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The Mothers of East Los Angeles: (Other)Mothering for Environmental Justice

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA)—an environmental justice group started and led by older Mexican American women—and the organization’s campaign to prevent the construction of a state prison in their neighborhood. The women enact motherwork that protects the well-being of the neighborhood’s children, in addition to crafting motherhood into a communal responsibility to look after the neighborhood as a mother would their child. MELA’s maternal appeals rely on and eclipse identification with traditional gender categories, suggesting new ways for motherhood to function as an organizing principle to mobilize collectives. More broadly, this essay contributes to scholarly discussions on rhetorical agency by considering motherhood as a means for women’s collective resistance and empowerment.

Beginning in the early 1980s, Governor George Deukmejian began an aggressive statewide prison reform to address the rapid rates of incarceration in California’s prison system. Purportedly spending $3.3 billion, the reform sought to build eight penitentiaries and make major additions to seven existing institutions. One of the new prisons proposed was a 1,450-bed high-rise along the Los Angeles River near the predominantly Mexican American neighborhood of Boyle Heights. The governor, along with the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors and Department of Corrections (DOC), argued that East L.A. would be ideal for the prison, citing that its location was close to the courthouse in downtown L.A., would provide necessary jobs to the surrounding communities, and could house inmates closer to their families. Assemblywoman Gloria Molina took issue with the prison’s location, contending that the project ignored Boyle Heights’ history of being displaced by development, the proximity of the prison to homes and schools, and its addition to a neighborhood already housing more than 14,000 inmates in smaller detention facilities. Given her difficulty convincing prison proponents, Molina set up a meeting with Boyle Heights residents to mobilize support against the project. That small, informal meeting birthed what would become the Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA) organization and began a six-year grassroots campaign against the city, state, and DOC over the prison’s placement and construction. Mobilized by a shared dedication to safeguarding their families and neighborhood, the women of MELA crafted maternity as a fundamental organizing base from which they protested the disparate impacts of the prison and, in effect, constituted themselves and their community as environmental justice activists.

The prison, however, was not Boyle Heights’ first time being displaced by government projects. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the state of California began construction on the L.A. freeway and...
Dodger Stadium. The projects reportedly displaced 10,000 residents in East L.A. in an effort to avoid political opposition over land value depletion in affluent white neighborhoods. In an interview with The New York Times (NYT), Juana Beatriz Gutiérrez—one of the founding members of MELA—explained that “people didn’t fight back” against the freeway and stadium projects because they thought “there was nothing you could do about it.” So “when the prison project came up,” some Boyle Heights residents were “tired” of the city “doing things without telling us.” For many concerned mothers, the announcement of the prison was a “springboard for resistance” that would launch them into a battle for environmental justice. Beginning in July of 1986, MELA held weekly marches every Monday afternoon across the Olympic Boulevard Bridge that connects the Boyle Heights neighborhood to the location of the proposed project. As the Mothers continued their weekly protests, support for and membership in the organization grew rapidly, empowering the Boyle Heights community to become one of the most outspoken voices against the prison.

Through an analysis of MELA’s anti-prison campaign, I demonstrate how rhetorical agency operates collaboratively within environmental justice contexts via performances of motherhood, most notably how motherhood is redefined through this process into a network of care that assists in organizing and leading grassroots efforts. For the purpose of this essay, I use the term rhetorical agency to denote the collaborative and collective dimensions to agents’ actions. While conversations on the topic see collective agency as a representational interchange between a speaker and a group of people, I suggest that collective agency is also a constitutive process assembled through various reiterations of collaboration. And while many women engage in environmental justice, in part, because of a felt responsibility as mothers to protect their families, there is more to the “mother” identity than explaining individual women’s motives for activism. The Mothers’ anti-prison campaign offers an opportunity to examine how environmental justice contexts transform motherhood into an agency through which women become a unified group of community representatives establishing links between their individual homes, the welfare of human bodies, and the overall sustainability of their neighborhood. MELA’s rhetorics of motherhood conceive motherwork as a cooperative process wherein women seek out modes of identification and symbolic action with other concerned mothers as well as the Boyle Heights community. And it is through that collaborative process, I contend, that the women of MELA redefine the notion of motherhood beyond its biological limits to protect the neighborhood’s children and other community members.

In this essay, I argue that MELA’s conception of motherhood encompasses more than empowering individual women to protest the prison to include agencies of motherhood that constituted a shared sense of agency among the women and their community. In addition to grounding their arguments against the prison in their roles as mothers and housewives, the women of MELA constructed themselves as othermothers: a form of maternal labor where a woman looks after others’ children as they would their own, whether she has children of her own or not. Expanding the scope of the “mother” identity renovates motherhood in ways that not only mobilized the women’s collective action but provided them with rhetorical resources to protest the prison project. MELA also emboldened nonmembers, with or without children, to act rhetorically as othermothers by articulating a shared responsibility to look after the kids of the neighborhood as a mother would her own children. In addition, MELA presented themselves as mothers of the community and reconstituted motherhood to include a more generalized ethic of care that saw motherwork as a form of communal labor. While the organization has since fractured, I contend that the Mothers’ strategic rhetorics, beyond undoubtedly having a profound impact in stopping the prison project, reveal the collective agentic capabilities possible with motherhood.

More broadly, I seek to give power and value to othermothering as a strategy that enables women’s collective agency. Moving beyond the presumption that motherhood is only a motivation for activism, othermothering presents opportunities to examine how women rely on and challenge traditional gender norms related to maternity to construct and advance advocacies under the altruistic goal of protecting children. Renovating othermothering into a rhetorical practice for engendering environmental justice expands the scope of motherhood to include the ways women
mobilize maternity to inspire and bring about collaborative action. Recent scholarship details individual speakers constituting a collective rhetoric through othermothering as a means of “gaining respect” while also “serving [their] community at large.”

