Women Who Lead: Environmental Activism and Gender Performance

by

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Introduction

“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe around us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.” Rachel Carson, 1963

Growing up on the Jersey Shore, my favorite pastimes included jumping through massive ocean waves and collecting shells along the shoreline. However, my parents always monitored me closely, worried that I might accidentally pick up cigarette butts, fast food wrappers, and broken bottles that littered the beach and at times were more plentiful than shells. While these items appeared to be merely an eyesore, the local news was constantly inundated with images and stories about the ubiquity of contamination in our oceans, rivers, and lakes. I lived across the street from a river, but I was never allowed to play in it because dead fish would frequently wash ashore. Frustrated and upset by the toxins that had ruined the natural resources in my own backyard, I grew interested in the environmental movement.

I was first introduced to Silent Spring, Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking book that sparked the modern environmental movement, in high school AP Environmental Science. I had never considered the environmental movement in scientific terms. To that point I had participated in a volunteer group that held bi-annual beach sweeps and watched with sadness as the headlines and images of environmental destruction dominated the media. Carson’s book revolutionized my world. Even though it had been written 50 years earlier, everything Carson discussed was still applicable. The depth of her language allowed me to understand the gravity of the problem of
pesticides. I felt a sense of urgency to protect nature from future harm, as well as a desire to explore the environmental movement and Carson’s legacy.

When I arrived at Wesleyan in the fall of 2012, I immediately began taking classes in Environmental Studies, my intended major. In a class called “The Environmental Imagination,” I was again exposed to Silent Spring, but this time I was asked to read it more critically and consider the politics and historical context surrounding it. This provided the groundwork for my interest in my honors thesis. I wanted to understand the lives of the women who had paved the way for me to follow my passions. I was fascinated by the different ways women were able to enter all-male spaces and achieve success. Environmental studies and conservation have historically been highly gendered fields; the majority of participants in the conservation movement in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries were women, but the individuals that dominated public discourse during this time were mostly men, including Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. Because of this disparity, I wanted to explore how women entered and eventually significantly contributed to the public discourse.

In this thesis I limited my research to Rachel Carson, Lois Gibbs, and Erin Brockovich as they were all involved in American anti-toxic activism and were pioneers in fighting corporations on behalf of the environment. I wanted to focus on how their work was affected and enabled by their different lived experiences. Because of the variety of their experiences, each woman’s story will be recounted differently: an examination of Carson’s life, an in-depth retelling of Gibbs’s quick
rise to activist leadership, and an exploration into Brockovich’s relationship with the media as a means of activism. As women they were challenged by hegemonic patriarchal systems of oppression upheld through heteronormative discourse. Reflecting on the power of this discourse, my thesis seeks to explore the ways in which these women sometimes strategically, sometimes unintentionally, used their gender as a means of combatting sexism and fighting for anti-toxic environmental reform.

**Performativity Framework and the Heterosexual Matrix**

In order to explore how these women were able to pursue environmental activism in a country that esteems patriarchal social and institutional structures, a framework that interrogates gender performativity must first be established. I am proposing that these women were able to overcome systemic barriers to champion on behalf of the environment by manipulating their performance of femininity. In the mid-twentieth century, feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (1949). Feminist theorist Judith Butler echoes that idea in her book *Gender Trouble* when she posits that gender is not innate but in fact is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance” (1990). These repeated acts form the basis of normative gender roles and behaviors that culturally define masculinity and femininity.¹ They not only create

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¹ In this thesis I am using the binary constructs of male and female. Hereafter, “man” refers to gender conforming individuals who hold dominating positions in society and use their power to maintain this position, and “woman” refers to gender conforming individuals who hold subordinate positions in society and are oppressed by men. These definitions are generalizations of the terms and while they do
ideas about normative gender behaviors, but create gender itself. Butler continues, “gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘presdiscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (1990). The production of gender by performative acts simultaneously produces ideas of sex and sex differences. Sex is the supposed “blank canvas” against which gender is formed through culturally ingrained behaviors. Yet, sex is also a cultural construction, “a performatively enacted signification” through which normative social rules create biological and behavioral differences (Butler, 1990). Discourse establishes social norms and practices which create the appearance of gender and concurrently, sex.

Gender is a frame through which sexual “differences” are given importance. It also provides the means for performativity to enable performance.  

2 The definition of sex is fluid—it can be anatomical, hormonal, or chromosomal. Scientific discourse creates the boundaries between the sexes, yet it is not uniform, even within the same cultural and discursive limits. The discourse agrees that the boundaries between males and females exist at all three junctures, but no one definition is correct. Due to the discursive differences in defining sex, as well as cultural constraints, it can be posited that sex is created in the same manner as gender. The circular process by which sex and gender generate one another through discourse and performances not apply to all gender conforming individuals, their historical usage serves to broadly define and differentiate between the two terms.

2 According to Judith Butler, performativity is the action of discourse that defines an activity, such as sexing a baby with the exclamation, “It’s a girl!” Performance is acting in a certain way and daily reproductions of discursively gendered actions.
relatedly enables the binary systems of male/female and masculine/feminine to mutually generate and institutionalize sex roles.

Masculinity and femininity exist in opposition to one another in both cultural discourse and practice, and this opposition is enhanced through interactions between the two. Heterosexuality, produced by “normative” interactions between the oppositional forces of masculinity and femininity, reinforces the differentiation through interactions. Butler writes, “the institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (1990). In Butler’s definition of gender and gender relations, heterosexuality grounds the binary conception of gender. Within this practice of heterosexual desire lies the heterosexual matrix, a cultural construction of specific gender norms that define normative heterosexuality and ideas about sexual reproduction. Normative practices of heterosexual desire construct men as the dominant players within the matrix and women as subsidiary players who must direct their performances in the service of the dominance/submission hierarchy. This hierarchy can be explained by the notion that “he is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (Beauvoir, 1949). In order for women to conform to heteronormative practices of desire, they create their performances around masculinity, repeating behaviors only appropriate for an Other. Submissive femininity norms establish the critical nature of masculinity through the reinforcement of “undesirable” behaviors unsuitable for the Subject.
The heterosexual matrix is enforced and reinforced by the repetitive daily behaviors that create and fortify gender. Through this process, men dominate public spaces and relegate women to inferior, private ones. If women occupy public spaces, their behavior is patrolled and their involvement is limited. Women’s role as inferior has old roots in human history—men were seen to possess the ability to transcend the earth and their bodies whereas women were tied to the earth and their physicality. Simone de Beauvoir posited that the binary of immanence and transcendence is related to the binary of emotionality and rationality; men are productive, rational thinkers and women possess all of the “earthly,” “passionate” characteristics that men disregard. She wrote that it is impossible for men to see women as rational and productive because, “for man, she is a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object, an Other through whom he seeks himself” (1949).

Inherent to the binary system is the idea of value dualisms, in which one side of the dualism is more esteemed than the other. For example, in the value dualism of man and woman, man is elevated over woman, and in the value dualism of culture and nature, culture is elevated over nature (Ortner, 1974). Value dualisms are the foundations of problematic systems of oppression. They are created and enforced by the pervasive cultural myths that men are rational creatures who are able to transcend their earthly boundaries in order to create culture and be active producers within society. Women, contrarily, are perceived as emotional creatures that are bound to the earth and serve passive, hidden roles in society. Beauvoir reasoned that “because man is transcendence and ambition, he projects new demands with each tool: after
having invented bronze instruments, he was no longer satisfied with developing 
gardens and wanted instead to clear and cultivate vast fields” (1949). Men advance 
society and not only create technology, but apply it for “the good” of the human 
population. Contrarily, emotional, earthly, inferior women are enslaved to their 
reproductive capacities and private spaces. While these reproductive capacities are 
“natural,” they are also “hazardous” and “contaminated.” Thus, women are not only 
denied access to esteemed social roles because of their emotional, reproductive 
nature, but also are excluded—their bodies are “toxic” due to their life-giving 
properties.

Within this gendered system that values masculinity, femininity and its 
reproductive capacities become by-products. The most “disgusting” by-product of 
reproduction is menstruation: blood is a powerful life-giving and sustaining force, but 
its monthly cycles are a source of feminine impurity, not strength. The monthly 
cycles of menstruation are reminders of the closely looming presence of death, as 
death is related to fertility. Beauvoir wrote, “the day man is born, he begins to die;” 
each cycle serves as a reminder of the fragility of life and the imminence of death, 
causing men to fear menstruation and its relation with death (1949). It has been 
suggested that it is on these grounds that men seek to oppress women in order to quell 
their fear of death and fertility. If women are impure and contaminated, then they 
must not be allowed in public spaces for fear of spreading the contamination. Simone 
de Beauvoir philosophized that, “in fact, it is not the blood that makes her impure, but 
rather, this blood is a manifestation of her impurity” (1949).
Nature has been deemed feminine and given “feminine” attributes, thus connecting it with women and toxicity. When nature is seen as feminine, it can be controlled and viewed within power structures as inferior for its reproductive capacities and its perception as oppositional to masculinity and production. Female bodies mimic earthly cycles of fertility and death, and because of their inability to transcend this bodily phenomenon, women are impure, toxic, and unworthy of societal production. As they were not only unable to transcend this reproductive capacity, but also because it was beyond their control, men used this as yet another justification to dominate and oppress women.

Since the “deviant” female body became “toxic” on a monthly basis, men not only used this as a means of inferiorization, but ingrained this inferiorization into oppressive social structures and power hierarchies. This inferiority “originally came from the fact that she was restricted to repeating life, while man invented reasons for living, in his eyes more essential than the pure facility of existence; confining women to motherhood is the perpetuation of this situation” (Beauvoir, 1949). Motherhood was thus a socially constructed means of enslaving women that, through discourse and repeated practice, became a woman’s true life’s purpose.

While the mother is a “toxic” woman, the process of creating life slightly amends the negative view of her sexuality. She is no longer the free sexual object wedged between fertility (active menstruation) and sterility (in between cycles), but a sanctified creature constrained by her husband and children. As a mother, “the woman was held in awe; through motherhood she has to be transfigured and
subjugated” (Beauvoir, 1949). Through the process of motherhood, the woman is transformed; her “impurities” and “contamination” are now second to her inferiority. Her body has already been conquered by man and transformed by child; therefore, her sexuality and contamination threat are less “dangerous” because of her enslavement to the private sphere. While motherhood is not a process of “detoxification,” it certainly lessens the stigma of “contamination.” However, this perception is still damaging because while the stigma of contamination is lessened since she is less “toxic,” the mother can thus more readily provide provisions at her own expense. The mother is self-sacrificing and even when she has been depleted and destroyed she will continue to give until she physically can give no more. For both mothers and Mother Nature, once all of her resources have been exploited, she has failed and is seen as unfit to serve her role as mother/Mother. As a failure, she can be completely denigrated and destroyed through discursive consequences or harmful practices. This self-sacrifice is applicable to both women and nature and why the relationship between the two is so problematic; it not only reinforces hegemonic power regimes, but justifies their exploitation.

The sexualized woman serves as a constant reminder of women’s fertility, as well as a tie to nature and its virility. Catherine Roach writes, “Earth and women alike share a “teeming” fertility and bountifulness that they offer freely to all offspring” (2003). Nature is most fertile and bountiful in spring when she exhibits these traits with beautiful, vibrant flowers and plants, buzzing insects, and singing birds. With everything in full bloom, nature is her “sexiest,” showing off her
reproductive capabilities and life-sustaining resources. Similarly, when women visibly display their sexuality, they remind men of their reproductive capacities and “raw passion.” Overt feminine sexuality is also a reminder of the connection between women and nature because their fertility is in full bloom. With their fertility and “resources” on “display,” their capabilities beyond reproduction are devalued. Additionally, the connection between toxicity and death is a mechanism for reinforcing their exploitation and the elevation of men over women and culture over nature.

In between the “toxic” woman and the subjugated mother lies the pregnant woman. She exists in a “pure” state because it is only once she is providing life and shelter to a developing child that she is able to transcend her bodily needs. However, while transcendent of her physical body, she becomes more connected with nature and the earth. She is not transcendent in the same way that men are able to surpass their physical nature to produce culture because she is the embodiment of nature and reproduction. She is destined to further the population, not contribute to cultural advancement. Yet, the physical state of the pregnant woman is “pure” because she is not menstruating and not yet producing life-sustaining milk for her newborn child. The “toxic” state of women, while dependent on her place in the fertility cycle, is a constant means of oppression and connecting women to nature and contaminated earth. The earth undergoes similar periods of reproduction and has also been exploited as a by-product of providing the materials for production and cultural advancement. Butler described earlier how women and feminine gender
performances exist in order to make masculine gender performances significant and powerful. Thus, the heterosexual matrix not only maintains male dominance and subsequent female subordination, but also the subordination of nature.

According to Val Plumwood, “the connection between women and nature and their mutual inferiorisation is by no means a thing of the past, and continues to drive, for example, the denial of women’s activity and indeed of the whole sphere of reproduction” (1993). The connection between women and nature emphasizes the separation of public and private spheres and provides the means for demeaning women and nature because of their life-sustaining biological abilities. The oppression of women and nature in order to support male dominance leads to the construction of feminine performances as secondary: “women must become, must ‘be’ (in the very sense of ‘posture as they were’) precisely what men are not and, in their very lack, establish the essential function of men” (Butler, 1990). The heterosexual matrix maintains normative power regimes through culturally established norms that oppress women. If men are vital to societal advancement and its unintentional effects of environmental degradation, then women, unessential to cultural production but crucial to care for the private sphere, are left to clean up the by-products of advancement—environmental pollution. Hence, women are seen as the “rightful” owners and fixers of environmental problems because of their caretaking role within the heterosexual matrix.

The heterosexual matrix not only creates gender through repeated cultural behaviors, but also produces the limitations surrounding the acceptability of gendered
behavioral practices. Butler argues, “the limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture […] Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of culture” (1990). While femininity and masculinity are limited to specific, discursively defined behaviors, there is a range through which gendered behaviors can be performed and still be considered appropriate. This range enables variations in gender performances, and these variations are what allow the three women this thesis is focusing on to succeed. Their manipulations of gender within the discursively defined ranges were very different, yet their conformity to certain performances of femininity allowed these agentic women to be successful in their struggles for environmental advocacy and anti-toxic reform.

**Manipulations of Femininity**

*Boundary Transgressions*

The first chapter will discuss Rachel Carson and her transgressions of typical “feminine” boundaries. At first glance, Rachel Carson appeared to be the prime example of a woman who conformed to femininity norms: she was quiet, petite, and pretty, with perfectly permed hair and appropriately conservative dress. Yet beyond that feminine exterior, she rejected normative standards of femininity in order to pursue her aspirations. Rachel Carson was a woman in science in the 1950s who represented an intrusion into the public sphere. Carson was determined to follow her passions and pursue a career in science, manipulating her gender performance to transgress discursive feminine boundaries in order to achieve this goal. Her deviance
from the confines of expected “pure” femininity facilitated her success because she was able to alter her behaviors to fit her goals.

Sociologist Jennifer Carlson theorized that given an appropriate context, women not only are capable of transgressing feminine boundaries, but desire to do so in order to engage in society in a meaningful way.

So while there are sanctions for women who exclusively perform masculinity, doing femininity without doing (or having done) masculinity seems increasingly less tenable, less desirable, and less (economically) livable; rather an ‘independent’ woman who can balance masculinity with femininity seems increasingly culturally validated in the US (Carlson, 2011).

Women who possess the ability to perform femininity while transgressing some of its more restrictive boundaries are able to be more self-sufficient in American society—they can engage meaningfully in public spaces and produce cultural advancements. However, these transgressions are viewed negatively by men because they threaten the integrity of the heterosexual matrix; women who perform tasks that were relegated to men compromise male dominance. It is due to transgressors like Rachel Carson who first paved the way for independent women to leave the confines of femininity that nonconforming feminine performances gained acceptability.

