Stony Brook University

The Impact of Environmental Injustice

A Thesis Presented

By

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to The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

English

Stony Brook University

August 2008

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

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Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The environmental justice movement is based on the premise that environmental degradation has a greater detrimental effect on underrepresented peoples, such as women and children, members of lower socioeconomic classes, and minorities. This thesis focuses particularly on the impact of the destruction of the environment on women and children in specific communities in the northeast United States. Not only does environmental degradation have a more severe impact on the physical bodies of women and children, but it also attacks their cultural bonds, shifting gender roles and the relationship between a mother and child. In addition to field study and interviews in the Pelham Bay section of Bronx, New York, I set out to research national criticism on the basis of gender and ecofeminist theory. Ultimately, it became apparent that the result of the patriarchal exploitation of resources and the resulting exploitation of lower socioeconomic classes impact the culture of family units was the alteration of women's roles. Through the acknowledgement of the social impact of environmental degradation, we can see the extent of interconnection between women and the land.

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With the rise of pop-culture's examination of environmental pollution and its relation to cancer, the phrases "toxic landfill" and "polluted water" have become routine commonalities. Contaminated areas, such as the Pelham Bay Landfill and Barnegat Bay, seem to be anonymous additions on an ever growing list. To some of the people who live in the surrounding area, however, it is their life. The story of the Pelham Bay Landfill dramatically details the creation of a landfill for household wastes, which turned into an illegal dump site of known carcinogens. It also tells of the families whose homes border the Eastchester Bay, the fragile gap between their children and poison. Especially, the landfill tells of an inexperienced woman's struggle, as an activist, to make a difference in the lives of her East Bronx, New York, community. Susan Antonetta's memoir, *Body Toxic*, also details a similar pattern of pollution in the water surrounding her summer home in Barnegat Bay, New Jersey. While these situations are modern political and environmental concerns, they are also ecofeminist issues. As the land became contaminated, it led to the degradation of children's bodies and deconstructed a culture that was built upon the surrounding water. When the levels of chemicals in the water exceeded the acceptable human level, lives were altered. The culture that revolved around the bays came to a halt, and affected local business. Ultimately, we also see an impact on mothers and their relationships with their children; each woman is affected differently. In Antonetta's story, she has been unable to conceive due to birth defects associated with exposure to toxins. Patricia Nonnon, in Pelham Bay, lived in fear of losing more children to leukemia. As a result, the women were forced to take up new responsibilities. Branching from traditional roles, activist women were forced to fight on the frontline against the patriarchal organizations that damaged their environment. As one examines the Pelham Bay Landfill, it is apparent that there exists a clear link between the contamination of the land and the resulting negative health and cultural changes that impacted the local community. Susan Antonetta draws the same connections throughout her memoir. The overall picture of the two women's experiences depicts cases of environmental injustice, economic exploitation, and the resulting call for women's activism. Each of these facets of pollution expresses commentaries on the role of women and how it must change to fit the current system. Patricia Nonnon's story takes her into

the realm of grassroots activism, whereas Susan Antonetta channels her activism through literary education and expression. Still, repeatedly, these cases challenge the traditional role of "mother," and consequentially the role of women. Environmental degradation often robs women of their right to have a maternal connection with their families and children. The poison that seeps into the waters and soil surrounding families also seeps into the relationship of family members. The patriarchal exploitation of resources and the resulting exploitation of lower socioeconomic classes impact the culture of family units who are connected to the land, and alter women's roles to accommodate for those changes within their families.

Patricia Nonnon's tale begins with the contaminated land her daughter, Kerri, played in until her death. The Pelham Bay Landfill (PBL) was opened in 1963 as a municipal solid waste landfill. Located in Bronx, New York, it was operated under the New York City Department of Sanitation (NYS DOS). Encompassing eighty-one acres, it is bordered by four main bodies: Hutchinson River to the northeast, Eastchester Bay to the southeast, Pelham Bay Park to the southwest, and the Bruckner Boulevard Extension to the northwest. Other prevalent landmarks within proximity include the New England Thruway, also known as I-95, City Island, and Co-op City. (NYS DOH 2) In the 1990 Census, it was estimated that 26,954 people lived within just one mile of the PBL. While zoning in the surrounding area is primarily residential, "the commercial district is designed to permit waterfront recreation and boating and fishing uses. Typical development includes marinas, boat repair shops, and public or private beaches" (NYS DOH 5). The community has a strong foundation in marine activities; nautical history is interwoven into the culture of the island.