Shifting the focus, in this essay I explore how groups of women practice motherwork together as well as the ways they incentivize audiences to perform similar practices regardless of reproductive and familial affinities. Othermothering constructs and maintains networks that promote knowledge bases, value systems, and forms of world-making that both rely on and eclipse identification with traditional gender categories and promote care, empathy, and nurturance as unifying principles to mobilize collectives. By examining how such practices were important for bringing together and empowering members of an already marginalized community, I aim to help rhetoric scholars identify and explain how modes of agency operate to bring together collectives around organizing principles related to motherhood.

The essay follows in three parts. First, I examine existing scholarship on motherhood and environmental justice as it relates to othermothering, its rhetorical sensitivities, and the contributions the concept makes to theories of rhetorical agency. Second, I examine the othermothering practices of MELA and find that they worked to communicate the women’s collective responsibility to mother others’ children as well as to mother their community. And finally, I conclude by considering the importance and relevance of othermothering in testing the boundary conditions of rhetorical agency, motherhood, and environmental justice.

Environmental justice activism and (other)mothering

As a social movement and scholarly endeavor, environmental justice contends that people of color and low-income communities bear a disproportionate burden of environmental pollution and toxins when compared to white, affluent neighborhoods. Studies that explored the geographical processes that produce such disparate impacts surfaced in the 1980s and provided important evidence of environmental inequity with regard to the racial and class disparities in the distribution of environmental hazards and goods. Most notably, these studies enabled activists to employ civil rights discourses (e.g., “rights,” “equity,” “fairness”) to advocate for changes to environmental policies and procedures. While an emphasis on allocation has been critical to developing an understanding of environmental justice, scholars argue that the focus offers an incomplete understanding of “justice” that overlooks the “social structure and institutional context” that shape distributive patterns. Structures and practices, in addition to the rules and norms that guide them, are mediated by language and social interactions that condition “people’s ability to participate in determining their actions and their ability to develop and exercise their capabilities.” It is not enough to “gain a place at the environmental decision making tables,” Phaedra Pezzullo reminds us, because once “those spaces are made … there are substantive challenges that constrain citizens from having effects.” Thus, it is important to develop our conversations about environmental justice to also include “the nature of subsequent negotiations between citizens and institutions” in their battle over what should be considered the “environment” and “justice.”

In addition to the limitations of a purely distributive focus on environmental justice, its emphasis on race and class potentially obfuscates the role other identity categories may have in helping analyze environmental justice. In particular, and of interest for this essay, the role gender plays in shaping how activists understand and partake in environmental justice, Rachel Stein remarks, “remains underexplored.” And this is surprising given that women are the “daily observers” who notice environmental disturbances and hazards first, regularly propelling them into activism. Women, often working-class and women of color, become involved in environmental justice out of the necessity to protect their families, making up an incredible percentage of active members in neighborhood environmental justice groups. For the women of MELA, their participation in the anti-prison campaign was, in part, for very similar reasons. The prison presented an opportunity, as Gutiérrez explained in the NYT interview, to become “involved in this sort of thing … for the children.” The Mothers saw themselves as procurators of their families who voiced concerns “not
for self-interests” but “for the children’s interests.” Giovanna Di Chiro explains that this shared commitment is often due to how the “everydayness” of nature “brings environmental issues home” for women. The current essay does not disregard race and class as important modes of analysis; rather, I am interested in how motherhood gets mobilized to discuss and deliberate on issues related to the health and safety of human communities and the environment. Thus, I prioritize gender as a means to analyze how women take up motherhood as an agency for coming together to organize and lead grassroots campaigns.

Being a mother may certainly be a motivating factor for women to become involved in environmental justice, but their rhetorics of motherhood encompass more than just women’s relationships with their home and family. Women transcribe their everydayness with the environment into public forms of resistance against dominant and normative power structures becoming a “rich source of empowerment” as they “reshape traditional language and meanings into an ideology of resistance.” In any conversation of people resisting dominant structures and institutions, both in efforts to articulate a sense of self or community and to create social change, the topic of agency is relevant. Rhetorical agency, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell argues, is quite “promiscuous and protean,” however, as it can refer to “invention, strategies, authorship, institutional power, identity, subjectivity, practices, and subject positions.” Agency, then, is less an object one has or retains and more the means by which an agent or set of agents makes possible symbolic action. Rhetorical agency, Erin Rand adds, is inherently connected to broader topics regarding empowerment and resistance, contending that marginalized individuals and groups utilize whatever means necessary and available to “redistribute relations of power and redefine categories of identity.” Stacey Sowards moves these discussions even further, considering how Latina women, such as Dolores Huerta’s leadership in the United Farm Workers movement, employ the resistive elements of rhetorical agency to navigate gender, race, and class constraints. What has come to define rhetorical agency is an understanding of invention, style, and form that is neither isolated from dominant structures and ideologies nor entirely determined by them. For the women of MELA, their positions as Mexican American mothers could easily be read as limiting the potential of their activism. The current essay, however, considers the resistive elements of MELA’s motherwork and explores their capacities to generate women’s collective resistance and empowerment.