*Motherhood*

Chapter Two will examine the ways in which Lois Gibbs manipulated her performance of motherhood. Gibbs was a mother who fought for relocation for her community away from environmental contamination in the 1970s. In order to maintain the power structures within the heterosexual matrix, women were prevented
from entering the workforce because it would disrupt the regime in which men held all of the power and masculinity was the essential gender performance. Through the establishment of these cultural gender roles, women were seen as having a “natural” capacity for mothering. In her groundbreaking book *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow writes that, “women produce *themselves* through their own daily housework” (1978). Mothering is not an innate trait to women, foremost, because sex is a product of cultural discourse. Secondarily, the socially constructed behaviors of motherhood produce and reinforce it as an identity and gender performance.

Mothering is ingrained into performances of femininity, through which “the sexual division of labor both produces gender differences and is in turn reproduced by them” (1978). The heterosexual matrix reinforces differences between masculinity and production and femininity and reproduction. Heteronormative family structure is a means through which mothering becomes ingrained in discourse and “naturalized” for women. Chodorow describes how these processes reproduce performances of motherhood through “the regularized repetition of social processes, the perpetuation of conditions which require members’ participation, the genesis of legitimating ideologies and institutions, and the psychological as well as physical reproduction of people to perform necessary roles” (1978). Normative social structures reproduce performances of motherhood through the cultural institutions and norms that maintain the heteronormative matrix.

Lois Gibbs knew that she would be a mother and homemaker from an early age; as one of six children, she grew up performing domestic tasks, producing the
idea of mothering as a form of femininity in her mind (Konrad, 2011). Once she had a family of her own and noticed how her children were negatively impacted by the toxic canal under their school, she brought her performance of motherhood from the private sphere to the public one in order to fight for relocation away from the contamination. Gibbs’s entrance into the public sphere was not questioned because “it is possible for the subject to claim autonomy under sexuality and maternity” (Beauvoir, 1949). It also enabled her to manipulate her performance as a mother to communicate her ideas and achieve her goals of relocation and anti-toxic reform.

Sexuality

Chapter Three will explore Erin Brockovich’s agentic performance of feminine sexuality. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “society even requires woman to make herself an erotic object,” (1949) and that is what Brockovich did to further her goals. Men are not tied to their bodies and are free to conduct their (hetero)sexuality as they please; women exist to serve men and therefore must become sex objects in order to please the dominant actors. Feminine sexuality must be subservient to and contain the aspects of sexuality that masculinity eschews. Masculinity views feminine sexuality as mysterious, private, and provocative, something that should be limited to private spaces and exist only for the purposes of reproduction. While women exist as erotic objects, the ways in which they are permitted to perform their sexuality are limited: “A woman who teases male desire too blatantly is considered vulgar; but a woman who is seen to repudiate this is disreputable as well” (Beauvoir, 1949). The boundary between acceptable sexuality and unacceptable sexuality is very fine. Should a woman perform in an “improper” way, she will face discursive
and/or societal consequences, such as the devaluing of her intellect. Thus, the definition and perception of feminine sexuality is one basis for discrimination and oppression of women.

Foucault defines sexuality as “a socially constructed instrument of power” (1978). As Judith Butler proposed, gender and sex are social constructions created through discourse that enable heteronormative power dynamics and masculine dominance. Thus, sexuality and the power that comes from controlling or performing it creates a dynamic system within the confines of the matrix. The normative means of acting within the matrix involves the oppression of women and feminine sexuality, and discourse actively works to maintain this relationship.

Erin Brockovich’s performance of femininity was purposefully overtly sexual. She used her sexuality as a tool of power, manipulating her performance to suit her needs in the same way that Gibbs was able to manipulate her performance because of the acceptability of motherhood as a form of femininity. This manipulation of her sexuality contributed to her success in the lawsuit against Pacific Gas and Energy (PG&E) because her behaviors were not read as deviant. Therefore, she was able to covertly use feminine sexuality and the politics of the heterosexual desire to her advantage. The politics of the heterosexual matrix permits oppression and discrimination of women because “the goal of fashion to which she is in thrall is […] to cut her from her transcendence so as to offer her as a prey to male desires” (Beauvoir, 1949). Appearance standards are ingrained into femininity norms to subjugate women and prevent them from becoming rational producers. However,
when manipulated agentically, feminine sexuality can empower women to triumph against opponents and heteronormative rules.

When I first began writing this thesis, I was trying to figure out what allowed these women environmental activists to succeed in their efforts to bring toxic concerns to a broader public. Gender theory has been a useful framework for analyzing how they were able to do what they did. Using this performativity framework and applying it in three different ways, I will show the ways in which women are able to overcome the barrier of being the “inferior gender” in order to succeed as activists. I am using Rachel Carson, Lois Gibbs, and Erin Brockovich as examples for their contributions to anti-toxic reform and the environmental movement. These women have inspired countless generations of female activists. They deeply inspire me.
Chapter 1: Rachel Carson

Introduction

Rachel Carson was an environmental activist who championed for transparency, environmental justice, and regulation in the late 1950s and early 1960s. She first noticed the harmful effects of pesticides while working for the United States government, and felt obliged to bring awareness and justice to the environmental movement, specifically the fight against toxics and pollution. She fought against bureaucratic red tape and slander and overcame obstacles, including poverty and serious medical conditions, so her cause could be heard. Her work ushered in a new era of environmentalism and showed the world that women were equally, if not more capable than men at launching successful environmental campaigns.

Rachel Carson was more than an advocate for the environment, she was an acclaimed writer, scientist, and pioneer of the modern environmental movement. She succeeded in a time when women were not given opportunities to triumph. In this chapter I suggest that her ability to achieve so much in the face of hardship and opposition should be attributed to her rejection of normative gender stereotypes and her comfort with occupying traditionally “masculine” gender roles.

The Importance of Silent Spring

In 1962, Rachel Carson published Silent Spring, a book which meticulously described the effects of pesticides and other similarly harmful chemicals. This book immediately rose to the top of the bestseller list and received international acclaim. While it was lauded by scientists, government officials, researchers, and more around
the world, it also created controversy. *Silent Spring* exposed the chemical and pesticide companies and alerted the public to the negative consequences of maintaining their dominance over agriculture, food, and consumer industries.

Impressive on its own, *Silent Spring*’s publication is much more remarkable given the obstacles Carson faced. As a woman coming of age in the early twentieth century, Carson was expected to follow normative gender rules and marry young, have children, and become a housewife. However, she had dreams of pursuing her passions of writing and science and transgressed gender norms to follow her dreams and eventually become the “mother” of modern environmentalism.

**Historical Context**

Rachel Carson was born in 1907, a time when most women did not complete high school and few pursued higher education. Carson had no interest in conforming to this standard and chose to pursue a career in science. She rejected feminine norms and entered “forbidden” masculine spaces. Carson overcame educational gender barriers to obtain her master’s degree, as well as professional gender barriers that limited her career options. She also faced the gender barrier of having her work taken seriously. Yet, she was able to persevere and triumph over the men who sought to keep her tied to cultural gender norms.

First wave feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought ideas about women’s equality in terms of voting rights and citizenship to public discourse. Rachel Carson came of age when these discussions were most fervent, imprinting ideas of female ability and access in her mind. She was a teenager
when women received the right to vote which marked a cultural shift; though access to basic citizenship and rights would not come easily, women were able to transgress societal gender boundaries in order to gain access to new realities.

These cultural shifts not only allowed Carson to see the acceptability in transgressing gender boundaries to pursue her goals, but formative female role models further instilled this idea. Carson’s mother, Maria Carson, was a major influence in her life, imparting a love of nature and reverence for living beings in her daughter. Professor Arlene Quarantiello of St. Anselm College writes, “Maria Carson enjoyed natural history, botany, and bird-watching and possessed a great respect for nature that she passed along to her daughter. Carson’s mother also shared with her daughter a love of books and writing” (2010). Maria Carson possessed the ability to pass on her passions to her daughter because of the influence that mothers have in their daughters’ lives, as “the little girl, more dominated by the mother than the little boy,” is subject to her beliefs and interests (Beauvoir, 1949). Carson’s reverence for nature and passion for writing were viewed as “appropriately” feminine, thus, Carson was free to pursue them.

These activities were “acceptable” for women to pursue because they could occur in private spaces in and around the home. Those who lived in suburban and rural settings did not have to venture far from the home to observe and engage with nature, and women in urban settings could visit parks. Additionally, women were free to engage with nature because of their connection by the patriarchy: “Nature includes everything that reason excludes […] nature-as-passion or emotion, nature as
the feminine” (Plumwood, 1993). Women’s connection to nature and confinement to private spaces reinforces the perception that they are emotional.

Because of this relationship, Maria Carson, Rachel Carson, and all women after them were able to engage with nature without significant repercussions. Carson had dreams of publishing her writing at an early age, and published her first story, “A Battle in the Clouds,” in St. Nicholas Magazine when she was 11 (Lear, 1997). As long as women wrote about “appropriate” topics, such as nature, love, and family, they were free to write as they pleased.

Though these cultural rules exist as a component of the heterosexual matrix in order to maintain masculine dominance, “taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders” (Butler, 1990). Judith Butler posits that both gender and sex are cultural constructions, and applications of these constructions leave room for interpretation. “Female” sexed bodies do not always align with cultural constructions of gender, enabling individual differences between “women.” While “women” may be confined to a limited set of “appropriate” interests and pursuits, because of these individual differences, “women” may take interest in disciplines traditionally limited to “men.” Such was the case with Carson, who transgressed culturally gendered boundaries to pursue her passion for science.

**Emotionality versus Rationality**

The emotionality/rationality binary could not help but interfere with Carson’s progress: “She [the girl] has always been convinced of male superiority; this male
prestige is not a childish mirage; it has economic and social foundations; men are, without question, the masters of the world; everything convinces the adolescent girl that it is in her interest to be their vassal” (Beauvoir, 1949). Girls are taught from an early age that their primary purpose is to serve rational, productive men because they do not have the same abilities to produce rational thoughts and ideas in order to advance society. Science, the pinnacle of rational thought, was reserved exclusively for men because women were too emotional and unstable to handle the reasoning required to understand science.

Women were not only viewed as incapable of thinking logically, but their emotional nature, should they dare to enter public productive spaces, stood in opposition to reason and rationality. Because these values are created within a binary system, they are mutually exclusive. Therefore, if women transgress the boundaries between private and public spaces, then this transgression would interfere with cultural production as their “emotional” nature would prevent men from engaging in rational, productive processes. This argument formed the backbone of the heterosexual matrix as it was the means for maintaining “traditional” gender roles, and was also the argument used to justify the mistreatment of women who were able to transgress the matrix’s boundaries to enter public spaces. However, while men were quick to use the binary as a means of reinforcing gender norms, they ignored the fact that emotion breeds passion and fuels scientific discovery. The process of motivation itself deconstructs the binary between rationality and emotionality because it is supported by a combination of cognitive processes and intrinsic desire.
Accomplishments are the result of motivation, which cannot be achieved without the successful integration of rational thought and desire.

In the same way that motivation deconstructs the binary, Carson’s work and interests also deconstructed the binary. In her work for the government, as well as in her later books, she combined science and writing, two seemingly oppositional disciplines, to produce rigorous and inspiring work. Since gender and its associations are viewed dichotomously, Carson not only transgressed normative gender rules to pursue her goals, but also deconstructed these binary systems. In her writing “mixing science and emotion meant tempering science with respect, even humility before the mystery of nature’s unknown powers, and being conscious of the unpredictable consequences of human actions in the environment” (Sideris & Moore, 2008).

Carson used emotion in *Silent Spring* to let the science speak for itself and be understood by the largest audience possible without isolating them with difficult scientific jargon. The emotion embedded within the book also added to its readability and effectiveness because it paired poignant stories with hard scientific facts.

Contrary to what the male scientists and leaders of the time believed, emotional language is necessary when writing about science and nature. The passionate, poetic prose pays respect to nature without attempting to control it. Carson’s use of emotional language to refer to science and nature broke down the dichotomy of rationality versus emotionality. This was vital to her work because it represented her goal of creating a more complete, holistic perspective of nature and the fluidity between man and nature. As Judith Butler writes, “gender is the repeated
stylistization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance” (1990). Gender is not masculine or feminine, rational or emotional, but exists as it is performed within a specific cultural context. In order to follow her passions for both science and writing, Carson did not conform to the highly rigid norms of the heterosexual matrix, but deconstructed its dichotomous nature through her transgressions.

**Mary Scott Skinker’s Influence**

Carson attended Pennsylvania College for Women (PCW) near her home in Springfield, Pennsylvania. Her family struggled to finance her education, but with scholarships, they scraped together enough for her to complete her degree. At PCW, she met the first woman outside of her family who helped shape her future as a scientist, writer, and activist. Mary Scott Skinker was Carson’s biology professor and first role model in college. She was the one who pushed Carson to pursue her love of science. According to Carson’s biographer, Linda Lear, “Mary Scott Skinker was Rachel’s model, both of what a scientist was and what she herself might expect from a life spent in the practice of that discipline” (1997). Skinker showed Carson the importance of following one’s passions; she encouraged Carson to listen to her intuition and switch her major to Biology from English. Carson was torn; she felt as though her pursuit of science meant abandoning her passion for writing. The college administration was disappointed when she switched her major because “science was not considered a woman’s field in those days, and there were few opportunities for women aside from teaching. But a relieved Rachel was confident that she had made
the right choice” (Quaratiello, 2010). As a woman in science pursuing research instead of limited herself to solely teaching, Skinker served as a mentor and role model, showing Carson that it was possible to be a woman and have a career in science.

Skinker left PCW in 1929 to further her career and continue research at Johns Hopkins University, and Carson was eager to join her as soon as she was financially able (Lear, 1997). Skinker was formative in Carson’s life for her guidance, as well as for her performance of gender. Prior to college, Carson’s primary representation of performances of femininity was her mother’s love of nature and the outdoors. As a professor and later researcher for the United States government, Skinker not only demonstrated the possibility of performing aspects of masculinity, but encouraged it as well. Women had been contained in these traditional roles because she represents “the fixed image of her animal destiny, the life essential to her existence, but that condemns her to finitude and death” (Beauvoir, 1949). In order to be productive, men sought to contain reminders of their mortality and animality to private spaces, away from sites of invention. When faced with the arduous task of challenging gender expectations, Skinker showed Carson that women too possessed the ability to contribute to cultural advancement and did not have to limit themselves to patriarchal defined disciplines.

With Skinker’s encouragement, Carson went to Woods Hole, Massachusetts after graduating from PCW to gain field research experience. Woods Hole was the first place that she felt like she had made the right decision to pursue science instead
of English and writing. As cited by Lear, Carson described Woods Hole as a place where she “began to get my first understanding of the real sea world—that is, the world as it is known by shore birds and fishes and beach crabs and all the other creatures that live in the sea or along its edge” (1997). Her work brought her enormous fulfillment, something she had desired in college but had been unable to find. She had long been fascinated by the sea and was finally able to experience its splendors in person. At Woods Hole, she was accepted by the other scientists and did not have to alter her gender performance in order to conform to societal norms. After completing her research at Woods Hole, Skinker advised her to pursue a master’s degree. She had been keen to follow Skinker to Hopkins and learning of their master’s program in zoology, she enrolled as soon as she was financially able. Despite her excitement over the program and advanced research opportunities, she was viewed negatively by her male colleagues at Hopkins because of her gender; they made it difficult for her both in and outside of class, taunting her for transgressing traditional gender boundaries. Skinker paved the way for her to enter a highly masculine space of higher learning and productivity, and she was able to graduate and obtain her degree from Hopkins but it was not without consequence—her scientific abilities were devalued and she was not perceived as an equal.