Eastchester Bay, which shares the largest border with the PBL, is at the center of community activities. A natural resource, locals use the water for swimming, boating, and fishing. Prior to 1994, commercial shellfishing was a typical business; but there was a regulation that mandated fishers to keep the shellfish in clean water for twenty-one days prior to selling. The purpose of this was to decontaminate the shellfish of any toxins they may have internalized while sitting at the bottom of the bay. (NYS DOH 5-6) Recreational fishing, while it is prohibited, still occurs. In 1990, it was documented that, "because of insufficient fencing and warning signs, it is easy for those fishing

recreationally to gain access [at] the base of the landfill, where they cast rods and wade for shellfish" (Winlarski A3). Regardless of the legal statutes of fishing in the waters, on a warm summer day, the Bay is cluttered with boats and fishing line.

The PBL is located on land encompassing Pelham Bay Park. The largest park in the city, it includes 2,764 acres. The NYC Department of Parks and Recreation describes it on their web page as a great nature preserve. They state, "Pelham [Bay Park] has one of the most diverse groups of ecosystems of any New York City park, including 13 miles of rocky shoreline, 195 acres of saltwater wetland, 161 acres of mud flats, 520 acres of forest, and 83 acres of meadow" (Pelham Bay Park). Under their maps, however, they designate the area where the PBL is located as "managed lawn." It is also described as a place for "nature lovers," being that it is the home to many birds, rodents, and a diverse array of plants. The park and bay serve to connect the community to local nature, and they offer events to encourage citizens to take an active role in observing the natural resources. Senior citizens were known to frequent a community garden on the landfill, and consume the vegetables that grew there. "The northwest corner of the PBL was previously used as a community garden… [but it was] closed in 1988" (NYS DOH 5). While the PBL closed in 1978, gardening continued for ten years. Of the group of elderly gardeners, three had died of stomach cancer by 1991. (Dreifus 82)

During the fifteen years that the PBL was open, it functioned to accept "household wastes." Like many landfills around the city, "it was used to dispose of 2,600 tons of solid waste per day" (*Nonnon v City of New York* 2). Because of its size and use of trucks to dump refuse, in addition to ordinary garbage, "washing machines, refrigerators, stoves and even cars… have been found in the fill of the landfill" (Nabavi 4). Although it was an eyesore for local residents, it posed no threat to the community. Aside from complaints about the foul smelling "greenish haze" that rose off the landfill, residents accepted it as a part of the neighborhood.

The community's sentiment toward the landfill changed in the early 1980s when allegations of illegal dumping arose in the media. "On May 6, 1982, a driver/dispatcher for the Hudson Oil Refining Company testified before a New York State Senate Committee on Crime, that waste oil sludges, metal plating wastes, lacquer, and solvents were illegally disposed at several New York City landfills, including the Pelham Bay

Landfill from 1974 to 1980" (NYS DOH 2). As the story unraveled, the truth was realized. "Mob-connected companies began hauling in truckloads of highly toxic chemicals. Instead of empty tuna cans and shredded bills, the Pelham dump was beginning to hold substances with names like ethylbenzene, dioctylphthalate and xylene. In some cases, the chemicals were dumped in drums, in others, they were sprayed right on the mountain of garbage" (Bx. Dump Poisoned, Killed Kids - Now City Must Pay: Residents 8-9). Ultimately, "mob"-linked carting firms disposed of approximately 1.1 million gallons of toxic waste onto the PBL. While the oil-refinery worker pleaded guilty to conspiracy, inclusive of bribing a city worker to allow the dumping, prosecution went little further. (Bx. Dump Poisoned, Killed Kids - Now City Must Pay: Residents 8-9) In 1985, responding to complaints about dangerous leachate streams and ponds by residents, "the City Department of Sanitation (DOS) signed a consent decree with the State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). It admitted that it had allowed leachate to enter the surface and groundwaters in violation of state and federal standards, and that it had allowed hazardous wastes to be illegally disposed at Pelham Bay while it was in operation" (*Nonnon v City of New York* 2-3). With responsibility finally claimed, it was time to address the issue of cleanup.