Performances of rhetorical agency are often facilitated through collaborative and collective means, which is a growing perspective on rhetorical agency that expands the theory to include leaderless grassroots movements and ones organized and led by marginalized groups. Sowards suggests that agency is more than an individual process but also how the agent embraces “enabling mechanisms, such as collective and collaborative efforts for social organizing” and “elements that facilitate the constitution of identity.” For example, Sarah Hayden contends that participants at the Million Mom March transformed maternity from a “personal relationship” into a “public alliance modeled after the interconnected relationships between the moms and their children.” The women’s collective public performances of motherhood promote a “social and political worldview” in which “nurturance, empathy, and care are privileged” as permissible values for civil and political engagement. In environmental justice, studies of motherhood as an agency for collective resistance and empowerment are limited but still provide a helpful context for the current essay. Jennifer Peeples finds that for women engaged in a South-Central community environmental justice dispute, the “concerned mother” identity served to unite a group of women under the “altruistic goal of protecting their children” as well as confirmed their collective legitimacy and authority to speak on issues of health and safety. In accord with the scholars discussed above, I consider how motherhood can expand and enrich these discussions of collective agency by moving beyond individual rhetors speaking to and on behalf of a community to consider maternity as both a site and means for women’s collaborative environmental justice activism.

Motherhood can facilitate capacities to access and participate in environmental decision making by constituting agencies for women to publicly reflect on and critique environmental concerns. When children’s welfare is “called into question by outside forces,” the boundaries that often define
“public” and “private” are blurred and the “place where mothers are perceived to be knowledgeable” is extended from the home to the community.\textsuperscript{35} For MELA, the women’s private experiences are renovated into politically enabling resources to draw on when making arguments on behalf of their families, possibly displayed best in their organization’s motto:

\textit{Not economically rich, but culturally wealthy. Not politically powerful, but socially conscious. Not mainstream educated, but armed with the knowledge, commitment, and determination that only a mother can possess.}\textsuperscript{36}

In using a “not-but” structure, the motto articulates the organization’s values and strategies by juxtaposing the women’s available means for agency to the resources utilized by those who are most likely to threaten their neighborhood. The parallel phrasing crafts the constraints that often impair women’s capacity to engage in public deliberations into empowering resources that can influence social and political deliberations. Women’s familial responsibilities and the maternal wisdom they learn from those experiences are emboldened as a result, renovating the “mother” identity into a canary cry that could warn and protect others.\textsuperscript{37} As women make public judgments with regard to their individual families’ health and well-being, they often widen the scope of their mothering to include the structures of power that make possible environmental injustice and the broader collectives impacted by them.

Although maternal appeals for environmental justice often begin with women communicating “home-based concerns,” MELA expanded their “issue identification” to locate “their concerns within broader societal/structural contexts.”\textsuperscript{38} Such activities are similar to the concept of othermothering.\textsuperscript{39} Othermothering is a form of maternal labor that sees motherwork “in relation to the welfare of the community as a whole.”\textsuperscript{40} Often this position is bestowed upon women who have lived long enough to have a sense of the community’s tradition and culture as well as exhibit what Stanlie James calls an “ethic of care” toward the “survival and well-being” of those in their community.\textsuperscript{41} I suggest that othermothering is a rhetorical strategy that assists women in establishing linkages between the health and safety of their homes and the health and safety of their neighborhood. The practice, through its various reiterations, blurs the boundary between individual and community and makes women’s activism through collective action possible. The problematic of rhetorical agency has prompted scholars to explore the means of empowerment for individual female rhetors and their representative capacities\textsuperscript{42} as well as leaderless movements’ potentialities for environmental justice.\textsuperscript{43} However, we do not yet fully understand how groups of women come together to collaborate around common environmental issues while also utilizing gender in various ways to advocate for justice through community-led actions.

My analysis of MELA’s motherwork adds the insight that motherhood can facilitate an organizing base around which a group of women can participate in environmental justice and, more importantly, renovate the “mother” identity into an agency for collective resistance and empowerment. Othermothering expands the traditional notions of “motherhood” that often rely on reproduction and kinship and, instead, suggest that motherhood includes an unwavering commitment to the betterment and protection of others. As a rhetorical practice invested in fostering networks of care, othermothering entails a type of “motherwork” that Collins argues “recognizes that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and identity.”\textsuperscript{44} The practice is a particularly salient rhetorical strategy in communities of color because an individual’s survival is often linked to the survival of their community and, thus, individuals take on the responsibility to care for others outside of their immediate family.\textsuperscript{45} As a result of such motherwork, women “provide analyses and/or critiques of conditions or situations that may affect the well-being of [their] community.”\textsuperscript{46} In context to environmental justice, the practice enables women to craft structural criticisms and speak on behalf of their community’s health and safety as they organize and lead grassroots actions.

Although it is difficult for women to convince outsiders that environmental injustice is occurring in their neighborhood, othermothering is a helpful practice when speaking to members of their community or other communities who believe they share a similar situation. In her analysis of
“mom-in-chief” Michelle Obama, Hayden argues that Obama effectively utilized motherwork to transform herself into both othermother-in-chief and mother of the broader Black community. Both practices cast Obama into a “powerful role” that both offers “a critique of the racism extant in U.S. culture” as well as works to “advance the needs of people of color.” However, Hayden’s analysis is limited in its scope and does not consider the ways othermothering works collaboratively. For example, speakers at the Million Mom March advocated for “women and men of various ethnicities, races, religious beliefs, sexual orientations[,] and professional identity” to share in the “responsibility to participate in maternal practices” that protect children from gun violence. Othermothering carries the capacity to generate collaboration by speaking across differences and constructing a common identity (mother) around a shared responsibility (protecting and caring for children). In doing so, the practice assists women in clarifying and communicating a unified sense of resistance and empowerment, not just among women themselves but also inspiring mutual critique and reflection within a broader collective.

By echoing and extending communication theories regarding othermothering, I argue that it is a rhetorical agency for women’s collaborative environmental justice activism. The women of MELA present an opportunity to theorize the concept much further than existing rhetorical scholarship on both motherhood and environmental justice by detailing not just the forms in which their rhetorics take shape but also how othermothering authorizes and enables collaborative acts of resistance and empowerment. The Mothers practice othermothering as the means through which they build and maintain support for a broader network beyond their individual family units. As the rhetorical means for the women’s collaboration, othermothering assists in creating critical linkages among individual women, their families, their community, and the environment in which they exist.