**Government Work**

Despite the discrimination that Carson faced at Hopkins because she was a woman, and discrimination that would follow her for years to come, she was able to graduate with a master’s degree in 1932. However, due to financial instabilities, she
was unable to pursue further degrees. After graduation, Carson began looking for work but was overlooked for many positions because she was a woman. Positions of power, especially in science, were all held by men. Because men believed themselves to be superior, they denied women intellectual opportunities; thus, for women, “thinking is more of a game than an instrument; lacking intellectual training, even intelligent, sensitive, and sincere women do not know how to present their opinions and draw conclusions from them” (Beauvoir, 1949). Without opportunities to enter productive spaces and learn the basics of logic and presenting ideas, women are denied access to reason with men. This reinforces their inferiority because they lack the abilities that would enable them to raise themselves up in society. Despite the difficulties in obtaining a job, Carson’s persistence paid off as she was eventually able to obtain a position through Skinker’s advice and counseling with the United States government.

Carson had been in regular contact with Elmer Higgins at the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries during her job search, but he had been unable to find her a position. Ultimately, he realized that he needed a good writer for some temporary, part-time work and hired her. His “staff scientists couldn’t write in an engaging manner, and other professional writers didn’t have the necessary scientific background” (Quaratiello, 2010). Carson’s unique combination of skills and position at the Bureau were her key to success—by mixing science with writing, her transgression into masculine spheres was mediated by her feminine talents, softening the repercussions than if she had only pursued hard science.
At this time, women working in the government conducting scientific research faced a great deal of sexism. Mary Scott Skinker was verbally harassed and her upward mobility within the zoological division of the USDA was stunted by sexist male department heads. Skinker was tormented over being an “old maid” and her promotions came slowly, if at all, in her department (Lear, 1997). Skinker’s transgression into discursively defined “masculine” areas and performance of typical “masculine” behaviors did not go unnoticed; she was penalized for breaking the mold of gender performance through sexist harassment and discrimination. As a woman and an “other” in a masculine space, Skinker represented “not the limit of masculinity in feminine alterity, but the site of masculine self-elaboration” (Butler, 1990). Skinker was unable to reach her full potential as a scientist because the men in power only viewed her through the lens of the heterosexual matrix as a source of male desire and reproduction, “marked within masculinist discourse” and unable to transcend her physicality (Butler, 1990).

Luckily, Carson did not face the same biases and consequences because “while she had a scientific classification, her work increasingly led her away from field and laboratory studies and into public information and editing, where women were more traditionally employed and accepted” (Lear, 1997). This allowed her to escape the same penalties that Skinker experienced. By working in a scientific bureau of the government, her transgression of established cultural boundaries proved to be significant obstacle, but her writing prevented her transgression from stalling her upward movement and ability to advance her career.
Yet, Carson still faced consequences for choosing a career over a family. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “a woman alone […] is a socially incomplete being, even if she earns her living; she needs a ring on her finger to achieve the total dignity of a person and her full rights” (1949). Given the historical context, the limited career options for women which were “so unrewarding and badly paid,” and the view that marriage was “a more beneficial career than most,” it was socially unusual for Carson to forgo marriage for government service (Beauvoir, 1949). Her choice was a source of criticism from men who were threatened by Carson and her work. I will discuss this negative reaction later in the chapter, when I describe the reactions to Silent Spring.

Carson’s Early Books

While Rachel Carson intentionally transgressed gender performance boundaries of the heterosexual matrix by choosing her career over marriage, she unintentionally transgressed the boundaries by combining her love of science and nature with writing. It was a by-product of following her passions and living out her childhood fantasies. Carson’s fascination with the ocean began before she ever stepped foot out of Western Pennsylvania. Writing about the ocean was a natural next step for someone who spent her childhood reading stories about the sea and her young adulthood researching and conducting experiments on it. She wrote her first two books while still at the US Bureau of Fisheries, which proved to be a laborious process because “Carson was a slow, painstaking writer, preferring to revise paragraph by paragraph, sometimes even sentence by sentence, before she went on to
the next” (Lear, 1997). Her first book, *Under the Sea-Wind*, was published in 1941 but did not sell well. She partially blamed this on her publisher’s lack of publicity. Though the book was not popular, it allowed her to prove herself as a writer and show off her talents. Both the scientific and literary communities lauded the book. Her second book, *The Sea Around Us* (1951), contrastingly became wildly popular, received much praise and attention, and established her as a major literary figure.

However, despite the praise and attention Carson received for *The Sea Around Us*, she also faced sexist critics.

The sexism that greeted Carson and her sudden fame is not as surprising as its blatant crudeness is striking. Many male readers, and certainly the scientific community, were reluctant to admit that a woman could deal with a scientific subject of such scope and complexity. Almost every male who reviewed the book speculated about what a woman who could write such a book could look like (Lear, 1997).

There was a small group of men who were shocked to learn that a woman wrote such a fantastic book and blended science and poetry so beautifully. Her first book was more “feminine” in its subject matter and fell wholly into the category of nature writing, an acceptable field for women. Her second book included more scientific information, a clear deviation from “appropriate” feminine subject matters. However, while *The Sea Around Us* received criticism from men who felt Carson to be a threat to the heterosexual matrix and masculine dominance, her work was still largely categorized as nature writing, minimizing her transgression into masculine disciplines. Carson, accustomed to male criticism for her gender performance transgressions, was undeterred by this backlash and instead used it to fuel her
motivation to begin research on her next book. Lear writes, “the acclaim for The Sea Around Us did not bring Carson only honors and awards. Its enormous sale, not to mention the republication of Under the Sea-Wind, produced a royalty income that brought her financial independence and a measure of security for the first time in her life” (1997).

After the publication and success of The Sea Around Us, Carson quit her job at the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries to pursue writing full-time. She had other complicating responsibilities including taking care of her elderly mother and her sick niece, Marjorie (“Marjie”), who became pregnant with a child out of wedlock. Carson needed to hide her pregnancy from the public because of the shame associated with an out-of-wedlock pregnancy during this time period. Despite all of these personal responsibilities, Carson managed to publish a third book, The Edge of the Sea (1955), which became another success. This book was more demanding to write because it was more technical, and difficult to organize. However, because the writing process was so laborious, it illuminated her skill and prowess as a literary figure. Lear describes the effect of Carson’s third book: “With its publication and acclaim, Carson had proved that the author of The Sea Around Us was no ephemeral star on the literary horizon but a writer to be reckoned with now and in the future” (1997). Her early work received criticism because she was a female writer and the subject matter became increasingly scientific; however, this criticism paled to what she received for Silent Spring because these books did not pose structural threats to male dominance and oppressive institutions.
Gendered Attacks on Silent Spring

Silent Spring, which was published in 1962, brought Carson the most acclaim and controversy. This book was decades in the making: “Rachel Carson had been interested in the role of poisons in the environment since 1938, when she thought to write an article on naturally occurring arsenics” (Lear, 1997). Lear continues, “Carson was first brought back to the subject of synthetic pesticides in the fall and winter of 1957 by the controversy surrounding the USDA’s fire ant eradication program and by the Long Island suit seeking to halt the aerial spraying of private land with DDT” (1997). Carson was compelled to write Silent Spring because she wanted to alert the public to the dangers of pesticides and the widespread destruction that they cause; she felt they needed to be informed about the poisons they were unintentionally ingesting and absorbing. She had always felt a sense of obligation to the public; in her previous books she sought to teach the public about the wonders of the sea and the magic of the natural world, giving nature a voice. She intended for Silent Spring to provoke collective action and meaningful change in individual activities, as well as inspire legislation.

Carson and her publishers and editors knew that Silent Spring would be controversial before it was published so they took legal precautions to prevent libel lawsuits by chemical and pesticide giants, such as removing mentions of trade names in her discussion of chemical products (Lear, 1997). They anticipated enormous controversy because the book was a direct criticism of and call to fundamentally alter the chemical and pesticide industries. However, even with their precautionary
actions, anxieties still ran high over the potential for legal action and media blowback. Despite hundreds of positive reviews in local and national papers, there were dozens of attacks on both the book and Carson herself. The attacks fell into two categories: those on her gender, which implied a lack of credibility, and those on the information in the book, which primarily came from those with a financial stake in pesticides and the chemical industry.

The largest theme driving the opposition was the claim that Carson was unfit to write the book because of her gender. Attempting to bring Carson’s gender transgressions to public attention, “many of Carson’s critics, including some scientists, accused her of ‘emotionalism’ after the publication of Silent Spring, usually more or less making explicit reference to her gender” (Sideris & Moore, 2008). They wanted to publicize that an unmarried woman, already outside of the heterosexual matrix for choosing her career over marriage at a time when the housewife was the pinnacle of achievement for American women, further deviated from “acceptable norms” by entering masculine scientific spaces. They publicly attacked her in order to assert their dominance as the leaders of public spaces and as the only ones who should be capable of rational thought and conducting scientific research. Carson posed a threat to their role as the authority on scientific thought and reasoning, but also to the heterosexual matrix itself.

Carson’s critics fought back against Silent Spring primarily because it was a “scientifically sound indictment of the indiscriminate use of chemicals in the United States and the world” (Sideris & Moore, 2008). Additionally, as a woman without
institutional ties, Carson threatened the mainstream scientific community and conventional mode of producing scientific advancements. She was not legally or financially bound to any organization and this enormous freedom, in addition to her gender, terrified male scientists and researchers with institutional backgrounds and affiliations. In response to the book and the threat that it posed, critics referred to it as “science fiction” and called her “spinster. Communist. A member of a nature cult. An amateur naturalist who should stick to poetry not politics” to discredit her (Sideris & Moore, 2008). These gendered attacks were not only limited to newspaper book reviews, but also came over radio and television broadcasts; “Even the airwaves were filled with vilification of Carson, with critiques once again suffused with gendered notions of science and who does ‘good’ science” (Sideris & Moore, 2008). Directly referencing the emotionality/rationality binary, critics called her “hysterical,” “crazy,” and “out of line.” These critiques were consequences for transgressing into masculine spaces. Science, especially “good” science, was reserved for discursively defined, masculine performing men, not transgressive, feminine women.

Similarly, they sought to discredit her supporters in order to sway public perceptions against her. They “cast her supporters as emotional housewives and crazy organic gardeners who were irrationally opposed to scientific and economic progress” (Sideris & Moore, 2008). They used the same dichotomous logic to insult her supporters and portray them as “feminine” and contrary to production. If Silent Spring and Rachel Carson were emotional and halted scientific production with their erroneous information and feminine qualities, then her supporters did as well.
Carson was also attacked because *Silent Spring* marked a turning point in the environmental movement and a threat to contemporary economic and political systems. She “severed the tradition of only men having the big ideas and setting the agenda in the environmental movement. Not being the wife or the colleague of some great man, she was preserved from absorption into a man’s career” (Hynes, 1989). This meant opening herself up to personal attacks, especially on her political associations, because the book made her publicly vulnerable. *Silent Spring* was linked to Communism by her male opponents who preyed upon the fear present in the American public imagination. These political attacks came in response to a shortened version of *Silent Spring* that appeared in the *New Yorker*.

One writer wrote: “Miss Rachel Carson's reference to the selfishness of insecticide manufacturers probably reflects her Communist sympathies, like a lot of our writers these days. We can live without birds and animals, but, as the current market slump shows, we cannot live without business. As for insects, isn't it just like a woman to be scared to death of a few little bugs! As long as we have the H-bomb everything will be O.K.” (Sideris & Moore, 2008).

The early 1960s was period of tense international relations and constant vigilance of external threats; therefore, nonconventional or system altering behavior was linked to Communism. Carson’s performance did not fit neatly into the discursively labeled box of femininity, which caused opponents to align her with the Communist Party. Those who endangered the uneasy post-war peace in the United States were thought to be as dangerous as the threat of nuclear warfare from the Soviet Union, and thus were linked with Communism in order to maintain the current systems of the time.
Ironically, Carson employed Cold War rhetoric in her book to convince her readers that this was an urgent matter, and one not only affecting nature, but morals as well. Yet, her opponents chose Communism as a means of discrediting her in order to feed the mainstream American fear.

**Carson’s Performance of Sexuality**

Another way Rachel Carson’s opponents tried to discredit her was by attacking her marital status.

Even a profile of Carson in *Life* purporting to be a balanced assessment of the woman and her work could not overlook the implications of Carson’s sex, noting that ‘for all her gentle mien, Rachel Carson, 55, who is unmarried but not a feminist, is a formidable adversary.’ [...] and yet there is also in these words the implication that Carson’s unmarried status is itself an expression of some deficiency, that were she married none of this controversy would have developed (Sideris & Moore, 2008).

These attacks implied that had she had a husband, he would have been able to control her and put her in her “rightful” place—which was far away from the public sphere where she could call for the downfall of the chemical industry. The attacks also implied that because Carson forewent marriage, there was something fundamentally wrong. However, though Carson’s marital status was a threat to the heterosexual matrix, there was no concrete evidence to support attacks on the basis of anything besides non-normativity.

Historians have speculated that Carson chose to remain single not only to focus on her career, but also because she was a lesbian. During her time, homosexual relationships were illegal; thus, she would have had to keep her sexual relationships
out of the public eye. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “a woman alone always seems a little unusual. As an ‘erotic perversion,’ feminine homosexuality […] provokes scorn or scandal” (1949). She was already viciously attacked for performing “masculine” behaviors and engaging in science; to publicly display a homosexual relationship would have brought more than criticism and punishment, it would have mandated legal action. Therefore, given the cultural context, historians and scholars cannot make concrete claims about Carson’s decision to remain single.

However, despite the lack of concrete information about Carson’s sexuality and relationships, much speculation exists, especially regarding Carson’s relationship with Dorothy Freeman. Carson and Freeman first met on Southport Island, Maine in July 1953; they owned neighboring summer homes and quickly bonded over their love of nature, the shore, and cats (Lear, 1997). Their relationship quickly blossomed and they began sending each other letters a few times a week. In addition to these letters, they also wrote “apples,” which were secret letters they hid inside their regular letters and were not meant to be shared. They also had a term “strongbox” coded in their letters for when they wished the other would destroy a particular letter (Carson & Freeman, 1995). While these facts are not particularly compelling, the content of these letters, published in a book entitled, Always, Rachel, in 1995, leaves room for interpretation regarding the nature of their relationship. They frequently openly express their love for one another. Carson writes at one point, “I used to think, when I let myself consider the possibility that you might be left alone, how wonderful it would be if you could then be close to me, somehow, somewhere […] Darling, as
much as another person can, I am living these days with you. Because I love you so
dearly” (Carson & Freeman, 1995). Though the book is full of open proclamations of
their love, in a time when female homosexuality was designated as “a culturally
unintelligible practice, inherently psychotic” and discourse mandated “maternity as a
compulsory defense against libidinal chaos,” the letters may also only serve as
two examples of the support embedded in extremely close female friendships (Butler,
1990). While some scholars may speculate that her correspondences with Freeman
are examples of her transgressive sexuality, historical constraints and a lack of
concrete evidence make it difficult to say with certainty that she transgressed sexual
limitations.

Additionally, much of the scholarship excludes mention of her sexuality
because historians have chosen to avoid speculation on Carson’s close relationships
with the women in her life. Due to the fact that Carson was an intensely private
person and also would have been forced to hide her sexuality, academics cannot be
certain of the nature of her relationships. More importantly, “to reveal the essence of
Rachel Carson, it doesn’t really matter” (Lytle, 2007). While interesting, many have
chosen to avoid commenting on her sexuality all together because Carson’s feelings
of affection and adoration for Freeman “would have existed no matter what physical
intimacy the two woman shared” (Lytle, 2007). Simone de Beauvoir hypothesized
that, “a woman who becomes lesbian because she rejects male domination often
experiences the joy of recognizing the same proud Amazon in another” (1949).
While it is uncertain if Carson transgressed sexual boundaries, she did in fact reject
male domination and found happiness in her relationships with her classmates at PCW, Skinker, and Freeman. Her gender performance was based around actions that brought her joy: professionally, that meant performing a typically “masculine” career of science writing, and personally, that meant surrounding herself with other strong women who also rejected traditional patriarchal notions to some degree.

**Industry Attacks on *Silent Spring***

In addition to the opposition she faced as an unmarried woman performing nonconforming gender behaviors, Carson was also vilified because she was, as author Michael Smith coined it, a “discursive entrepreneur.”

