlessly intertwining the three models of maternal activism, the final example is of a group of mothers who are using motherhood as a platform for global change, Mothers Acting Up (MAU). The purpose of MAU is to “inspire, educate, and engage the growing movement of mothers”; it was officially launched on Mothers Day in 2001 and has grown to have active members in 50 states and 24 countries (“History”). On their website they introduce themselves as follows:

Welcome to Mothers Acting Up (MAU), a movement of mothers\* stretching traditional mothering roles to include advocating for the world’s children. *Why mothers?* Because we’re already passionate, committed and potentially the most powerful lobby for children on earth. *Why the world’s children?* Because our own children’s future is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of every other child. Collectively, YOU, she, we, can create a world where every child—and the planet itself—thrives. (“About”)

\*mothers and others who exercise care over someone smaller.

These opening words perfectly convey how the three models coalesce. To begin, the role of maternalist framing is clear and maternal nurturance is used as a call to specifically focus on a mothering task, protecting children. However, the ideology of good motherhood is being defined on their terms, and they explicitly ask mothers to “stretch” out of traditional gendered roles and become political actors. The incorporation of the feminist ethic of care framework is evident in their appeal for mothers to care about all children everywhere while their goal of working so “every child ... thrives” shows the role of equal rights/liberal feminism. Further, although they refer to mothers throughout and call themselves Mothers Acting Up, throughout the website they also continually define mothers (with the asterisk and definition above) in a more gender neutral way, causing the reader to acknowledge repeatedly that males and other types of ‘mothers’ exist. This clearly fits with an ethic of care framework that values caretaking but does not assume that mothers are the only or best caregivers.

Perusing the website provides repeated evidence of this intertwining of the three models and the ways in which they are striving to foster politically aware

activist mothers. MAU strategically invokes the power of maternal nurturance and protecting children, but they then use this to educate mothers on structural, institutional, and political factors. They urge mothers to “measure the true impact of actions—our consumption, energy & trade policies and national security strategies—not only by how they affect *our* children, but children everywhere. My, your and her child’s future health & happiness depend on our ability to connect the dots today” (“Principles”). This intent is also clearly seen in the history section where they describe how MAU was founded by four mothers who:

while raising their children together—became increasingly disturbed by the choices their government was making and how those choices were impacting the lives and future of every child on the planet. They believed that mothers—the primary caretakers of children around the world—were potentially an incredible powerful lobby for children, BUT often didn’t see themselves as political, or hadn’t yet seen it as their role, their job, their honor to speak out for children. (“History”)

Their wording impeccably melds feminist care theory, liberal feminism, and maternalism in ways that simultaneously values mothering, demands action, and disrupts gender norms.

Their goal of directly challenging traditional stereotypes of mothers and creating politically savvy activists is further evident in the words of one of the founders, Beth Osnes, who said: “we want to have a seat at the table where people are deciding where we’ll go to war, how to lower carbon dioxide emissions, where our natural resources are going” (Horvat). Thus, MAU is a group that explicitly calls on the mothering role as a mechanism to launch activism while simultaneously challenging gender norms and grounding the activism in a multifaceted, global, and political context. A perfect example of activist mothering in the twenty-first century, activism which must be read through a matricentric feminist framework in order to recognize its complexity. The activists themselves intertwine the models effortlessly, and trying to read their activism from only one framework would provide an incomplete picture. MAU strategically utilizes the mothering identity to appeal to members, and presses them to do their mothering “job” and engage in civic activism, but their agenda is fully located within an ethic of care and liberal feminism.

## Conclusion

This examination of mother activism in the environmental movement clearly supports the utility and validity of O’Reilly’s theory of matricentric feminism

in establishing the multifaceted nature of maternal activism both currently and historically. Examining environmental activists own narratives from a matricentric feminist framework shows the confluence of models and allows for an analysis of the ways in which each activist may emphasize one model over another. The move away from a sole emphasis on maternalism and including other models and activist agendas is seen as emerging in the 1960s, with the major role of liberal feminism/equal rights emerging as a complementary theory with the anti-toxic activists and the environmental justice movement from the 1970s on. Further, the utility of looking at the evolution and multifaceted nature of maternalism along a continuum as proposed by Wilson shows how maternalism has gradually evolved over the last half a century to from a solely essentialist maternalist framing in the conservation period (with the exception of Rosalie Edge) into the activist mothering of today.

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