**The MELA anti-prison campaign**

Despite the East L.A. community’s reluctance to get involved in oppositional issues and organizations in the past, the anti-prison campaign sparked their interests because it centered motherhood as an impetus and means for participation. On May 24, 1985, Assemblywoman Molina hosted a casual get-together to “inform the community in E.L.A. of an injustice … to build a jail.” From that meeting, Juana Beatriz Gutiérrez and her husband, along with two leaders from local parishes and two other concerned mothers from the neighborhood, began an informal campaign to raise awareness of the proposed prison. The group shared information “by means of the different parishes in E.L.A.” and collected signatures “to demonstrate the community’s opposition to the construction of the jail.”

A local priest, Father John Moretta, worked alongside the group, assisting them in networking with the community and often, due to language barriers, acting as a representative for the organization to the media. However, the women built and maintained the organization. It was the concerned mothers who were most successful in getting others involved, Father Moretta noted, because “people trusted them … when they came to share information it wasn’t like a complete stranger trying to ask them to join and be political.”

Unified around a central issue, the group of concerned mothers became “committed to organizing, educating[,] and mobilizing [the] community for the benefit of [their] children.” MELA’s activism, while directed at prison proponents, was also strategically crafted with the intention to evoke similar reflections and critiques in their community.

To better understand how the Mothers’ quotidian and organizational activities shaped their anti-prison campaign, I analyze archive material gathered from the *Juana Beatriz Gutiérrez Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection* in the Special Collections and Archives at California State University, Northridge. The collection consists of correspondences to and from MELA, newspaper clippings regarding the organization during their activities, as well as flyers, magazine articles, interviews, ethnographic studies, and certificates of achievements for MELA. The current essay joins with other scholars interested in taking seriously the practices of marginalized communities and their everyday discourses that often evade critical attention, particularly in places battling for environmental justice. By illuminating how MELA builds and maintains a sense of motherhood that is
politically empowering, I offer up “new perspectives and windows” into the ways women mobilize motherhood to articulate a collective sense of agency that is often only documented in newspaper articles, photographs, and correspondences.\textsuperscript{56} My hope is that analyzing the archive material can serve to document and give presence to a historically marginalized community of color and the women of that community who organized and led grassroots struggles for environmental justice. To accomplish this task, I first detail how MELA practiced othermothering as a means to look after and protect the neighborhood’s children—a rhetorical practice the women also employed to inspire mutual critique and reflection in their community. Then, I analyze how the women acted as mothers of the community, expanding the scope of motherhood even further to include a general ethic of care. And, finally, I consider the limitations to MELA’s othermothering practices, specifically the women’s lack of access to traditional means of deliberative engagement as well as men’s participation in their mothering rhetorics.

First, I will consider how the women of MELA came together and constructed themselves as mothers of others’ children. To look after and take responsibility for a child not one’s own, “in an arrangement that may or may not be formal,” is what Stanlie James calls othermothering.\textsuperscript{57} This type of motherwork, Patricia Hill Collins finds, occurs with older African American women who are perceived with a certain caliber of strength and wisdom and, as a result of such authority, take on the role as caretaker of others’ children.\textsuperscript{58} Othermothering, then, responds to issues brought home, but often those issues also impact the broader collective. Concerned mothers make maternal appeals for children who are not their own but who may also be impacted by the same outside threat. Within environmental justice contexts, suggest Peeples and DeLuca, women’s individual action will not suffice because the “material realities” of their conflicts demand “individual knowledge and empowerment and community action.”\textsuperscript{59} Motherhood takes on a collective public persona wherein women speak on behalf of children writ large by offering up maternal appeals that promote an alternative “political and moral order” based on values of care and nurturance.\textsuperscript{60} Thus, othermothering does important agentic work within preexisting kinship networks, but do so by reconstituting the role of a “mother” to include a shared ethic of care toward others’ children.

The women of MELA strategically employed othermothering as a means to unify the group under the banner of caring for the neighborhood’s children. While the Mothers were a central focus of the anti-prison campaign—spearheading protests and vigils—maintaining and improving the safety and health of the community’s children was an organizing force that mobilized the women’s collective activism. The “mother is the soul of the family,” founding member Aurora Castillo explains, but “the child is the heartbeat … we must fight to keep the heart of our community beating.”\textsuperscript{61} The Mothers certainly valued the well-being of their own children, but they also displayed an ethic of care toward others’ children, in effect communicating about the neighborhood’s children as a vulnerable group in need of protection. Others’ children—their well-being, health, and safety—came to represent not just the individual homes they live in but, as one informational flyer proclaims, the broader collective’s “empowerment and betterment.”\textsuperscript{62} Each child, Gutiérrez contends, is a “great asset to their community, their families[,] and to themselves.”\textsuperscript{63} However, “gangs, inadequate schools[,] and an insensitive government” threaten the “path to their children’s success.”\textsuperscript{64} The Mothers’ construction of the community’s children as a vulnerable social group permitted the women to assert that it was mothers who had to collectively “take action” against the prison.\textsuperscript{65} For MELA, motherwork was not only an individual responsibility but also a communal activity the women participated in that benefited everyone’s children. Othermothering not only brought the women of MELA together but provided means for the women’s collective resistance and empowerment because their sense of agency resided in the creation of a group of concerned mothers rather than residing in any one particular member. Unified by this shared “concerned mother” identity, the women of MELA came together to collaborate and enact ways to protect the neighborhood’s children.