Carson was a ‘discursive entrepreneur’ who used her own unique discursive position—she was not intimidated by scientific discourse about pesticide harms that provided the raw materials for her text production; she had legitimacy and credibility as a science writer as well as access to important distribution channels that ensure her texts would be widely disseminated; and she had the ability to compose prose capable of moving her readers to action (Sideris & Moore, 2008).

A woman who could utilize dense scientific research and remarkable writing abilities and spread her message to an audience willing to listen was threatening to men. Rachel’s “discursive entrepreneurship” was especially threatening to the chemical and pesticide industries due to their financial stake in widespread indiscriminate spraying and their fear of a mainstream anti-spraying movement. The industry attacks followed the other gendered criticisms that accused her of being “emotional” and a Communist, but also tried to refute her science research by proving the safety and necessity of pesticides. Monsanto distributed an article to over 140,000
individuals parodying *Silent Spring*, while the National Agricultural Chemicals Association appropriated $250,000 to the publicity department to fight against the book (Brooks, 1962). The entirety of the September 1962 issue of *CropLife* was dedicated to “extolling the value of pesticides.” Industry officials not only commended the use of pesticides for keeping a large percentage of the population from starving but also used Carson’s gender as a means of shaming her ability to write such a scientifically accurate book (Sideris & Moore, 2008). Despite their attempts to prevent *Silent Spring*’s increasing popularity and widespread distribution, the book and movement it inspired could not be stopped.

Rachel Carson was so challenged by the chemical and pesticide industries because she provided a “critique of the value system responsible for environmental degradation” (Richardson & Vanderford, 2005). Positive media portrayals of female environmentalists exclude women who try to dismantle the institutions responsible for environmental harm because of the stake these institutions have in maintaining positive images. These organizations, run by males, epitomize masculine dominance over society. The chemical and pesticide industries controlled a significant portion of the agriculture and consumer markets and also influenced scientific and government research and policies.

The patriarchs of agricultural politics and the chemical industry built their defense of chemical agriculture on the metaphor of ware, with insects as enemies, chemicals as weapons, and themselves as heroes. When Rachel Carson exploded the myth of agricultural security through chemical aggression on nature, the chemical industry, many scientists, and some politicians
saw a woman who had stepped into a world where she had no place and, they alleged, no competence. Theirs was the world of rationality, technicality, public policy, and science. Her rightful and most suitable world was poetic nature writing (Hynes, 1989).

Carson represented a major shift in these institutions’ place within society, and therefore, was targeted and shamed with criticism and personal attacks.

Though Carson was viciously attacked, ironically she was able to mediate these transgressions through the maintenance of feminine appearance norms. She put a great deal of effort into upholding an attractive, contextually proper outward appearance. Beautiful outward appearances are a norm of femininity as “dressing has a twofold significance: it is meant to show the woman’s social standing, but at the same time it concretizes feminine narcissism” (Beauvoir, 1949). As a renowned author, Carson spent time giving speeches and receiving awards, and in the public arena, she maintained a certain level of beauty. She enjoyed spending time getting her hair permed and picking out outfits, which is evidenced in her letters to Dorothy Freeman. She also “was conscious of her physical appearance and determined to rebut the perverted image of the female scientist” (Lear, 1997). She was cognizant of her transgressions into masculine spaces, as well as the cultural stereotype of the “masculine” female scientist; thus, her active maintenance of feminine appearance norms, while something she enjoyed, was also a means of proving her femininity to the public.

Both Butler and Beauvoir posited that gender is not something that one is but something one becomes through repeated actions. Due to the cultural stereotype,
Carson was aware that her appearance was confusing: “As a small, slight, soft-voiced woman, Cason knew she further confounded most people’s expectations” (Sideris & Moore, 2008). The public expected a woman tough enough to transgress hegemonic boundaries and take on the chemical and pesticide industries to “dress in a masculine way, out of imitation of males and defiance of society” (Beauvoir, 1949). However, Carson had internalized cultural ideas about femininity and appearance and, therefore, dressed in the same manner as her contemporaries, shocking her critics as well as the general public. Just as her writing had softened her transgressions into a scientific government agency, her conformity to feminine performance norms contributed to her success because it softened the impact of her transgressive behaviors.

**Ecofeminism and Silent Spring**

Value dualisms, which proliferate systems that devalue women as successful and rational, also enable the systemic destruction of nature through nature’s inferiorization.

Ecofeminism argues that patriarchy, the domination of women by men, has been associated with the domination of nature. Men have justified their attempts to dominate nature by associating it with women, objectifying women and nature by placing them in category of ‘other.’ Patriarchy also involves a denial of human links with the natural world and of men’s feminine side (Hofrichter, 1993). The main tenet of ecofeminism argues that women and nature have been “otherized” by the patriarchy in order to justify their mistreatment and domination of them over the last few millennia. The rationalization for the propagation of hegemonic systems of power by the chemical and pesticide companies relied on the rhetoric of nature as
the Other and something necessitating control and domination by men. Innate in this logic is the idea that without man’s control, nature would run wild and overtake “civilization.” This same logic was applied to women, specifically, Rachel Carson. Her critics called her “too emotional,” thus aligning her with nature and femininity as something to be controlled and subdued by “rational” men. Though she was attacked by the patriarchy, her femininity and willingness to transgress boundaries made her the perfect person to write *Silent Spring* and advocate on behalf on the environment.

Environmental activism has a long history of female involvement since women were prevented from engaging in the scientific, more “rational” aspects of environmentalism. Women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created organizations devoted to birding, gardening, and social action. Caroline Bartlett and Mary Elizabeth McDowell championed for better sanitation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, organizing women’s action groups along the way. Ellen Swallow Richards was the first female student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and created a woman’s lab at the school. She contributed significantly to food, water, air, and consumer product testing, as well as the field of sanitary chemistry, though also faced discrimination as a woman in science (Breton, 1998). Carson’s initial forays into environmentalism were not viewed as transgressions; in the same way that women were allowed to engage in nature writing because of their connection to nature through reproduction and their “inability” to productively advance society, women had been able to be active in environmentalism and conservation. However, once Carson left behind pure nature writing to begin
exploring the scientific aspects of environmentalism, she “wrongfully” transgressed onto masculine, public, scientific spaces.

Through her boundary transgressions, Carson’s work made an important feminist statement, though she never referred to herself as a feminist. When questioned about her views on the feminist movement and gender equality in an interview with Life Magazine she replied, “I’m not interested in things done by women or by men but in things done by people” (Lear, 1997). This statement illustrates a connection to androgynous feminism—feminism as overcoming the confines of the heterosexual matrix and not making decisions based on culturally constructed ideas of gender. Though her beliefs aligned more closely with androgynous feminism and gender blindness, she served as an example of liberal feminism, which argues that “women were equally capable of rational thought and deserved to be included in all aspects of society” (Bromley, 2012). Liberal feminism, popularized by Mary Wollstonecraft in the late eighteenth century, formed the basis of First Wave Feminism, which earned mainstream attention during Carson’s youth. Carson chose to surround herself with other strong women, such as Mary Scott Skinker and her editor, Marie Rodell, who served as examples of female achievement. Carson’s achievements and beliefs were a combination of liberal and androgynous feminism: a forward thinker, she was interested in people’s achievements, not those exclusively held by one category of gendered bodies or another, but more appropriately given the cultural context, she believed in and supported women’s equality in “masculine” spaces.
Carson’s Success

Though her performance of femininity and transgression of its boundaries led her to unintentionally serve as a feminist symbol and anger men who believed in the integrity of the heterosexual matrix, she also received enormous support from government officials, fellow writers, scientists, researchers, and individuals. Carson’s opponents were largely those who were threatened by her and her performance of aspects of masculinity, while her supporters were a much larger group that was impressed by the scope and depth of her work. They did not perceive that her performance of femininity detracted from her ability to write and engage with science meaningfully. She received hundreds of letters from the international science community lauding Silent Spring and her abilities to convey an important message with such finesse. There were also hundreds of Letters to the Editor from concerned citizens who read Silent Spring and were moved to action. These letters were one of the most meaningful signs of Silent Spring’s success. She intended to cultivate a public sense of duty to act and to create awareness of the dangers of pesticides. In addition to the encouragement and defense of the book from the scientific community and the public, Carson also received letters of support from government officials. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas was one of her biggest allies. He called it “the most revolutionary book since Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and urged the nation to read it (Lear, 1997). Paul Knight, Secretary of the Department of the Interior, was another powerful ally of Carson and Silent Spring. In a letter to her he wrote, “anything I may be able to do will be done in relative anonymity […] But under such a system we can often be very effective in matters of public policy without becoming directly
involved” (Knight, 1962). As an esteemed government official, Knight could not officially assist with her project, however, he was able to pass along information and help push regulatory legislation along under the veil of anonymity. Her supporters were undeterred by the virulent criticism because they believed in Silent Spring and Carson’s ability to create and lead a new movement in environmentalism, regardless of her gender performance.

Rachel Carson published four award-winning books including Silent Spring, which brought the environmental movement to the public agenda. She created a new wave of environmentalism by showing the link between anthropogenic actions and environmental destruction. She was one of the first to include humans as part of the environment and not as a separate entity. She encouraged the public to learn about the impact of chemicals on the environment, to take a stand, and to engage with the movement to create a healthier, safer world. For her work, Carson received dozens of awards and medals, international recognition, and government attention to begin creating change at the highest level to complement grassroots changes. These accomplishments are incredible for anyone, let alone a woman who was publicly vilified by scientists, government officials, and the chemical and pesticide industries for transgressing femininity boundaries to engage successfully and meaningfully with science. She was consistently presented with obstacles. She became the caretaker of Marjie’s son, Roger, in 1957 after she passed away following complications from severe anemia (Lear, 1997). Carson herself suffered from numerous health problems throughout her life, including ulcers, chronic infections, and cancer. She did not find
out about her breast cancer until more than six months had passed from the initial diagnosis because her diagnosing doctor was accustomed to telling husbands about their wives’ diagnoses. This possibly compromised her treatment and the outcome of her disease (Steingraber, 2012).

Following *Silent Spring*’s publication, Carson was asked to testify in front of government committees created by President Kennedy in 1963 in order to investigate the effects of pesticides. These hearings proved that her work made an indelible mark and that the government deemed it important enough to consider creating legislation. At the hearings, government officials only saw a strong woman, writer, and scientist who was eloquent, knowledgeable, and assertive; her femininity was secondary to her performance as a confident and erudite individual. Men in positions of power tried to provoke her to reveal her “feminine,” “emotional” side, but she maintained her more “transgressive” (in some aspects) performance in order to communicate her ideas about the need for anti-pesticide legislation. In government hearings, this performance worked to her benefit. She mirrored the “masculine” behavioral performances of those around her by presenting logical, concise arguments, scientific facts, and a self-assured demeanor despite the immense pain she experienced from her arthritis and painful cancer treatments. Thus, she left no room for sexist criticism. These hearings led to several bills and other pieces of legislation that regulated pesticides and other chemicals in the environment.

Carson passed away on April 14, 1964; unfortunately she did not live to see the long term far reaching effects of *Silent Spring*. *Silent Spring* galvanized America
into demanding change: the Environmental Defense Fund, one of the largest non-profit environmental advocacy groups, was founded in 1967; the National Environmental Policy Act was launched in 1969 which established uniform guidelines for environmental protection; and most significantly, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a federal government agency designed to protect human health and the environment, was created in 1970. These new developments consolidated environmental policy and action and streamlined the legislative process by connecting all of the government outposts devoted to environmental pursuits. Quaratiello writes, “Carson had recommended just such an agency during her Senate testimony in 1963” (2010). All of these outcomes were part of Carson’s dream for the nation. Her love of science, readiness to challenge the chemical and pesticide industries, and unwillingness to back down in the face of criticism and discrimination exist outside of the limitations of femininity as they have been traditionally repeatedly performed and reinforced by men. Her exquisite writing and maintenance of her outward appearance are defined within cultural contexts as feminine as these performances have been designated to women. Carson’s ability to transgress certain gender boundaries enabled her to communicate her ideas and achieve her goals. On a larger scale, her work and actions not only formed the basis of the modern environmental movement, but also altered public discourse about women in science and other public spaces.
Chapter 2: Lois Gibbs

Introduction

In the late 1970’s, Love Canal, a quiet little town on the eastern edge of Niagara Falls, New York, became a media circus when a series of newspaper articles led to an investigation where dozens of chemical residues were found throughout the community. At the center of the controversy was Lois Gibbs, a mother and housewife turned activist and community organizer. She noticed her children experiencing escalating health problems far outside the realm of normal childhood illnesses. She took action, and in a matter of months she found herself leading a community group called the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA) to unite the community against the toxins that had been discovered at Love Canal. Their opponents were the uncommunicative and uncooperative state and federal government agencies who were slow to take action on behalf of the residents, as well as Hooker Chemical, the company responsible for the toxic contamination. Soon, the Department of Health and the EPA launched studies and investigations that led to the discovery of extremely high levels of dioxin, a toxic chemical. Gibbs’s ability to create and lead a successful anti-toxic movement is remarkable; she brought a community together that had no experience or understanding of community organizing and environmental pollution. Her work led to the creation of vital anti-toxic federal legislation. In this chapter I will suggest that her achievements as a mother changed normative “rules” imposed on mothers in public spaces. This chapter considers the historical connections between women, motherhood, and nature,
and given these connections, seeks to explore the ways in which the manipulation, both intentionally and unintentionally, of Gibbs’s gender performance in her role as a mother allowed her to communicate her ideas and attain her goals.

**What Happened at Love Canal³**

In 1892, William T. Love proposed connecting the upper and lower sections of the Niagara Falls River, but the project was abandoned after two years due to a lack of funds. The empty lot was taken over by various chemical companies, and eventually Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation gained ownership of the land from 1942 to 1952 and used it as a dumping ground. The next year, they sold the land for one dollar to the Niagara Falls Board of Education. The Board of Education, aware of the canal’s history, turned the land into a densely populated community and built homes, schools, and playgrounds directly over the canal. In early 1978, *The Niagara Gazette* began investigating Love Canal because of reports of chemical residues, noxious smells, and illnesses among residents. *The Niagara Gazette*’s continued reporting about the local contamination sparked an interest for some residents. Author Elizabeth Blum wrote, “once the city began its initial studies, more and more residents became aware of the situation through the growing news coverage. One of these residents, a self-described ‘news junkie’ named Lois Gibbs, connected the chemical waste to her son’s recent spate of illnesses” (2008). Gibbs was a housewife lacking higher education, so she reached out to her brother, a

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biologist, to probe him about the link between her children’s concerning health problems and the articles in *The Gazette*. Alarmed by the newspaper reports and her family’s illnesses, Gibbs spoke with neighbors regarding the emerging health crisis. After driving to Albany for meetings and failing to obtain information from government officials, Gibbs, her good friend, Debbie Cerillo, and other local mothers began organizing.

Throughout the beginning of 1978, Gibbs and other mothers made multiple attempts to engage local officials and push for action. They contacted representatives, sent letters, and attended meetings. Unfortunately, the officials were reticent to provide helpful information regarding the scope and potential harm of the contamination. As mothers, their focus was protecting their children. This focus reproduced their identities through their familial ferocity as they pursued improved living standards for their children. Finally, in April 1978, the New York Department of Health Commissioner, Dr. Robert Whalen, ordered health studies. However, little government intervention occurred after studies proved that toxic contamination existed in her neighborhood and under her son’s school. As an actor within the heterosexual matrix, she had internalized ideas of mothers as “fixers,” and her frustrations dramatically grew with her inability to “fix” the issues at Love Canal. She consulted with her neighbors, trying to find ways to engage officials beyond the traditional means of letter writing and phone calls. While her neighbors responded well to town hall meetings and door-to-door solicitations, she knew she would need to increase the size of her appeals to grab the government officials’ attention.
In May of 1978, the EPA announced that a study from the previous year on air quality at Love Canal revealed a huge amount of dangerous air toxins. However, no action was taken, further increasing the residents’ frustrations. Finally, on August 2nd, 1978, pressure from residents as well as growing media coverage forced Dr. Whalen to declare a health emergency at Love Canal and issue an evacuation of pregnant women and children under the age of two. Five days later, on August 7th, 1978, President Carter approved emergency financial aid so that the state of New York could buy out the homes closest to the center of the toxic contamination. Due to the lack of action and protection for the majority of the community, Gibbs, along with a few other concerned citizens, founded the LCHA with the goal of using community organizing to pressure the government to take responsibility for the contamination and to assist the rest of the ailing community.