Ultimately, the city stopped the leaking and further contamination. Their solution to the toxic waste site was to cap it and monitor the water and air around it. Currently, the site is "capped," meaning that a membrane was put over the entire site that acts to prevent further contamination from poisonous leachate. The Department of Environmental Protection stated in their "Pelham Bay Landfill Newsletter," for the summer of 1999, that the landfill was now "blooming" with a variety of wildflowers, trees, shrubs, and bushes. Inclusive of these plants are "gray and paper birches, bayberry, red cedars, chestnut and black oaks, sassafras, and persimmon. In addition, the growth of new foliage on the remediated landfill has begun to attract several species of birds and butterflies" (Pelham Bay Landfill in Bloom). Other measures taken include an on-site gas flare, to burn off escaping methane gas, and a leachate collection system.

On the other hand, we are presented with a similar tale in Susanne Antonetta's *Body Toxic*. The novel serves a memoir of the effects of her summer home's landscape on her body. Antonetta did not die of cancer, but is still living today. Nevertheless, she

dealt with her own array of medical maladies, such as petit mal, which is a mild seizure disorder. (Antonetta 198) She writes, “In the seventies, eighties and nineties the Toms River/Beachwood area has been wracked by childhood cancers – particularly of the brain and nervous system – leukemia, breast cancers, many times higher than normal. My family was not. We’ve been wracked by infertility, tumors, organs malformed at birth and manic-depression” (Antonetta 26). Antonetta was spared a death sentence, but suffered in her own way. Throughout her memoir, however, she relates each disease to her exposure to toxic chemicals throughout her childhood in New Jersey. Creating a sense of irony, she says, “I may have pummeled away at my central nervous system and organs and drifts of ganglia but what did it was the small white fish and the blackberries and the air itself”(Antonetta 148). She also draws strong connections between her mother’s exposure to chemicals and its relation to her own body. By pointing out her position in relation to the past, she links the generations in the same manner that the events in her life led to her present medical complications. The toxins she swam in, the DDT her mother breathed, and the carcinogens that contaminated her food are all aspects of one story. Antonetta states, “This is the story of a body” (Antonetta 186). Her childhood is painted with poisonous images that left her body damaged. As she compiles these images, we are left with just that: a body.

Southern New Jersey has been bombarded by a plethora of toxic chemicals. Unfortunate for Antonetta, many incidents of contamination were within a few miles of her summer home. The soil and water she spent her summers playing in was inundated with carcinogens we now fear. Starting with Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane (DDT), her first exposure was before she was born. Her mother was exposed to high levels of DDT due to the government’s war on insects after World War II. As Rachel Carson later popularized in *Silent Spring,* Antonetta reveals that DDT is not processed by the body and then expelled. It dwells in the body and changes into Dichlorodiphenyldichloroethylene (DDE), where it takes its final resting place in a woman’s fatty tissues. Antonetta explains, “When a pregnant woman begins the work of forming her infant she will draw on her fat reserves; I mean to say, her DDE reserves… The highest concentration of DDE in an exposed mother will be found in her breastmilk… A mouthful of breastmilk and DDE formed my first human meal”

(Antonetta 137-138). Exposed from the first moments after birth, this pattern continued through her childhood. Antonetta recalls summers spent in marshy New Jersey, where she believed the mosquitoes might drain them of their blood. Every week, a DDT truck came down the dirt road that led to her bungalow, spraying a grey cloud of pesticides. The adults, however, did not shelter the children from the spray. She says, "My mother and aunts slammed the windows shut and dragged the cats in. For some reason they related the danger of pesticides to animals, not children, not Baby Boom children. We were somehow not human" (Antonetta 134). After the spraying, Antonetta explains, the children would eat food that they could not taste. Yet no one seemed concerned about possible effects of the chemicals on children or their future progeny.