Coming together as mothers of the neighborhood’s children provided MELA the means to place the prison project within a system of injustice that was far more likely to threaten the welfare of their children than any individual prisoner or jail. Slogans such as “Books Not Jails,” “Our Children
Need Schools Not Prisons,” and “Schools Not Prisons” filled the Mothers’ protest signs and cemented the prison within a broader criminal justice system that prioritized the incarceration of people of color over improving educational services. The slogans, in part, responded to Governor Deukmejian’s choice to locate the prison in Boyle Heights because, as one MELA pamphlet on the prison describes, his choice made it “blatantly clear” that the governor was “more preoccupied with sending our children to prison than keeping them in school.” Speaking as a group of concerned mothers on behalf of a vulnerable group of children helped to usher MELA’s opposition to the prison project through collective structural criticisms. Expanding the impacts of the prison to include its effects on the community’s children highlights the choice to locate it within Boyle Heights as symptomatic of a larger system of injustice. The Mothers’ arguments against the prison went beyond the threat posed by individual prisoners. Instead, prison proponents posed a much greater threat given their preoccupation with building a prison rather than investing in children’s futures. The women’s shared concerns certainly brought them together, but it also provided a juncture for their collaboration that revealed a common experience of injustice for many Boyle Heights families.

MELA also encouraged similar othermothering critiques and reflections in Boyle Heights residents. During her ethnographic research of the organization, Mary Pardo overheard women in the community express solidarity with the anti-prison campaign even when they did not share in the mother identity. At one anti-prison campaign meeting, a young woman from the neighborhood, when speaking of her support for organization, “qualified herself as a ‘resident’ but not a ‘mother’ of East Los Angeles.” MELA member Erlinda Robles replied, “When you are fighting for a better life for children and ‘doing’ for them, isn’t that what mothers do? So you don’t have to have children to be a mother.” Robles’ response to the woman’s concern, taken as is, reveals a way MELA encouraged community members to join the anti-prison campaign. Taken a bit further, her response also illuminates the use of a “feminine” style that invites collective action from members of their community who did not see themselves as a “concerned mother.” Traditionally “female crafts” of emotional support, nurturance, and empathy are unmoored from motherhood’s essentialist upbringing and, here, is reconditioned into a generalized ethic of care that summons others to promote “an alternative framework stressing connection, empathy, and familial concerns.” Othermothering operates an agency for collaborative motherwork because it does not rely purely on a biological or kin-based connection. Instead, MELA advocated for a form of motherhood that one performs when joining in on the responsibility of looking after another as a mother would her child. Rather than the “concerned mother” identity being solely defined by individual biological affiliations, MELA renovated motherhood into means for creating and sustaining networks of care among a collective.

Another example may elucidate further the othermothering rhetoric within MELA’s anti-prison campaign and its capacity to inspire mutual critique and reflection in the community. An image published in the Los Angeles Herald Examiner at one of MELA’s marches against the prison shows an older woman dressed in what appears to be a catholic habit, holding a sign with the words “NO PRISON IN EAST LA” above an image of a child behind prison bars. The newspaper captioned the picture declaring, “they’ll have none of it,” a statement that seemingly assimilates the woman into a “mother” role. Taken for what it appears to be, the image displays a generalized ethic of care toward protecting East Los Angeles children by a community member who, for all intents and purposes, is without child. The nun is framed through similar “militant mother” discourses that have come to define much of women’s environmental justice activism by displaying a protective refusal to be satisfied with the prison because of its impact on the community’s children. The nun’s involvement with the anti-prison campaign, the content of her protest sign, and other details regarding her attire suggests that she is joining in on MELA’s motherwork in ways that reaffirm a communal commitment to others’ children. Motherhood both was a site for the nun’s collaboration with the women of...
MELA as well as facilitated agencies for her to articulate a communal commitment to Boyle Heights through her disapproval of the prison project. Simply, othermothering transformed maternity into the symbolic and material means for the nun’s civic and political engagement. Both of these anecdotal illustrations, while still circumstantial, embody the ways MELA encouraged othermothering for nonmothers and displayed evidence of the enabling effects of motherhood beyond kinship that incentivized activism and built networks among residents of Boyle Heights.

The women of MELA also came together and crafted themselves into mothers of Boyle Heights residents. Bound up in MELA’s othermothering is a clear commitment to better their community. Often, women engaged in environmental justice struggles extend their motherwork beyond their individual family units as well as beyond children altogether. Women of color and indigenous women have long performed motherwork that includes mothering the broader community with which they belong. For example, Prindeville and Bretting interviewed indigenous women who named community development topics—such as employment opportunities, housing and transportation, and neighborhood and workplace safety—as salient issues that drive their environmental justice activism.

For the women of MELA, the rhetorics of othermothering that allowed them to be mothers of the neighborhood’s children also extended to older members of the community. More than simply residing in Boyle Heights, the Mothers saw themselves as protectors of the community: “digo ‘mi comunidad’ porque me siento parte de ella, quiero a mi raza como parte de mi familia” (“I say ‘my community’ because I feel am part of it. I love my raza, my people, as part of my family”). For Gutiérrez, she sees herself as both a mother and community member, roles that naturally overlapped during their environmental justice disputes. Being a “homemaker” and “resident of E.L.A.,” Gutiérrez explains, meant that she would always be committed to fighting “without ceasing” so that the community “will be respected.” By establishing links between her role as a homemaker and her role as a resident of East L.A., Gutiérrez extends the commitment to protect her own family to others in Boyle Heights. MELA saw community members as part of the women’s extended kinship network who, as such, needed to be cared for in ways similar to those of their children. The Mothers sought to increase the “potential within each person” living in Boyle Heights, whether through “education, self-esteem, health, employment, the environment[,] or political resources.” Collective resistance and empowerment is made possible through the women’s othermothering rhetorics because it expanded the scope of motherhood to include a general ethic of care that transmuted motherwork into a form of communal labor and responsibility.