Federal assistance slowly arrived with Whalen’s declaration and evacuation of a select group of residents, but a lack of communication still remained between officials and residents. At organized meetings, officials dodged questions and provided vague responses to questions regarding toxins. The LCHA mobilized and began recruiting members and support from the community at large. Gibbs served as the President, with Debbie Cerillo working as Treasurer, and residents Karen Schroeder as Secretary and Tom Heisner as Vice President. Though Heisner was Vice President, the LCHA was predominately led by and composed of women. Women took an active role; as wives and mothers, they were concerned over the ill health of their families. They were the caretakers and both internal and external
pressures supported the notion that it was their “motherly duty” to advocate on behalf of their children. Also, the majority of men in the community were employed by chemical companies or similar industries and were afraid of losing their jobs if they spoke out.

By the end of 1978, dangerously high levels of dioxin had been discovered and announced, and the LCHA used this finding to increase public support in their fight against the government. Dioxin is one of the most dangerous chemicals to humans. It is a by-product of industrial activities such as burning and chemical manufacturing and is extremely problematic because it is persistent, meaning it remains in the environment for a long time, and a bio-accumulant, meaning it accumulates exponentially throughout the food chain. In humans it can disrupt endocrine and reproductive processes, impair the immune system, and cause skin lesions (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2015). Despite numerous recommendations from various laboratories and health-related agencies, the government was slow to limit the residents from engaging in community activities that would endanger them; they were reticent to admit that harm could occur from simple activities like gardening or playing outside. Gibbs began working with a local cancer researcher, Dr. Beverly Paigen, in early 1979 to gain a better understanding of the scientific effects of dioxin and other chemicals present at Love Canal. Gibbs was then able to explain the effects of the chemical poison without the scientific jargon, but had the credibility of a scientific expert behind her. This relationship allowed Gibbs to release a local newsletter which greatly increased community support for the
LCHA and their cause. Gibbs’s popularity and leadership in conjunction with Paigen’s expertise created the perfect union.

On March 21st, 1979, a Senate sub-committee hearing regarding the health problems at Love Canal was held. Many residents, including Gibbs, traveled down to Washington D.C. to speak out about the government’s lack of assistance, its underestimation of the scope of illnesses, and the poor response they experienced. Love Canal was a predominately white, working class community and the majority of the residents could not afford to move. At the hearings they criticized the government for their inadequate financial relief to support the residents. They also condemned the government’s slow and inefficient process to relocate residents and remediate the area. Finally, on April 24th, 1979, the EPA approved four million dollars for remedial work and on June 14th, 1979, President Carter revealed preliminary plans for a national Superfund program to remedy toxic contamination sites across the United States. Meanwhile, throughout 1979, Gibbs and the LCHA targeted their meetings and protests at New York Governor Hugh Carey. They believed that his upcoming re-election would make him more willing and capable of providing assistance than President Carter.

Carey attempted to appease the community with empty promises and flowery language. He used complicated political jargon to confuse and trick residents into believing he was helping them. For example, he promised that families whose health conditions were linked to the contamination would be moved. However, the scientific studies that the government conducted did not definitively link the health
problems with the contamination. This meant that no true assistance was provided to the residents. Gibbs, like hundreds of others in Love Canal, still had not received the aid to relocate her family and was concerned about spending so much time near the contamination.

By November 5th, 1979, the residents received news that they would be relocated, but they were not given any information regarding the details of this relocation, mounting frustrations. At this point, over 100 families were living in nearby motels; the contamination and toxic fumes made the area unlivable. Additionally, new health reports described possible outcomes like cancer, miscarriages, and more that the residents were either at risk for or already experiencing. A health study released on May 17th, 1980, showed that 11 of the 36 participants had chromosomal damage. Much of this study focused on pregnant women and women of child-bearing age. This meant that the effects of the contamination were more significant than contact illnesses; the residents’ DNA had been altered and these mutations could be passed down to future generations.

Pandemonium spread throughout the community because information regarding their relocation was not forthcoming despite this new bombshell about the detrimental effects of living next to the contaminated canal. As a result, the EPA sent two representatives to Love Canal to explain the findings. Tensions spiked and culminated in Gibbs and a few others taking the two representatives hostage in the LCHA’s main office building for six hours. Gibbs argued that it was for the representatives’ “protection” against the angry mob of over 500 outside.
Additionally, though technically “hostages,” the representatives were “held” in a room that they were free to move about in and had access to homemade food, water, and a telephone. Simultaneously, a massive, emotionally charged protest broke out that included one resident burning the letters “EPA” on his front yard. After five hours, they released the hostages but demanded that the government provide them with an offer of relocation within two days or they would take “further, more aggressive action” (Gibbs, 2011).

The hostage situation provided Gibbs’s with an opportunity to capture President Carter’s attention. The entire community was viewed as a feminized “emotional,” “hysterical” body following their “reactive” response. The protests and hostage situation brought extensive media attention to the chromosome study and their fight, too much for the government to ignore. Finally, after the riots stopped, the protesters calmed down, and the EPA representatives were released, President Carter announced on May 21st, 1980, that Love Canal was under a state of emergency and the government would provide funds to relocate an additional 710 residents.

**Lois Gibbs and the LCHA**

In the early days of the LCHA, Gibbs led alongside Tom Heisner. This relationship quickly soured as Heisner preferred to focus on economic issues and the monetary losses that the residents faced paying taxes for toxic homes and schools. On the other hand, in her position as a mother, Gibbs focused on the health consequences that her family and the other residents faced. Eventually Heisner and Karen Schroeder, his biggest supporter, were voted out of the LCHA due to their reluctance
to focus on the health and child welfare aspect of the contamination. Gibbs then began focusing her rhetoric exclusively on issues of health and well-being which are central to motherhood. She started to campaign to residents and the media using ideas and rhetoric about motherhood in order to gain support outside the LCHA and to encourage the residents’ participation in protests. Child welfare and issues surrounding pregnancy featured prominently in her speeches. Gibbs used the LCHA as a platform for communicating with the public, both within and outside of Love Canal. The LCHA eventually transformed from a group initially concerned about their community to a strong group of women who used the support of their group and identity as mothers to become a powerful lobbying force for the community.

“The Housewife Who Went to Washington”

From the beginning of the conflict at Love Canal, Lois Gibbs maintained and reinforced her identity as a mother. In interviews when asked if she considered herself a feminist, she was obstinate in her responses about the separation between her fight and the feminist cause. She made certain to clearly distinguish between herself as a “normal” housewife who happened to be thrust into the center of a firestorm and “those” women who chose to act defiantly. She strongly rejected the feminist movement and feminist labeling, viewing the movement as anti-family and anti-motherhood. However, she embraced many of the qualities and ideas put forth by the movement, such as women’s rights to be heard in public spaces and increased political roles and representation for women.
The crux of Gibbs’s activism rested on her fierce desire as a mother to rescue her children from their current health disaster and to protect them from future harm. As a mother within the heterosexual matrix, her core performance was based upon acting in opposition to the performances of men; thus, she learned to be quiet and unobtrusive. However, when her children’s lives were threatened, she was able to step outside of the confines of the private sphere and into a public activist role. This transgression was not seen as deviant precisely because of her gender performance. Unlike Carson, who was criticized for performing aspects of masculinity in public spaces and fundamentally altering gender roles, Gibbs’s performance of motherhood allowed her to maintain her femininity in public because she was protesting on behalf of her children, and her end goal did not permanently disrupt the sexual division of labor.

Since the women of Love Canal performed motherhood without an intentional desire to significantly alter the heterosexual matrix by separating themselves from the feminist movement, the surrounding community and the public could not criticize them for protesting and starting a movement. At rallies and meetings, Gibbs would speak with her sick children by her side, perpetuating the view that she was first and foremost a mother, and an activist second. This reminder of motherhood was deliberate; it was also a reminder of the separation that Gibbs and the other women at Love Canal desperately tried to make between themselves and the feminist cause. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* had been released a decade and a half earlier and sparked Second Wave Feminism, but the women of Love Canal saw the feminist
movement as speaking largely to upper class, college educated women who felt “trapped” as housewives. They saw these women as desperate to escape family life and desiring to enter the public sphere out of boredom and entrapment, whereas the Love Canal mothers were content devoting the rest of their lives to their families. They demarcated the boundary between the feminist movement and its anti-family quest to release women from the limitations of the patriarchy, which included motherhood, and themselves, who saw motherhood as the core of their identity. In contradiction with their beliefs, they became feminists because “their rejection of feminism and their subsequent activism yielded a sense of empowerment and agency and, ironically, roles outside of the home. They became feminists while vocally rejecting the movement itself” (Blum, 2008). This positionality within public spaces and political contexts both intentionally and inadvertently enabled Gibbs to communicate and achieve her goals through the manipulation of motherhood. She intentionally stressed the importance of motherhood and used that argument as the backbone of her activism, but inadvertently positioned herself as a relatable feminist actor and the right to be a mother, wife, and activist all at once.

Gibbs’s activism fits in the historical context of women who used the rhetoric of motherhood as a means of entering traditionally masculine spaces in order to fight against environmental contamination. This began in the mid-nineteenth century with the urbanization and industrialization of the United States. Given this historical precedent, Gibbs’s gender performance was not only accepted by the public, but, it could be argued, was expected. The public and media were accustomed to
motherhood appeals for environmental reform on behalf of children and “future
generations.” Even if individuals were not mothers themselves, they could
understand and accept the concept of environmental reform in order protect children’s
health. Gibbs was also cognizant of the ways in which she could use the media to
support her campaign. She appeared on the Phil Donahue show, a television talk
show that “every housewife in America watched” (Gibbs, 2011). She used her
experiences of femininity and motherhood to appeal to the public in the most
successful ways. In this way, Gibbs’s use of motherhood in order to communicate
her goals and achieve environmental reform was both unintentional and purposeful.
She intentionally used motherhood to gain more support by deliberately denouncing
the feminist cause and embracing the importance of heteronormative family structure.
Her gender performance was based on her experiences and interactions accumulated
throughout her life, not crafted for the purpose of her environmental campaign.
Though unaware of how her denouncement of feminism transformed her into a
feminist figure, the more distance she put between herself and the feminist
movement, the more she came to embody the movement’s ideals. While she
performed in this manner to declare her identity and views, it had the secondary effect
of positioning her within the specific historical context of mothers who used
mothering rhetoric in order to combat environmental contamination and achieve
reform.
**Emotionality vs. Rationality**

Due to Lois Gibbs’s self-positioning as a “traditional” mother, she and the other LCHA women were labeled “emotional” by critics in the media, local men, and government officials as a means of discrediting them. As previously mentioned, the patriarchy has tied women to nature using the connection of motherhood as a means of oppression. The relationship between women and nature as emotional is another reason why Gibbs’s environmental activism was accepted by the general public—as a woman, it was her right and duty to protest on behalf of a related “being,” and to use affective appeals to do so. However, this was also a means of inferiorization and oppression because men used this label of “emotionality” to describe women’s supposed inability to compose a thoughtful and meaningful environmental campaign. Although Gibbs’s manipulation of motherhood contributed to her success, it also was a means of devaluing her and her colleagues’ efforts. The government, a “logical” masculine body, and its representatives, controlling hyper-masculine men, viewed the LCHA as obstacles interrupting their “rational” routine.

While the women of Love Canal were criticized for their “emotionality,” the men of Love Canal were actually the emotional ones. The men of Love Canal reacted in “emotional” ways in response to the women’s activism because it threatened their dominance and therefore, their masculinity. They cried at public meetings, had emotional outbursts in inappropriate and public settings, and were prone to public screaming matches (Blum, 2008). While their reactions would have been deemed “hysterical” had they been women, their masculinity and power within the
heterosexual matrix enabled them to escape this “inferiorization” and negatively connoted labeling. It also allowed them to maintain their perception as rational actors. The women of the LCHA, however, were labelled “emotional” and “hysterical” simply because of their gender. They acted rationally, forming coalitions and organizing speeches and protests, yet the fact that they were protesting in the first place caused them to be perceived as emotional actors.

Due to the Gibbs and her female colleagues’ inability to escape the perception of “hysterical women,” they opted to embrace the label rather than try to fight it. They chose to create a political campaign in which they could use their identities and experiences to their advantage. They fought using politics because they realized they couldn’t fight with science: the scientific studies were purposefully poorly completed so that they couldn’t stand up as evidence in court; the women who gave birth to babies with birth defects were told they were part of a community of “genetically defective people;” and women who had experienced miscarriages were told that they had secretly gotten abortions or had lost their babies because of the “hysteric” (Gibbs, 2011). Many of the studies were conducted by state and federally funded institutions, therefore, if funds went to relocating the residents, then there would be less money available to support research endeavors at these institutions. Moreover, officials tried to emphasize the women’s hysteria as the cause of medical problems to further oppress them and reinforce the beliefs of the emotionality/rationality binary.

They also used the “emotional” stereotype as a media appeal to increase support against government pushback. When confronted with repeated refusals from
state officials regarding relocation, “the Homeowner Association female members performed dramatic acts of public theater to draw attention to and gain support for their cause” (Hay, 2009). Ironically, by acting logically to create a plan of action to raise public and media support, they were seen as increasingly emotional. This combination of fierce motherhood and public appeals featuring children worked to dramatize their cause to increase support and force government concessions. Whereas Carson actively fought against the emotional label because it contradicted her gender performance and goals, Gibbs found that it aided her performance and allowed her to more easily communicate her ideas.

Just as women, in conjunction with nature, have been viewed as “emotional” and “irrational,” they have also been viewed as “toxic” and contaminated. As described earlier, because of the patriarchal hyper focus on women as reproducers, the “by-products” of the reproductive cycles have made women “contaminated.” Relatedly, the earth has been contaminated as a by-product of the reproductive process; nature has been “toxified” as a result of humans exploiting its life-sustaining resources. This is problematic because, as Roach reminds us, “the consequences for both women and nature can be noxious. Both are seen as an endless resource of succor, who, if she fails to provide what we want, is cruelly withholding it, so justifying our exploitation or plunder” (2003). When women and nature are seen as inferior, reproductive, toxic bodies, then oppression and exploitation of these bodies is acceptable. The cost of production is the destruction of “inferior” resources: the mother and Mother Nature seemingly possess an inextinguishable and inexhaustible
supply of nurturance and resources, and therefore, are sources of exploitation by men as well as by normative societal practices.

At Love Canal, the women were perceived of and portrayed as “toxic.” They were not only inferior, dirty, menstruating women, but they were also contaminated with dioxin and other poisonous chemicals. Even though mothers and pregnant women are usually perceived as less toxic, this perception was dismissed as the presence of hazardous waste served as a symbolically “toxifying” agent. The toxic land further contributed to this perception of “toxic” women because the land had failed to provide a safe community, just as the mothers had “failed” to protect their children from harm. Additionally, the majority of the health reports and studies focused on pregnant women; the studies were dedicated to researching the extremely high miscarriage rate and high number of birth defects at Love Canal. The emphasis on pregnancy and childbirth was due to the customary view of the “pure” pregnant woman, as well as the pervasive idea that the mother can shelter her children from all harm. The toxins at Love Canal became a means of “retoxifying” pregnant women and mothers, devaluing nature and female bodies, and embedding the “contaminated” woman trope throughout the community.