The contamination of Antonetta's summer home landscape was accomplished by a group effort of various corporations. Starting in 1952 with the Ciba-Geigy Chemical Corporation, hundreds of thousands of gallons of commercial dyes, epoxy resins, and chemical waste byproducts were improperly disposed or illegally dumped into the ground, which poisoned the aquifer from which Antonetta's family drank. (Antonetta 17) Then, in 1960, a bunker containing military refuse caught fire and deposited about a pound of plutonium into the water, which contaminated the bay with radioactive particles. (Antonetta 15) Next, Denzer & Schafer X-Ray contaminated the aquifer with lead. (Antonetta 19) Then, Nicholas Agricola committed the same crime that New York Sanitation workers did at the Pelham Bay Landfill: he accepted money from Union Carbonide to "dispose" of drums of hazardous waste. Agricola, like the sanitation workers, simply buried the waste or poured it onto the ground. Seven thousand drums later, the soil and wells were contaminated with an A-to-Z list of known carcinogens. (Antonetta 19-20) Finally, the Oyster Creek nuclear power plant was the most poisonous contributor to the contamination at Barnegat Bay. Built in 1969, it was the last of its design. The plant's utilization of water to cool the reactor's discharge resulted in the pumping of radioactive waste into Oyster Creek, which is located five miles from Antonetta. (Antonetta 23-24) In addition to contaminating the soil and water, it also poisoned the fish that was consumed by the community. Antonetta paints a tragic picture of a toxic landscape where children were exposed to unsafe levels of carcinogenic chemicals during their daily summer recreation.

The stories of PBL and Barnegat Bay have many commonalities. Aside from illness and tragedy, however, both are set in traditionally economically disadvantaged areas. The Bronx is typically considered at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale than her neighboring boroughs. Areas of New Jersey have also grown into an image of lower income residential communities. The Bronx and southern New Jersey's lack of affluence make it a target for economic exploitation. Christine Cuomo addresses the pattern of environmental degradation and economic status in her essay "Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, and Human Population." She asserts that "certain forms of ecological destruction (such as the dumping of toxic waste) occur disproportionately in locations occupied by people of color and people who are poor" (Cuomo 97). The Bronx, the New York City county where the PBL is located, is stereotyped as being the lower class region of the Bronx. In comparison with more wealthy New York counties, this is true. We repeatedly see lower income areas targeted as the recipients of toxic waste. Antonetta also discusses this in her memoir. In reference to NPL sites she says, "most NPLs lie in the south, in poor rural areas like southern Ocean County, where dumping has been profitable and easy. They also happen to be the places where drinking water comes from an underground, easily reached aquifer rather than a reservoir" (Antonetta 21). When offered the chance to make a large profit in exchange for the "storage" of metal drums, many southern New Jersey residents saw this as a means to escape socioeconomic stagnation. This was seen with Nicholas Agricola in Antonetta's story. With the PBL, the NYC Department of Sanitation workers were the benefactors in the transaction. In both cases, there were little legal repercussions for the damage that was done. While the trial for the PBL has yet to be settled, Agricola "admitted to dumping at both sites and was fined, according to the head of a Toms River organization for parents of children with cancer, $100" (Antonetta 20).

Winonna LaDuke delves into economic exploitation in her novel, *All Our Relations*. Defending Native American's rights in the United States, she discusses the pressures on native tribes to accept toxic waste onto their lands. This runs parallel with stories from the Bronx and New Jersey where community members were put in circumstances where they had little choice but to accept toxins or that they simply could not afford to move from their homes into safer areas. In the chapter "Nuclear Waste," she

narrates the pollution that is forced onto native lands by economic exploitation. Most of the reservations she discusses have high levels of alcoholism and low levels of employment, which sets the stage for a community that is desperate for money. Two particular cases stand out regarding economic exploitation: the Ojibwe tribe and the Goshutes. After paper companies poisoned her tribe with mercury, Judy DaSilva, an Ojibwe woman from the Grassy Narrows reserve in northern Ontario, spoke out about the financial aspect of the dumping. She said, "Because we're poor, we just settled for money" (LaDuke 103). Without money, the people became desperate, even selling the purity of their sacred lands. A similar response was heard when Private Fuel Storage (PFS), a parent title for energy companies, signed a lease for forty acres of land on the Goshute tribe's reservation for an above ground nuclear waste storage facility. LaDuke states, "The tribal chairman promised each tribal member $2 million if the dump gets built. That kind of money, in a poor community like the Goshutes, has a lot of sway" (LaDuke 106). Like the Bronx landfill and South Jersey inlets, companies target areas where people of lower socioeconomic classes reside. It creates a sense of urgency where the people feel they have no choice but to trade the land for money, even if that violates their heritage and health.