MELA’s discourses and performances of motherhood and othermothering, however, were constrained in the impact of their rhetorical force. Most notably, motherhood was not an all-liberating strategy for the women. Often the women were branded as uneducated and uninformed about the environment, urban planning, and general knowledge about government policies, all constraints that made it difficult for their concerns to be taken seriously and addressed. The Mothers’ arguments against the prison that recalled the community’s history of displacement were also met with criticisms of being too localized, portraying the women and their concerns as narrow and self-interested. In addition, the women had to force themselves (sometimes literally) into these public conversations because their credibility to speak on such issues was questioned or disregarded all together. However, to solely characterize the Mothers as victims of these constraints ignores the various ways the women drew on their roles as mothers, housewives, and community members to craft collective arguments for environmental justice. Whereas some argue that motherhood can limit
women’s invention capabilities. MELA’s othermothering highlights “avenues of agency” made possible by women’s reconstitution of motherhood into a collective source of resistance and empowerment. MELA’s othermothering reveals alternative means of agency beyond being recognized by dominant institutions and structures of power and, instead, suggests that agency can be a collaborative process that occurs in the networking of a marginalized group of people.

In addition, the essentialist sensitivities of othermothering that often enabled the women’s activism did not translate completely for men in the organization. Originally, Father Moretta presumed that only concerned mothers would join the organization. In fact, he hoped more women would participate in the campaign because they would be “cooler and calmer and easier to control than the men.” And the “first times out,” Father Moretta explained, the majority of protesters were women but the mothers “began to invite their husbands and their children” to the meetings and marches. However, men often participated in more traditionally “masculine” ways by, for example, providing security at the protests and vigils. But others, like Erlinda Robles’ husband Valentín, started off by driving their wives to weekly meetings but quickly became interested in the organization’s concerns: “My husband doesn’t like getting involved, but he takes me because he knows I like it. … But he is very supportive. Once he gets there, he enjoys it and he starts in arguing too.” Juana Beatriz Gutiérrez’s husband, Ricardo, explained that some of the hesitation with the men’s activism within the organization might be informed by the community’s race and ethnicity:

The mother in a Latino community is the head of the household and the man is the supplier … but the woman runs the whole show. She is the one that takes care of the kids. … The macho image is a little different when you put it into practice. Sure, she does not do anything against my will. We always talk about it and then she goes ahead and does it. She has always been vociferous; maybe that is why we have stayed together so long.

Although there is a level of clarity in how the women from Boyle Heights crafted their motherwork as it relates to others’ children and the community, the roles men took on in the organization are a bit more opaque. So, while some men engaged in practices that can fall under the rubric of motherwork, other men in the organization retained a traditional “male” and “father” identity that made it difficult for them see themselves as a “mother” or doing motherwork. And while these nuances are quite important for understanding how men navigate racial, ethnic, and religious ties in conjunction with their construction of a “male” and “father” identity, the current essay is more concerned with how motherhood facilitated various agencies of collective resistance and empowerment among the women and, subsequently, how those maternal practices were encouraged in other members of the community. The gender roles that prevented some men from joining the organization or participating in MELA’s motherwork—arguably—also permitted the women of Boyle Heights to take on othermothering roles in significant ways that protected the welfare and safety of their neighborhood.

Birthing new perspectives on environmental justice

In this essay, I have argued that MELA crafted motherhood as an organizing base around which the women empowered themselves and their community to protest the location of a proposed prison in their neighborhood. The women of MELA practiced othermothering in their efforts to protect the well-being of the community’s children by constructing the prison as part of a systemic and structural effort that was more likely to threaten their children than any individual prisoner. The mothers also encouraged similar reflection and critique among their neighbors by advocating for an understanding of motherhood that was constituted through maternal practices and value systems rather than purely by biological affinities. Expanding the scope of motherhood beyond biological kinship empowered the Boyle Heights community to protect the neighborhood as a mother would her own child. Beyond constructing themselves and other residents as mothers of Boyle Heights children, MELA also utilized motherhood to articulate a collective sense of
resistance and empowerment among the women by positioning themselves as mothers of the community. This mothering of the community further blurs the boundaries between private and public and individual and community in ways that transform motherhood into a mode of civic and political engagement. Overall, my analysis of MELA’s anti-prison campaign illuminates how rhetorical agency is exercised within environmental justice contexts through motherhood; in particular, how women construct and maintain networks that promote care and nurturance as unifying principles to mobilize collectives.

Motherhood can be a critical entry point into understanding how women transform their roles as mothers, housewives, and community members into inventional resources that work to protest environmentally dangerous and discriminatory practices and policies. While not a traditional axis of analysis for understanding environmental justice, gender generally (and motherhood particularly) acts as a central organizing base for environmental justice activism and, as such, deserves more scholarly attention in detailing the various ways women participate in the decision-making process.

Through my analysis of MELA’s anti-prison campaign, I have shown how othermothering is a powerful and valuable practice of rhetoric that assists in unifying a group of women around environmental justice concerns and, through such process, enables a redefining of motherhood through collaborative and collective terms. Moving forward, we may consider how othermothering makes possible new means of political efficacy beyond environmental justice contexts. One might consider the use of othermothering in contemporary contexts regarding gun control, police brutality, prison abolition, and vaccinations and immunizations. And while MELA’s othermothering practices identify with conventional gender codes, I also examine, be they ephemeral, moments in the Mothers’ campaign against the prison wherein the women worked to inspire similar maternal reflections and critiques in others. Motherhood is renovated in such a way that care, empathy, and nurturance are organizing principles that bring people together and are then summoned to articulate collective resistance and empowerment. Overall, othermothering is an important concept for rhetorical scholars to continue exploring because it calls into question who can be a “mother” and what is considered “motherwork” in ways that may rely on and eclipse identification with traditional gender categories.