Class and Gender at Love Canal

Gibbs performed motherhood because it was the most accessible method of acting available to her. Like the majority of individuals living in Love Canal, Gibbs and her husband could not afford to simply abandon their home and relocate elsewhere. In addition to the LCHA, the Ecumenical Task Force, or ETF, formed in
early 1979 by the religious community of Western New York as another outlet for anti-contamination activism at Love Canal. Contrasting, the ETF was predominately middle class and well-educated with a Christian focus, though still largely white. Due to their higher socioeconomic status and therefore access to higher education, the ETF members had prior activist experiences, contacts in important places, and more complex ways of working within the system in order to achieve their goal of relocation. They also all cited *Silent Spring* and Rachel Carson as their inspiration for acting against environmental contamination and primarily used appeals of environmental stewardship in their rhetoric, in contrast to motherhood for the LCHA. However, the ETF and their stewardship appeal were not as successful because stewardship did not garner the same level of public support and sympathy as motherhood. The educational background of the ETF was its primary downfall, as the public and most residents found it to be alienating. The working class residents were unable to relate to the theoretical and intellectual arguments and appeals, causing tensions to erupt and leading support away from the group and towards Gibbs and the LCHA. Also, due to their increased knowledge, the ETF’s interests were much broader than the LCHA’s and they began exploring the relationship between contamination and other social problems such as poverty. Their broad scope of related issues also contributed to the group’s splintering and eventual downfall.

Due to the oppressive nature of value dualisms, issues of gender, race, class, and more intersect in interrelated systems of discrimination. As previously discussed, the main reason for the split between the original leaders of the LCHA was due to the
differing lenses through which the two groups viewed contamination. Heisner tried to rally the community around the argument that no one would want to purchase a home in a hazardous area, meaning that residents would lose the income from selling that would enable future purchases. Additionally, they would still have to pay taxes on both the old house and new one, and the majority of the community did not have the means to simply abandon their house without some form of retribution. Gibbs was more successful at relating her arguments to the larger community: “Her health concerns proved to be more captivating to the neighborhood and to the press as she established her leadership. Second, Gibbs’s language stressed a more inclusive, wider geographic view of who should benefit than that expressed by men.” (Blum, 2008).

The clash over issue framing not only separated the community along gender lines, but also along class lines. Men and women who could afford to leave the area sided with Gibbs, prompting animosity between groups.

Gender issues were not only limited to the fight between framing the main argument around health or economics, but also intersected with ideas of “appropriate” gendered behavior within the heterosexual matrix. When the women began taking a more active role in the community by advocating on behalf of the environment and their families, the men were relegated to a more subsidiary role in community politics. They were also forced to engage in stereotypically “feminine” behaviors such as caring for the house and children while the women were out protesting. This angered them; as the dominant actors in the heterosexual matrix, they were accustomed to holding all of the power. Therefore, “most husbands reluctantly
accepted their new gender roles during the temporary crisis, but they expected the family to return to ‘normal’ after the relocation” (Blum, 2008). There was so much pushback against the altered gender roles because of its threat to the heterosexual matrix and their normative roles as providers and producers. This sense of entitlement to production, culture, and bodily transcendence is rooted in the power that discourse gives to the penis: “The adult man looks upon his sex organ as a symbol of transcendence and power; he is as proud of it as a muscle and at the same time as a magical power: it is a freedom rich with the contingence of the given” (Beauvoir, 1949). Discursively sexed men not only see themselves as dominant because of the norms of the heterosexual matrix, but also because of the power that discourse has imbued in the penis. Threats to this power, and the implications of this power, are cause for conflict. Therefore, the LCHA’s activism was negatively viewed by their husbands because it forced the men to relinquish some of their power and freedom provided to them by their penises.

**Intersections with Race**

Moreover, intersections with race at Love Canal further complicated issues. There was a large black community that lived nearby in an area called Griffin Manor, a federal housing project across the street from Love Canal. The black women attempted to organize and advocate in the same manner as the white women, yet their voices were silenced due to cultural marginalization. The black residents worked to get their fight for relocation covered by media outlets, yet their stories were not picked up, even by black newspapers in the area. The local black newspapers
frequently covered stories of environmental contamination and pollution, yet chose to ignore the residents’ fight against the government (Blum, 2008). The white community saw itself as “post-racial,” believing itself to be “above” race and not allowing race to inform its decision-making. However, in reality, the white community members used underhanded racist technicalities in order to marginalize the black residents and maintain the racial hierarchy.

The black mothers led the community movement for relocation in the same manner as Gibbs and the white mothers, crafting their campaign around the health of their children and the negative impacts of contamination. The black women were the spokespersons on behalf of “their families and children, believing that their voices had equal legitimacy to the white voices asking for assistance” (Blum, 2008). However, the LCHA initially attempted to exclude the black women when they tried to unite their movements. The majority of Griffin Manor residents were renters, not technically homeowners, so the name “Love Canal Homeowners Association” and racial tensions between certain members proved to be a point of contention that was difficult to later overcome. Determined to maintain the racial hierarchy and marginalization of the black community, “Heisner demanded property-tax relief and emphasized mortgage boycotts, actions and solutions that marginalized the renters, since they owned no property” (Blum, 2008). As Gibbs gained power she sought to include the black mothers, but they were put off by Heisner’s early racist and classist rhetoric. The technicality of homeowners versus renters was a means of excluding
the black community from meetings, media ploys and rallies, and negotiations with
the government.

This exclusion led to the creation of the Concerned Love Canal Renters
Association, or CLCRA, with resident Elene Thornton presiding over the group. This
organization was similarly female led and dominated, and used mothering language in
order to appeal to the little media coverage they received, as well as to the
government. It was also a means of organizing among the Griffin Manor community
because it enabled the residents to unite behind a common fight and utilize a singular
rhetoric. However, there were a few differences in the rhetoric used by the two
groups. The LCHA focused exclusively on the rhetoric and appeals of motherhood,
while the CLCRA interwove motherhood with broader racial injustices. They
interspersed their appeals of motherhood with language about the ties between racism
and environmental contamination to convey the equal importance of children’s
health, racial equality, and societally institutionalized prejudice. They eventually
won relocation and assistance from the State of New York, just as the white residents
did, but their fight was more difficult because of structural racial prejudices.

Unlike the women of Griffin Manor, Gibbs’s fight was less complicated
because she did not have to combat culturally ingrained racism. As a young, pretty,
white mother, Gibbs fit the cultural ideal of femininity and motherhood. She was
able to manipulate her identity to conform to this cultural ideal and play up her white
“innocence.” This manipulation enabled her to create the idea of contamination as a
threat to whiteness; since the contamination caused miscarriages and birth defects,
“pure” white women were at risk for being “tainted.” Therefore, in order to preserve white women’s purity, the white residents of Love Canal had to be evacuated and relocated. Her fight was aided by her whiteness; her performance of motherhood aligned with normative performance standards of race and motherhood to increase her public appeal and raise support for her cause.

After Love Canal

When the white residents received news of their relocation in late May, it took a few months for them to see the results of Carter’s announcement. Gibbs and a few representatives from Love Canal went on the Phil Donahue show again in 1980, but this time they were more prepared. They knew the most successful ways in which to manipulate their performances in order to appeal to the public, as well as the politicians. They needed to convince the federal government to provide the funds to match the state relief efforts they had been promised. In addition to their appearance on television, a large group of residents, led by Lois Gibbs, traveled down to New York City for the Democratic National Convention on August 15th, 1980. She not only used appeals of motherhood through her dress and rhetoric, but also included current events, such as the Cuban Refugee Crisis and the Iranian Hostage Crisis, to expand their media appeals in order to increase their political pressure and place her argument within a specific contentious political framework; at the Convention, the residents created signs saying “Love Canal Boat People.” Finally, their political pressure succeeded when President Carter came to Love Canal in early October 1980. In a public speech, with Gibbs standing next to him, he announced that the federal
government would provide New York State with $15 million to buy out all of the homes. After his announcement, Gibbs took the opportunity to lobby on behalf of the residents for more benefits, such as those awarded to communities that are victims of natural disasters.

Through her work, she had discovered a new passion and ignited an activist spirit she never knew she had. Unfortunately, her husband, Harry, did not accept the permanently altered dynamics of the heterosexual matrix, and subsequently divorced her. Gibbs was undeterred, having found fulfillment in her environmental activism.

The events at Love Canal led to the creation of a federal piece of legislation called the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980 (CERCLA), or Superfund. This law authorized the EPA to clean up hazardously polluted and contaminated land. While it was a positive step in the right direction, it still left room for grassroots action. As Gibbs had learned at Love Canal, the government is often slow to act and resistant to providing assistance. Therefore, Gibbs founded the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice (CHEJ) to continue aiding communities faced with toxic environmental contamination and pollution. She works with communities around the United States who face hazardous contamination, and trains residents in these communities to organize amongst themselves to fight against bureaucracy and red tape in order to assist and remediate their neighborhoods. She continues this work today, using mothering rhetoric to appeal to the government and media in order to achieve reform for these citizens and increase support. Like Rachel Carson, her manipulation of her gender performance allowed her to achieve
anti-toxic reform and change the discursive rules around femininity and public spaces.
Chapter 3: Erin Brockovich

Introduction

Erin Brockovich, an environmental activist who is as renowned for her beauty as her environmental activism, catapulted to international fame in 2000 with the release of a blockbuster Hollywood feature film of the same name. The film Erin Brockovich was based on the real life events surrounding Brockovich’s efforts to bring one of the biggest class action lawsuits in American history against a California power company who knowingly contaminated a city’s water supply. Erin Brockovich garnered media attention not only for her scandalous attire, but also for her transformation from a former beauty queen and down-on-her-luck mother into a successful environmental activist (Brockovich, 2012). Brockovich used her sexuality for two reasons. First, it was the form of gender performance most accessible to her, and second, she recognized that sex sells; that is, exploiting sexuality can be a successful form of persuasion. She also purposefully manipulated her sexuality so she could be more overt and shocking. In this chapter I will suggest that the commodification and branding of Erin Brockovich enables her to manipulate sexuality in order to communicate and achieve her goals.

Who is Erin Brockovich?

Growing up dyslexic in Kansas, Erin Brockovich struggled with academics throughout her childhood (Paget, 2002). Though academic ventures were not her forte, it did not matter because she learned to survive and succeed by using societal messages about the ways women “should” be: beautiful, sexy, and appearance
focused and driven. These messages revolved around ideas of maintaining external beauty as a means of self-presentation and societal mobility. The more beautiful, feminine, and “appropriately” sexy a woman is, the more success she will have, and the more positively she will view herself. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “if the toilette has so much importance for many women, it is because they are under the illusion that it provides them with both the world and with their own self” (1949). The societal norm of basing self-worth on socially sanctioned appearances has been the way that women navigate their role within the heterosexual matrix. By conforming to femininity norms of outward beauty and sexiness, Brockovich was included in heteronormative rules of desire. Her adherence to this normative role allowed her to seek agency to manipulate the ways in which she appears to be more beautiful and sexual.

Brockovich learned that preserving her outward appearance was the key to success and maintained her physical beauty throughout her college years and early adulthood as a means of “fitting in;” in college she prioritized partying, and therefore cultivated a beautiful and sexy appearance that enabled her to get into the best parties (Paget, 2002). After college, Brockovich moved to out West because she “wanted to be a California girl” (Brockovich, 2012). She entered beauty pageants, repeatedly performing and thereby reinforcing societal ideas about femininity, appearance, sexuality, and self-worth. She met her first husband, Shawn Brown, around this time and settled in Reno, Nevada with their two children. However, after five years of marriage, the relationship dissolved and they divorced in 1987 (Blatty, 2015). Soon
after, she met Steve Brockovich, but after less than one year of marriage, they too divorced in 1989, leaving Brockovich a single mother now with three children (Brockovich, 2012). Following her second divorce, she needed to obtain stable employment so she could provide for her children. She moved back to California and began working for Ed Masry, a local lawyer with whom she eventually wagered a massive lawsuit against PG&E for failing to alert their customers to toxic chromium-6 contamination in their drinking water. After a three year legal battle against PG&E, from 1993 to 1996, Brockovich, Masry, and the rest of their team won. After Erin Brockovich’s release, she capitalized on her newfound fame by branding herself as a “sexy, celebrity activist.” She not only performed her sexuality overtly, but became famous for doing so. In an article about the woman behind the movie, journalist Austin Bunn writes, “Brockovich lives for that shock response but dares you to leave it at that. When she advises in her book to ‘dress for the part,’ she’s talking about a role that she invented: the all-star, foxy suburban mom” (Bunn, 2002).

She uses her gender performance in order to persuade those around her to listen to her environmental agenda.

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4 Chromium is a naturally occurring element that is found in three main forms: chromium (0), chromium-3, and chromium-6. Chromium-3 occurs naturally in the environment and is a necessary nutrient for humans. Chromium (0) and chromium-6 are created by industrial processes and used by the chemical and manufacturing industries. Chromium (0) is stable in the environment and therefore, most of the research is focused on chromium-3 because it is essential for humans and chromium-6 as it has been found to be an environmental toxin. In animal studies and through research on exposed individuals, chromium-6 has been found to be carcinogenic, and is also more easily absorbed by humans than chromium-3. Chromium-6 has also been linked to serious human health conditions (Banks, 2003).
For Brockovich, gender performance became a means to an end; in order to achieve her goals of raising awareness about water contamination and provoking those around her to enact meaningful regulatory anti-contamination legislation, her performance of femininity and sexuality was her means of garnering attention. Bunn writes, “we’re used to our crusaders rejecting style and sexuality for high seriousness, as if they were mutually exclusive. But Brockovich demands to be taken seriously with her Armani suits and her breast implants (and in some cases yes, her belly button showing)” (2002). To compensate for her lack of academic and legal credentials, her performance of femininity affords her the opportunity to convince those around her of her anti-toxic crusade. She possesses the knowledge to support her struggle for justice against toxic pollution, but her credentials include her strong work ethic, her infallible spirit, and her maternal experience for caring and compassion. When her third ex-husband, Eric Ellis, was asked about her dedication to environmental activism, he responded, “when it comes down to watching a movie or looking at toxic cases, she’ll look at the boxes” (Bunn, 2002). Despite her fame, track record, and inexhaustible work ethic, Brockovich still must fight the cultural devaluation of women because of their “inferiority” and “inherent sexuality” as justification for their objectification and exploitation. Though these norms exist as a component of the heterosexual matrix, her agency in her public presentation of her sexuality enables her to not only serve as a role model for young girls and other women, but also to work towards changing the rhetoric in these spaces.
Synopsis of *Erin Brockovich*

Throughout the movie, Erin Brockovich is portrayed as an overtly sexy, uneducated, independent, hard-working, obstinate woman and protective mother of three young children. The film begins with Brockovich seeking legal counsel from Ed Masry for an automobile accident in which she was injured but not at fault. Unable to find work, she eventually persuades Masry to give her a position at his law firm. Brockovich’s provocative clothing causes tension between her and Masry, who deems her attire inappropriate for an office setting, as well as between her and the other women in the office, who look down at her for her clothing choices. However, she cites her clothing as a core element of her identity and refuses to change in the face of opposition.

While combing through files one day, Brockovich comes across a case between PG&E and the Jensen family that was to be filed away. After reading through the case file and noticing bloodwork in a real estate case file, her interest in the case piques and she begins to explore it in more depth (Blatty, 2015). Learning of PG&E’s attempt to cover up chromium-6 contamination in the town of Hinkley’s water supply, she engages Masry and his legal team, as well as numerous experts and the community of Hinkley. She is resolute in her pursuit to uncover all of the details and help the Hinkley residents get justice and retribution for their suffering.6 Tempers flare between Brockovich and Masry while she collects research because he

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5 The fictional Jensen family was based on the real life Walker family from Hinkley, CA.
6 Chronic chromium-6 exposure has been linked to skin and respiratory disorders, cancer, and ulcers, all of which the Hinkley residents experienced (Banks, 2003).
worries about the financial implications of an opponent as large and powerful as PG&E.