MELA’s anti-prison campaign offers scholars interested in rhetorical agency new avenues to explore how groups of marginalized people collaborate in their negotiations with power structures and institutions, craft collective subjectivities among each other, and sustain grassroots struggles for social and political change. We are used to thinking of rhetorical agency in terms of individuals, and within that framework, the efforts of MELA may not register as a particularly noteworthy case. But as my analysis has shown, MELA’s anti-prison campaign is instructive for scholars invested in theorizing new modes of rhetorical agency. I suggest that rhetorical agency is also a collective process encompassing various reiterations of collaboration, a subtle but critical shift from conversations that see collective agency as individual agency scaled up (e.g., a rhetor speaking on behalf of or in the name of a community). MELA’s use of othermothering illustrates how rhetorical reinvention of the traditional “mother” identity can transcend the individual to generate collective agencies. In addition to bringing the “collective” in our conversations about rhetorical agency, it is important to test our theories of rhetorical agency and expand them to account for women, specifically women of color, and their particular modes of collaborative communication. The work of rhetorical scholars of ecofeminism has made more robust analyses regarding women’s environmental communication possible and laid the groundwork for understanding how gender (as well as other intersectional identities) enables and constrains women’s available means for creating social and political change.

Other women-led groups have capitalized on maternity’s traditional characteristics of care and nurturance to promote environmentally friendly and sustainable practices regarding energy, climate change, conservation, and sovereignty. For example, women leading protests against a pipeline on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota see themselves as “water protectors” fighting on behalf of their children and grandchildren for a “more peaceful and balanced way with Mother Earth.” Beyond providing salience to this essay’s claim that motherhood is a modality for women’s
environmental justice activism, other examples offer new opportunities for scholars interested in collective agency to explore how gender gets articulated in women’s collaboration for a more just and sustainable world.

MELA’s anti-prison campaign and their strategic uses of motherhood also illuminate how citizens—often marked by an urgency to protect themselves, their families, and communities—employ tactics for environmental justice that gain visibility for their concerns, critique dominant institutions and structures, and encourage community participation. And to some degree, it worked. In September 1992, Governor Pete Wilson scrapped the prison project in a “landmark victory” for the community. However, the prison project was only the beginning of MELA’s environmental justice activism. Soon after the announcement of the prison project, the state of California also announced a toxic waste incinerator in the neighboring community of Vernon. In a joint effort with MELA, the project was defeated by multiple neighborhoods in East L.A. The Mothers have gone on to prevent an oil pipeline from going through Boyle Heights; started the Mothers of East Los Angeles Water Conservation Program that provided residents with free low-flush toilets; protested alongside Cesar Chavez over the use of harmful agricultural pesticides; and set up college scholarships for area high school students. Yet even with such success, MELA remains unexplored by communication scholars interested in environmental justice and/or gender. Just as the mothers of Boyle Heights felt it was their responsibility to care for and protect their children and community, communication scholars must also display similar gallantry and obligation to detail the activities of those who face unfathomable odds and still succeed.

Notes

2. Department of Corrections Letter, June 5, 1985, Box 9, Folder 12, Juana Beatriz Gutiérrez Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Prisons—Correspondence to MELA, Oviatt Library Special Collectives and Archives, California State University, Northridge, CA. March 2016.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. MELA members are commonly referred to as “the Mothers.”
9. During a meeting of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies (ARS) in fall of 2004, a working group of forty scholars spent the better of four days trying to understand how rhetorical studies ought to understand the concept of rhetorical agency. The group organized their thoughts into three major themes: the illusion of agency as an object to be “given” or taken away, the skill of the agents to navigate contingent rhetorical situations, and the situational and structural conditions for agency that enable and constrain symbolic and material action. Cheryl Geisler documents that the ARS working group acknowledged that the term “agency” has shifted some in the previous decades of rhetorical scholarship, becoming “less concerned with determining the universals for rhetorical actions’ and “more interested in the specific local and or historical conditions that undergird it.” This essay does not attempt to parse through these debates, not because they are irrelevant but, rather, because my starting point for theorizing rhetorical agency is with these agreements. From there, however, I am interested in exploring how collaborative and collective means of resistance and empowerment complicate and expand existing theories of rhetorical agency. Cheryl Geisler, “How Ought We to Understand the Concept of Rhetorical Agency? Report From the ARS,” Rhetoric Society Quarterly 34, no. 3 (2004): 14. For more on these debates and key “turns” in rhetorical studies regarding rhetorical agency, see Dilip Gaonkar, “The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science,” in Rhetorical Hermeneutics: Invention and Interpretation in the Age of Science, ed. A. G. Gross and W. M. Ketih (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 25–88; Michael Leff, “Tradition and Agency in Humanistic Rhetoric,” Philosophy & Rhetoric 45, no. 2 (2003): 135–47; Sonja K.

10. This definition is adapted from Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 139.


12. I focus primarily on the Mothers’ anti-prison campaign that occurred between 1985, when the organization first began, and 1992, when the prison was postponed indefinitely. My focus on the anti-prison campaign is intentional as it occurred prior to the organization’s split into two groups: MELA and the Madres del Este de Los Angeles, Santa Isabel (MELASI). Rather than parse through that disagreement, this essay is more interested in how motherhood acted as an organizing base to bring the women together.