Brockovich and Masry clash with each new legal development regarding the case, but Brockovich is able to solve each issue as it arises with her charm, sensuality, and relatability. She demonstrates an aptitude for names and numbers, which enables her to prove her importance to the firm and the case. Her persistence and hard work lead to a victory against, and $333 million check from, PG&E. In the final scene, Masry presents Brockovich with a check for her cut of PG&E’s payment but does not initially reveal the amount. He tricks her by telling her that the number is not what she was expecting. Prone to emotional outbursts, she begins berating him for undervaluing her before it is revealed that the check is for two million dollars (Soderbergh, 2000).

**Erin Brockovich and Erin Brockovich**

Erin Brockovich and *Erin Brockovich* are intricately tied; the latter would, for obvious reasons, not exist without the former, but the former relies on the latter for name recognition and popularity within the contemporary cultural framework. The success of the film created a platform for a beautiful, sexy woman to aid ailing communities and provide assistance on environmental lawsuits, which Brockovich capitalized on. However, when asked about her relationship with the film, she is quick to distance herself. When giving a speech in a church in Porter Ranch, California in early 2016 to a community struggling with methane pollution, she began by telling the audience, “I am not Julia Roberts” (Carrol, 2016). Though the film is
based upon real life experiences and Brockovich has used it to catapult herself to celebrity status, she does not identify with Roberts’s portrayal of her.

She has noted that film director, Steven Soderbergh, hypersexualized her for the Hollywood film. While she did wear low cut shirts and tight skirts, the performance of her sexuality was exaggerated, and her promiscuity in exchange for information was overplayed. The activist was not as cunning or purposeful as her film counterpart when it came to manipulating her sexuality. Brockovich wore tight clothing because that was what she felt comfortable and confident in, and was what allowed her to be noticed (Moore, 2000). She chose revealing shirts because they created a “shock factor” effect and enabled her to “stand out” in a crowded room. Unlike that of the film character, Brockovich’s sexuality, while a large component of her persona, was secondary to her activism. As a product of the hypersexualization of Hollywood, Erin Brockovich the character reinforces the cultural stereotype that women are foremost valued for their bodies. Brockovich the activist works tirelessly to dispel this stereotype; through her provocative dress, she seeks to show audiences that women are capable of meaningful activism by “shocking” them with her speeches and presentations.

With the popularity of *Erin Brockovich*, Brockovich was able to create a brand around herself. In addition to using her celebrity status to set an example for young girls and women about the acceptability of performing feminine sexuality in public spaces, she also integrates inspirational speaking into the core of her brand. She became a hero who traveled across the United States to speak about her work,
trying to inspire others to take their lives into their own hands and fight back against
their problems. She hosted a Lifetime show for three seasons called “Final Justice
with Erin Brockovich” which featured women who overcame obstacles in their lives
(Brockovich, 2012). She also wrote an autobiography entitled Take It from Me:
Life’s a Struggle but You Can Win and promoted it throughout the United States.
However, in creating and promoting her brand, she had to walk a fine line between
performing as sexual, feminine woman and performing as a sex object.

After the film’s release, she was approached by Playboy to appear in a spread
in their magazine. She turned down the offer because her brand’s focus was a woman
who was open about her sexuality, not a sex object. While performances of sexuality
are acceptable forms of femininity within the heterosexual matrix, sex objects are
subject to much stricter repercussions such as complete devaluation of their cognitive
capacities. While all women who perform femininity and are open about their
sexuality are subject to these consequences, the more public their sexuality, the
harsher the consequences. Brockovich wanted to maintain her intellect and her
brand’s ability to support environmental activism, and therefore, chose to decline
Playboy’s offer, as well as other opportunities that would devalue her intelligence to
satisfy men’s thirst for sexual imagery. The media provided numerous outlets, such
as public appearances and interviews, where she could assert her sexuality; however,
Brockovich had to be vigilant in maintaining a balanced public image and choose her
media engagements carefully.
Simone de Beauvoir theorized about the vigilance women are required to maintain regarding their sexuality: “A woman who teases male desire too blatantly is considered vulgar; but a woman who is seen to repudiate this is disreputable as well,” demonstrating the double-edged sword that women face (1949). As the dominating performance in public spaces, masculinity restricts feminine sexuality to very specific limits that are neither “too” sexual nor “too prudish.” She continued to write that it is required for a “woman to make herself an erotic object” (Beauvoir, 1949). As transcendent producers, men require performances of feminine sexuality to be reproductive and just sexy enough to awaken their desire to participate in the reproductive process. Feminine sexuality should not inhibit masculine productivity by awakening male carnal desires in a counterproductive manner, or by not being erotic “enough.” Though Brockovich performs her sexuality as a way of “shocking” the public into paying attention, her performance of sexuality is erotic “enough” to provoke this response without devaluing her worth to that of a sex object.

Like her namesake, the protagonist in Erin Brockovich performs overt sexuality which leads to consequences such as the devaluation of her intellect and capabilities. In the film, the character is seen as less competent, is not accepted by the other women in the office, and is not given the same opportunities to succeed as they are. Sociologist Joan Acker posited, “thus, the attempts to banish sexuality from the workplace were part of the wider processes that differentiated the home, the location of legitimate sexual activity, from the place of capitalist production” (1990). The more women revealed their sexuality in places other than the home, the stronger
the punishment, as evidenced in the film in the differences in experiences between Brockovich and the other women in the office. Unlike her real life counterpart, the character pushes the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix beyond agentic femininity to the point where her femininity is far too deviant from the workplace norm of masculinity, and therefore, was viewed with disapproval. Thus, if women who perform sexuality in public spaces are seen as hindrances, then their bodies will be foremost on display and constant reminders of their reproductive abilities, not productivity.

**Emotionality and Rationality**

In addition to the binary of production and reproduction, the binary of emotionality and rationality is also relevant for Erin Brockovich, both the activist and the character. Since the activist has reinforced and reproduced ideas of performing sexuality and its relationship with communication and achievement, her actions are contained within the heterosexual matrix as hysterical and irrational. Due to her performance of femininity in public spaces and her transgression of the emotionality/rationality binary, she is subject to criticism by men angered by the disruption of heterosexual matrix norms. As “erotic objects,” women do not and should not possess logical capabilities; their sexuality and raw emotionality should prevent them from engaging in productive rational thought while the constraints of the heterosexual matrix should thwart them from gaining the skills to attempt to do so.
Consequently, the show 20/20 called the science behind the chromium-6 contamination in Hinkley “murky,” implying that Brockovich’s sexuality and femininity rendered her incapable of producing scientifically sound data (Banks, 2003). The EPA tried to assure the public that chromium-6 had no negative effects in water and was not toxic in large concentrations. Brockovich was criticized by Michael Fumento, a lawyer at the Hudson Institute who claimed that there was no correlation between chromium-6 ingestion and cancer, in addition to attempts to promulgate that her science was sloppy (Bunn, 2002). These efforts to discredit her on the basis of faulty science was the powerful and dominant males’ way of asserting their power as inherently logical actors; as a sexual woman she could not possibly possess the ability to conduct scientific studies and draw logical correlations. Just like Carson, she was condemned because she was a woman entering the public sphere of science and reason, but she also had the added layer of being a beautiful, sexy woman who was viewed primarily for her body, not her intellect. Additionally, she was attacked for disturbing huge, powerful institutions. Like in Carson’s and Gibbs’s cases, men in charge of dominating organizations were threatened by an “emotional” woman disrupting their power regimes and the politics of the heterosexual matrix. Powerful men who controlled public opinion, such as television producers and doctors, criticized her out of fear that they would lose their power, both within the heterosexual matrix and over the general public. In Brockovich’s case, the costs of changing laws to reflect the danger of chromium-6 contamination in drinking water and dealing with rehabilitating contaminated water systems was much more than the EPA wanted to incur. Her critics were also desperate to maintain the cultural myth
that a beautiful, sexy woman could not produce scientifically sound arguments in order to preserve the integrity of the heterosexual matrix. Through her activism, Brockovich serves as a role model for the ways in which women, especially those who choose to agentically perform their sexuality, can disrupt hegemonic power structures.

Similarly, Erin Brockovich segregates bodily, emotional femininity from dominant, “proper” masculinity. The protagonist has “emotional” outbursts, a quick temper and fast judgments, and makes choices involving feeling and acting instead of “logical” thinking. For example, when her new neighbor George starts babysitting her children, she responds “emotionally” with long, passionate, aggressive monologues. Brockovich is also placed in opposition to Masry and the outside lawyers that Masry hires to assist on the case. The lawyers are rational due to their “logical” thought processes, quantitative backgrounds, and fewer expressions of “emotionality.” However, while this binary is created in the film, Soderbergh also seeks to deconstruct it. He shows how a beautiful, sexy, “emotional” woman is capable of working rationally to collect vital information and assist in bringing PG&E to their knees. Brockovich’s opponents’ depiction of her as a “hysterical” and sexy woman paints her as an emotional figure, highlighting both the emotionality/rationality binary and the cultural myth of beauty versus brains.

The binary’s tenets must be further examined in order to comprehend how the film deconstructs it. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “rationalist maternalism tries in vain to ignore this powerful aspect of sexuality: sexual instinct cannot be regulated”
(1949). Because sexual instinct cannot be regulated with rational laws and logical processes, it becomes associated with emotionality and women. Another core idea behind the binary of emotionality and rationality is that the penis provides men with a sense of power and authority in public spaces. As a tool of both power and shame, “man exalts the phallus in that he grasps it as transcendence and activity, as a means of appropriation of the other; but he is ashamed when he sees in it only passive flesh through which he is the plaything of Life’s obscure forces” (Beauvoir, 1949). The penis is the tool that grants men physical and emotional dominance within the heterosexual matrix. It permits men to see themselves as the governing actors and allows them to transcend their physical bodies in order to contribute to societal advancement. It also contributes to the oppression and domination of women because it is the means through which they can use and abuse “lesser” female bodies. However, when the penis is not viewed in terms of dominance and appropriation, it incites feelings of shame. “But,” Beauvoir wrote, “because the erection looks like a planned movement and is undergone, it often looks ridiculous; and the simple mention of genital organs provokes glee” (1949). Therefore, in order for men to avoid feelings of shame and connection to their physical bodies, they appropriate female bodies to feed their egos and restore their sense of pride. This is acceptable within societal limits because men are “rational” “transcendent” creatures capable of advancing society.

Therefore, men control the boundaries of public and private spaces, due to the fact that “active sexuality was the enemy of orderly procedures, and excluding
women from certain areas of activity may have been, at least in part, a way to control sexuality” (Acker, 1990). Acker continues to describe how “the maintenance of gendered hierarchy is achieved partly through such often-tacit controls based on arguments about women’s reproduction, emotionality, and sexuality, helping to legitimize organizational structures through abstract, intellectualized techniques” (1990). Discourse reinforced ideas about sexuality into productive institutions such as offices, which designated masculinity as the normative mode of acting and femininity as the non-normative. In order to control this contextual non-normative performance, women’s roles and mobility in these spaces was highly regulated: they were only allowed in specific, low level positions, they received much less compensation, and they were subject to strict rules regarding clothing and appearance. Deviances from these norms, such as Erin Brockovich’s suggestive attire, were her way of breaking the emotionality/rationality binary and showing the ability for sexuality and production to co-exist.

**Erin Brockovich, Feminist**

In the same way that Carson’s and Gibbs’s activism was as much a means of altering the rhetoric in public spaces as it was about changing the laws, Brockovich’s performance of femininity and sexuality was also a means of changing the public discourse around feminine sexuality. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “clothes can be an instrument of conquest but not a weapon of defense; their art is to create mirages, they offer the viewer an imaginary object” (1949). Using her clothing as an instrument, Brockovich cultivates a specific image of her sexuality in order to draw
upon the cultural idea of the beautiful sex object, ripe for exploitation. In doing so, she started conversations around this notion by demonstrating her intelligence and ability to incite meaningful change through her work in Hinkley, as well as in other communities around the United States affected by water contamination. This jarring performance enables her to continue work on dispelling the pervasive cultural myth that women cannot possess both beauty and brains. The current rhetoric within the heterosexual matrix still delineates between overtly sexual women who are devalued because of their positionality as objects for male desire, and women who contain their sexuality and are then able to be productive in public spaces. However, though these women are able to be productive, masculinity is still the “neutral” performance, meaning that women’s productivity is highly regulated and inhibited. Like Rachel Carson, who worked to dispel the limitations on women in productive spaces by transgressing boundaries, and Lois Gibbs, who strove to change the discourse that women could not be both mothers and activists, Erin Brockovich used her performance of feminine sexuality to show that women could be both sexual and productive.

Though feminism is not a large component of Brockovich’s work, she identifies with the movement and believes herself to be a feminist.

The feminist movement is about women pushing and opening doors so that they’re heard, so that they’re seen as equals, so that they have the same opportunities. They absolutely contribute to this world. For me, that’s what the feminist movement is, and if that’s how you’re going to define it, then I’m the leader of the pack (Brockovich, 2013b).
Brockovich is a proponent of liberal feminism and equality for the sexes. She not only uses her performance as a means of communicating her ideas, but also as a way to initiate discussions about women’s rights, equality, and gender performances. Because of her past experiences with patriarchal institutions and men determined to maintain heterosexual matrix norms, she has come to realize that reinforcing masculinity is a means of preserving male dominance. She has been intimidated and objectified by men who are threatened by her gender performance, and uses those negative experiences as a source of strength (Brockovich, 2013a). When asked how she feels now about being in a room with all men, she says, “if you throw me into a room filled with testosterone, I’ll say, ‘you know what, your balls may be big, but my boobs are bigger’” (Brockovich, 2013a). As someone who believes in liberal feminism and equality for men and women, she seeks to empower women to occupy public spaces and to resist male intimidation in order to strive towards equality.

**Intersectionality**

Related to feminism and issues of women’s rights is intersectionality, which can be defined as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005). These relationships inform the manner in which specific categories such as race, class, and gender fit together in order to create variations in experiences. Intersectional issues of gender, class, and race are a large component of *Erin Brockovich*. There are many similarities between Brockovich and the majority of Hinkley’s residents as they are white and working class; however, Brockovich is not from Hinkley. Beautiful, young, and white,
Brockovich’s character is not questioned when she rides into Hinkley in her Jeep from Ed Masry to rescue the community from environmental contamination: “Of all the stories of environmental injustice to be told, it is at least worth asking what it means for Hollywood to choose one in which a white outsider is portrayed as willing to risk everything in order to ‘save’ a community that is not his/her own” (Pezzullo, 2014). Hollywood portrays Brockovich as a “savior” in the film; she is an outsider of similar background but through circumstance and hard work, she is able to raise herself up to a place where she can advocate on behalf of disenfranchised others to fight for environmental justice.

Hollywood prefers to employ tropes of white heroism and white perseverance, reinforcing hegemonic power structures (Pezzullo, 2014). While Brockovich’s character is disadvantaged because of her class and gender, she is privileged because she is white. She must regularly confront issues of classism and sexism, but is spared from daily encounters with racism. People of color are not only recipients of everyday racism, but also environmental racism. They are disproportionately affected by toxic pollution and environmental disasters. Communities of color are more likely to live next to chemical plants and suffer from detrimental effects of chemical poisoning from the environment. They are less likely to receive federal aid to rehabilitate contaminated areas and their fights for environmental justice are less likely to gain media attention and widespread support. Despite these facts, Hollywood has yet to make a film about communities of color and their struggles
against toxic pollution because of its maintenance of hegemonic power structures and preference for whiteness, especially for stories involving “saviors.”

Additionally, hypersexualization of Brockovich’s character highlights intersectional issues of race and gender. She jokes about performing sexual favors in exchange for information and frequently manipulates her performance of sexuality to make it more overt and exaggerated. Because of the discursive constructions surrounding women of color and sexuality, especially black women, it is unlikely that Brockovich’s character would have performed her gender and sexuality in the same manner had she not been white. Black women have been oppressed and violated for centuries because of the perception that their bodies are “exotic” and “hypersexual.” As a white woman, Brockovich, both the character and activist, can perform her sexuality in any manner of her choosing without fearing the same repercussions that a woman of color, especially a black woman, would experience. Therefore, it is unlikely that *Erin Brockovich* would have been made, and that the activist would have received the same level of recognition and celebrity, if Brockovich had been a woman of color, especially a black woman, or if Hinkley had been a community of color.

In addition to race, *Erin Brockovich* also deals with intersectional issues of class and gender in its discussion of organizational space. As a poor woman and single mother, she is societally disadvantaged not just through the creation of her gender performance around masculinity, but also because she must work to support

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7 In this context, I am defining organizational spaces as masculine public spaces, such as office buildings, where individuals are compensated, generally financially, for their productivity.
her children and lacks access to higher paying jobs that would provide more freedom and security. She primarily has access to lower paying jobs with longer hours and minimal benefits, impinging upon her true ability to increase her social standing via the “American Dream.” Class is mediated by gender, as “organizational logic assumes a congruence between responsibility, job complexity, and hierarchical position” (Acker, 1990). Women were historically barred from entering organizational spaces in the first place because, as described earlier, femininity was seen as belonging exclusively to the private space of the home. When women were allowed to enter the workforce, due to organizational logic they were given jobs with low responsibility, low complexity, and therefore, low salaries. Thus, gender mediates class due to the lack of opportunities afforded to women in organizational spaces and consequently society disadvantages women by not providing equal opportunities for economic success. These intersectional issues are largely ignored in the film in order to create the perception of a white, highly feminine, sexualized mother who is able to overcome social barriers to achieve the “American Dream” and bring justice to a suffering, white community.

Intersectional issues are relevant for the activist as well, as she finds herself dealing with class and gender in new ways as she moves from poverty to wealth. Her gender performance becomes more “acceptable” as the public is accustomed to celebrities maintaining some sense of provocativeness as a means of entertainment and creating specific public personas. Before she became a celebrity, she was viewed as an intrusive, overtly sexual woman. When Hinkley resident Roberta Walker was
interviewed about her initial meetings with Brockovich she said, “she knocked on my door, and there she was with her six-inch heels, and she wanted some samples of the bottom of my pool. I couldn't believe that this woman came and was going to do this, and I'm like, okay, the nerve, okay, go ahead” (Litoff, 2011). Like Walker, many were initially put off by Brockovich’s sexy performance, however; as she became a celebrity and well-known for her sexy attire, the public was not as critical. The wealth and power that accompanied her celebrity status altered perceptions of her performance; the public was used to “sexy” celebrities, therefore, by placing her in this category, her clothing and behavior were not so “abnormal.”

By launching Erin Brockovich from small town whistle-blower to celebrity activist, *Erin Brockovich* makes a statement about the types of women who receive mainstream media attention for their environmental activism. It implies that women must conform to the social norms of the heterosexual matrix that include whiteness, visible heterosexuality, and outward beauty in order to succeed. However, possessing these traits is not enough; in order for a female environmentalist to become a celebrity activist, she must not only conform to the heterosexual matrix norms, but directly and willingly appeal to heterosexual desires (Richardson & Vanderford, 2005). In contrast to Gibbs, Brockovich received so much media attention due to her performance of sexuality. Lois Gibbs was also a beautiful, white, heterosexual woman. However, while she was able to manipulate her identity and performance of motherhood in order to communicate her ideas and achieve her goals, she did not receive the same type of fame as Erin Brockovich because motherhood is not as
compelling for the media as feminine sexuality. Brockovich is able to “manipulate those around her to attain political ends by exerting power that is revealed in specifically feminine ways” (Richardson & Vanderford, 2005). Men are included in the manipulation of feminine sexuality because they are the targets of Brockovich’s appeal. While Gibbs applied pressure through the manipulation of motherhood, men were excluded because they had no role as a target or component of her appeal. Because “the world has always belonged to males,” the woman who plays to their desires and hegemonic norms will be rewarded with celebrity status (Beauvoir, 1949). Therefore, Erin Brockovich and Erin Brockovich are reminders that sexuality and the appeal of heterosexual desire are necessary to captivate and hold media attention.

**Erin Brockovich, celebrity activist**

*Erin Brockovich* was released over 15 years ago, but Erin Brockovich still continues to fight against drinking water contamination. Those left in Hinkley still face chromium-6 contaminated water. PG&E maintains their innocence and their corporate stance that the chromium-6 levels are not toxic, despite the negative health effects residents still face such as migraines, anemia, and miscarriages. In 2001, the state of California passed Senate Bill 351, nicknamed the Brockovich Bill, which regulated chromium-6 levels in drinking water (Banks, 2003). In response to the film and Brockovich’s celebrity activism, individuals around the world began sending her evidence of their environmental contamination-caused health problems. This motivated her to establish the Community Health Book, which is a digital map of communities all over the globe where people have experienced illnesses resulting
from environmental pollution (Blatty, 2015). She uses her celebrity platform as a way to inform the public about toxins in their communities that cause serious health problems.

Today, Brockovich tours the U.S., visiting contaminated communities and discusses her experiences with contamination and the ways in which residents can organize in order to better their communities. Since she lives in California, she spends a large portion of her time focusing on polluted communities in California. As an established name and figure, people still see her as a “savior” because of her work in Hinkley; however, she must constantly remind people that she is merely human and not a miracle worker. After the activist spoke at a meeting in Porter Ranch, one woman described her by saying, “she’s Erin Brockovich. She’s fixed things in the past” (Carrol, 2016). In this way, her celebrity status has become a way of transforming her into a larger-than-life figure. This stems from women being perceived as “carrying the world’s ills,” as Val Plumwood described earlier. When combined with her fame and celebrity, she is seen only for her ability to fix environmental contamination; her personhood and other capacities are diminished in the same way that Mother Nature is only seen for her reproductive and life-giving properties. The connection between Brockovich as the “savior” and Mother Nature as the source of life allows Brockovich to be seen as Nature’s “protector.” This connection has enabled her success as a celebrity activist, but it also is tiring because Brockovich cannot always protect Nature and innocent communities from
environmental contamination. Despite all of her hard work and attempts to get both the government and PG&E to clean up their acts, Hinkley is still contaminated.

Additionally, she uses her celebrity status as a means of inspiration and motivation. She is also a motivational speaker who lectures about the power of the individual and the power of choice in life. Her talks are not centered on environmental issues but rather on the ability one possesses to change the course of one’s life, even if all seems hopeless. Because of her humble background, she easily connects with the “common” American. This aids in building her brand of “Erin Brockovich,” a celebrity activist that people can relate to and hope to imitate. Her performance is a component of the brand as she uses it to draw people in and benefit from their fascination with the sexy woman who took down PG&E. Motivational speaking is more than an opportunity to inspire people; it is a mechanism to show the world the possibilities associated with the manipulation of gender performance and agency within discursively defined societal norms.
Conclusion

Rachel Carson, Lois Gibbs, and Erin Brockovich made remarkable impacts in the anti-toxic crusade in the United States and have been formative in leading and altering the environmental movement. I was interested in focusing on these three women because of the differences in their lived experiences. Their different situations enabled them to manipulate their gender performances in order to communicate their ideas, as well as to alter the discourse around female activism and achievement. While all three women faced criticism and institutionalized sexism in their pursuit of anti-toxic legislation, their accomplishments were aided by their whiteness.

In the same way that gender has been culturally constructed to reinforce male dominance and subjugate women, race too has been culturally constructed to support whites as dominant and non-whites as subordinate. Additionally, the gender aspect of racial dominance is complex. The appeal of whiteness mediated the activists’ transgressions of the emotionality/rationality binary and “deviant” behavior in public spaces; whiteness is seen as “neutral” and “natural”, and therefore enabled their success. While these three women were criticized for standing up against sexist, masculine institutions, “sexism as a system of domination has been institutionalized, but it has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in society” (hooks, 2000). Because of the intersectional nature of oppression, not only gender, but also identifiers such as class and race, determine a woman’s fate. Carson’s, Gibbs’s, and Brockovich’s interactions with sexism and feminism were mediated by
race; the institutionalization of racism within the fabric of the United States meant that their dissent against the patriarchy would not be completely silenced or unheard, unlike non-white women who tried to speak up. Gibbs and Brockovich both came from lower class backgrounds, but their whiteness allowed them to move into the public sphere with relative ease. I do not wish to discount their work or struggles by any means, but there is a reason why these women are present in the national memory of leading female environmentalists and not women such as Hazel Johnson, Beverly Wright, or Kari Fulton.

In addition to the ways in which whiteness privileges women who take up activist causes, whiteness also privileges communities. Though environmental contamination largely affects poorer communities who cannot afford to move away from the hazardous land, this issue also intersects with race. As compared to the United States as a whole, blacks are 75% more likely to live in “fenceline zones,” which are zones defined as one-tenth of the distance of a vulnerability zone (the maximum possible area where people could be harmed by a worst-case release of certain toxic or flammable chemicals) to a chemical facility; Latinos are 60% more likely to live in these areas, and the poverty rate in fenceline areas is 50% higher than for the rest of the country (Orum, Moore, Roberts, & Sanchez, 2014). These statistics, compounded with the fact that structural racism means that minorities, especially blacks, are almost three times more likely to live in poverty, show that systems of harm and contamination disproportionately affect blacks and other minority communities (National Poverty Center, 2016). Black children have been
found to have blood lead levels that are three times higher than white children (Drum, 2013). Research has shown that “people-of-color communities have borne a disproportionate burden of this nation’s air, water, and waste problems as well as the siting of sewer treatment plants; municipal landfills; incinerators; hazardous waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities; and other noxious plants” (Hofrichter, 1993). In addition to being located near factories and landfills, many communities of color are placed at highway intersections which are sources of dioxin and particulate matter pollution. Poor communities and communities of color are unfairly saddled with the responsibility of living in contaminated areas and dealing with the negative health effects that result.

The timeliest example of the undue environmental burdens that poor communities and communities of color face is the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. In April 2014, the state government ordered the city of Flint, with a population of 100,000, to switch its water source from Detroit’s to the Flint River in order to save money. The Flint River has a history of contamination and was once used as a dumping ground by General Motors. When fecal bacteria appeared in the water system a few months after the switch, officials ordered extra chlorine to be pumped throughout the system. Negligently, they did not order corrosive controls, chemical measures that are applied to water systems to prevent metals from leaching out of aging pipes and into the water supply, to be applied when using the extra chlorine, despite the history of contamination (Lurie, 2016). The contamination meant that the Flint River’s water was already significantly more corrosive than Detroit’s water at
baseline. The lack of corrosive control allowed the lead to leach out of the pipes and into the water supply (Lin, 2016). Residents soon began complaining to local and state officials that the water smelled and tasted off, but their complaints were dismissed. In Flint, 57% of residents are black, 40% live below the poverty line, and the median income is just under $25,000 a year (United States Census Bureau, 2015). The EPA and lower-level government agencies have systemically ignored many of their own laws and regulations in communities of color and poor communities because these communities generally do not possess the time, educational background, or resources to mobilize and protest environmental contamination (Hofrichter, 1993). When residents in these areas are actually able to speak up, their voices are usually silenced or ignored because of the lack of value attributed to these communities.

Despite government reassurances, concern about the water supply grew in households throughout Flint, especially because there was only one grocery store for the entire city, making bottled water extremely difficult, if not completely impossible, to obtain. One mother, LeeAnne Walters, noticed her children unexpectedly becoming very ill. Her daughter’s hair fell out, one of her sons stopped growing, and her babies developed rashes after bathing (Lurie, 2016). She, like Lois Gibbs, used her gender performance of motherhood to step into the public sphere and engage with local government officials. She wrote emails, attended meetings, and called her local representatives about these alarming health issues. However, these attempts to engage the local officials failed and she was seen as a “hysterical” woman
overreacting to a “minor” problem, just as Carson, Gibbs, and Brockovich were perceived. Nonetheless, as a mother, she was undeterred in her crusade to help her children and reached out to individuals in higher places, including EPA representative Miguel Del Toral. Unlike most of the male officials determined to maintain hegemonic power structures, he was horrified by her story and wanted to remedy the situation. He put her in touch with scientist Marc Edwards to collect data to present to the government. After collecting samples from her faucets, Edwards found that the Flint water contained levels of lead that were twice as high as the EPA limit for hazardous material (Lurie, 2016). While Edwards was conducting and presenting his data, Walters organized other concerned parents and they engaged state government officials in meetings and with emails and phone calls until their persistence led to action. Her activism, in conjunction with Del Toral’s cooperation, Edwards’s research, and work done by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a doctor at the nearby Hurley Medical Center, forced Michigan Governor Rick Snyder to declare a city-wide public health emergency in October 2015.

Prior to this announcement, while Walters was mobilizing her campaign within the community, Hanna-Attisha was spending long nights in the hospital’s lab comparing the lead in local children’s blood tests to children elsewhere in Genesee County. Her research showed extremely elevated lead levels, indicating lead poisoning among many of Flint’s children. Daily usage of the water in Flint was “equivalent to drinking through a lead painted straw” (Lurie, 2016). Dr. Hanna-Attisha felt the same pull as Rachel Carson to present her findings to the public in
order to alert them to the growing public health crisis. Although this was a more acute case, she was in a similarly knowledgeable position and felt the same need to share the information with the public in order to prevent further damage. Though to a lesser degree than Carson, she was also vilified by her opponents: Michigan State officials criticized her, called her “hysterical” and discounted her work as a means of maintaining their power. When the government could no longer ignore the disturbing revelations, they finally reluctantly declared a public health crisis and allowed Hanna-Attisha to present her findings, making the doctor a local hero despite the gendered pushback she faced.

The water crisis in Flint was largely due to the marginalization and structural racism embedded within the city and government institutions. In a *New York Times* article about the independent panel formed to assess the crisis, staff writer Julie Bosman writes, “disregard for the concerns of poor and minority people contributed to the government’s slow response to complaints from residents of Flint, Mich., about the foul and discolored water that was making them sick” (2016). The panel called it a case of environmental injustice and addressed the fact that these issues “not only created the crisis, but prolonged it” (Bosman, 2016). The bureaucracy’s disregard for the residents’ welfare not only resulted in slow and uncaring responses, but officials also manipulated data in order to keep the crisis “contained.” LeeAnne Walters noted that when Flint representatives came to test the water, they flushed out the faucets before collecting samples; Dr. Hanna-Attisha also remarked that the reports compiled on lead levels in Flint children’s blood included some samples from outside city
limits (Lurie, 2016). The panel’s findings showed significant negligence and failure on the government’s behalf because of Flint’s racial and class demographics. Though disheartening, this failure is unsurprising given America’s institutionalization of racism and disregard for the lower classes.

Unfortunately, the water crisis in Flint is not an isolated issue; 41 states reported lead levels higher than the acceptable EPA limit\(^8\) in their water systems within the last three years (Gusovsky, 2016). The areas with the most contamination are those with largely minority and poor populations. The same institutions created for the purposes of protecting the most vulnerable citizens are the ones that enable their demise. The legacy of Rachel Carson, Lois Gibbs, and Erin Brockovich has made the United States more cognizant of the danger of toxic environmental pollution, but without structural reform, government institutions will continue to favor white, middle and upper class citizens. All three women were privileged by their whiteness, and by manipulating their gender performances they were able to change the discourse around environmental activism and destructive environmental practices. Unfortunately, because American society is more willing to enable transgressions of specific socially constructed boundaries, mainstream activism is not as accessible to people of certain genders, races, classes, abilities, and more; structural changes would not only make environmental activism more inclusive, but would reduce issues of environmental injustice as well. However, until these changes

\(^8\) The EPA passed a regulation in 1991 known as the Lead and Copper Rule, which sets limits on acceptable levels of these metals in drinking water.
are made and environmental justice becomes a priority, Love Canal, Hinkley, Flint, and countless other contaminated sites will continue to poison U.S. citizens.
Works Cited