22. Ibid.

23. Giovanna Di Chiro found in her 1990 study that 90 percent of the active members in neighborhood environmental justice groups were women. See Di Chiro, “Defining Environmental Justice,” 118. Building upon that, Stein documents that women account for up to 60 percent of the leadership of people of color in environmental justice organizations. Stein, “Introduction,” 11.

24. NYT, “Mothers’ Group Fights Back.”


30. The resistive elements of rhetorical agency are often signaled by the constitution of individual and group identity, the forwarding of a collective criticism or advocacy, and the challenging of dominant structures and institutions. Sowards speaks to the ways certain identity categories, such as race, gender, and ethnicity, are presumed to constrain marginalized speakers’ ability for symbolic action. However, they may also operate as enabling resources to speak to an already marginalized community who sees themselves in the same or similar situation. Sowards says, “Rhetorical Agency as Hacienda Cara and Differential Consciousness Through the Lens of Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class: An Examination of Dolores Huerta’s Rhetoric,” *Communication Theory* 20 (2010): 241.

32. It is important to note that Sowards’ analysis focuses on Huerta’s capacity to speak to and on behalf of her community, a “scaled up” perspective on agency that sees an individual as representational of a broader collective. Sowards, “Rhetorical Agency,” 226.


35. Peeples, “Trashing South-Central,” 89.


37. I use the term “canary cry” as an allusion to the phrase “canary in a coal mine,” an idiomatic phrase to describe something or someone whose sensitivity to adverse conditions makes them useful in warning others of health and safety concerns.


41. James, “Mothering,” 47.


43. See Wanzer-Serrano, “Trashing the System”; Wanzer-Serrano, “Race, Colonality, and Geo-body Politics.”


49. La Opinión Article Translation, 1989, Box 9, Folder 17, Juana Beatriz Gutiérrez Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Prison Article Translation Raymundo Reynoso, Oviatt Library Special Collectives and Archives, California State University, Northridge, CA. March 2016.

50. Ibid.
Many of the archive materials are in both Spanish and English and required no translation. However, some materials are only available in Spanish and are not analyzed in this essay.


James, “Mothering,” 45.


Hayden, “Family Metaphors,” 198.


History Booklet, December 1989, Box 1, Folder 2, Juana Beatriz Gutiérrez Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Administrative Data: Biographies: Mission Statements, Oviatt Library Special Collectives and Archives, California State University, Northridge, CA. March 2016.


Ibid.


Child Protesters Newspaper Photograph, n.d., Box 9, Folder 20, Juana Beatriz Gutiérrez Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, MELA: Newspaper Clippings, Oviatt Library Special Collectives and Archives, California State University, Northridge, CA. March 2016.


A “feminine” style functions politically as a strategy for inviting audience empowerment and resistance through modes of reasoning made available to women in response to their exclusion from public life, such as anecdotes, concrete example, cooperative practices, and communal ethics. Dow and Tonn’s analysis of Texas Governor Anne Richards is a helpful example here: Richard’s rhetoric celebrated traditional “feminine” qualities and used them to render political judgments, particularly her application of wisdom from the private sphere of home and family to the public sphere. Doing so permitted Richards to be militant in her criticisms of the Republican Party but also appear to be inviting the audience to feel empowered to make the changes they felt necessary. Bonnie J. Dow and Mari B. Tonn, “‘Feminine Style’ and Political Judgment in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 286–302.

Dow and Tonn, “‘Feminine Style,’” 287.

Dow and Tonn, “‘Feminine Style,’” 295.

75. Peeples and DeLuca contend that the rhetoric of environmental justice "leaves no other options for being a good mother than to be a militant one." This is because, the authors continue, no other course of action will save their children than to transform the identity of "mothers" from "staid domestic women to engaged community activists." Maternal militancy, within environmental justice contexts, is directed toward the enemies of the community, pushing people to see "the truth of the situation in which the women exist" and who may need "aggressive prodding" to make the most just decision. Peeples and DeLuca, "The Truth of the Matter," 73–74.

76. See Krauss, "Women and Toxic Waste Protests"; Kurtz, "Gender and Environmental Justice."


80. La Opinión Translation, 1989.


83. I am referencing a particular protest in which MELA flooded a job fair for the prison hosted by the DOC at a Boyle Heights High school. The women interrupted the job fair to voice their disapproval of the project, citing their exclusion from other citywide discussions regarding the prison. For a more detailed account, see Pardo, Mexican American Women Activists, 122.


85. West, "Performing Resistance in/From the Kitchen,” 362.

86. It is important to note that this “belief” was quickly challenged by the women. Women in the organization became notorious for their confrontational tactics with city leaders and DOC officials over the prison project. And as the women’s organization grew and they took on other issues, the women continued to be a militant force for justice. Pardo, Mexican American Women Activists, 113. For a more sustained discussion of MELA’s more confrontational and militant tactics, see Kamal Platt, “Chicana Strategies for Success and Survival: Cultural Poetics of Environmental Justice From the Mothers of East Los Angeles,” Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies 18, no. 2 (1997): 48–72.

87. Ibid.


89. Pardo, Mexican American Women Activists, 130.

90. Pardo, Mexican American Women Activists, 129.

91. Another limitation to note: While MELA evoked a collective sense of motherhood, Father Moretta and Juana Beatriz Gutiérrez, by and large, were the faces of the organization. Much of the archive materials analyzed in this essay are produced by, in correspondence with, or center on their voices. Partially, this is because many of the Mothers did not speak much English and had limited experience talking to the media. While it should not diminish the salience of the collective agency crafted by the Mothers, it suggests that even loose networks of activists require some type of representative to articulate the group’s concerns and appear intelligible to the responding institutions and structures.


94. Sahagun, “Mothers of Conviction.”


96. Sahagun, “Mothers of Conviction.”