In addition to the dumping of toxins, there are also economic factors that worsen the effect of dumping. The situation in New Jersey was greatly exacerbated due to Antonetta's family's financial situation. She recounts, "Often we just ate what we could find. We caught crabs and blowfish, picked berries and beach plums" (Antonetta 132). Her family's attempt to live off the land left her body contaminated with levels of radiation that are far beyond the "acceptable risk." She claims, however, that this was a common practice for residents of the Barnegat Bay area. Her story continues, "There were very few jobs and people often lived in ways inconceivable in the rest of the state, catching and picking their own food, making charcoal and gathering cranberries, slapping together their shelter. As my grandfather did" (Antonetta 12). In the Bronx, the situation is incredibly similar. Men spend the evenings fishing in Eastchester Bay and bring home their catches for their family's dinner. While this is a traditional practice, it is also out of economic necessity. Local people of lower economic income areas tend to rely more strongly on the land for their livelihood. Hunting in New York City is illegal; however

Antonetta illustrates the local, South Jersey, dependence on this practice. She remembers, "a muskrat I fed that dragged back one day with a bullet in its gut… Lots of local people hunted muskrat for pelts and meat" (Antonetta 13). By consuming the meat of these animals, the people are exposed to higher levels of toxins than they would be if they ate plants. As mentioned earlier in relation to DDE, many of the carcinogenic chemicals are lipophilic, meaning that they are stored in fatty tissue. By consuming meat from an animal that was exposed to these toxins, a person takes on the cumulative effect of the chemicals. Simply, they are ingesting all the chemicals that the animal ate during its lifetime.

While the correlation between toxic dumping and economic strain is clear, we may still ask ourselves, why is this economic exploitation? On a large scale, companies who have an interest in unloading toxic waste target areas of lower economic affluence because the residents of those communities generally do not have the funds to fight back against large corporations. They cannot devote hundreds of thousands of dollars to legal fees and scientific research. Without the financial backing, they do not have a voice. Additionally, these communities often practice traditions that put residents at a greater level of exposure to chemicals than more affluent communities. Hunting and fishing of local fauna is an example of this. While hunting and fishing are traditional recreational activities, it is not done on the scale of a poor rural community. Generally, less affluent communities depend on the food they can take from the environment. Due to a lack of excess income to spend on food from a store, Antonetta's family used what they could from the land. As a result, her family and the community were exposed to toxic levels of chemicals. The same can be said for Bronx residents who spent summers dining on the daily catch. As a result of their economic state, their lives are subject to the contamination of major companies.

With these oppressive patriarchal factors controlling the health of families, women often become activists and fight against policy that puts their families in danger. One might ask, however, why women? What is the link between women and activism? According to Kathleen Johnson and David Johnson, interest in the environment is not gendered. In their essay "The Limits of Partiality," they write, "youth, higher education levels, and political liberalism are consistently, though moderately, associated with

environmental concern. The review finds no evidence linking environmental concern to one's sex" (Johnson 107). This statement, however, does not encompass most women activists in grassroots movements. Patricia Nonnon, for example, did not have a higher education degree and was not strongly politically affiliated. To amend this phenomenon Johnson and Johnson explain that environmental concern does not imply environmental activism. They continue, "Women represent the majority of Green voters and have played a central position in the anti-nuclear, peace, vegetarian, and antivivisection movements" (Johnson 108).

In accordance with Johnson and Johnson, we see that women are more prevalent in environmental activism. Why do women have a more predominant presence than men? Johnson and Johnson attempt to answer this question by suggesting that "[W]omen, by their very nature, are 'uniquely suited to lead in environmental matters'" (Johnson 107). On a biological level, women's natural reproductive cycle makes the presence of nature more difficult to ignore. Also, reproduction, itself, forces a connection between a woman and the earth. On a social and cultural level, women's connection to the land can be seen in traditional women's roles. They continue, "In general, the social and economic roles in which women predominate – including healer, wife, mother, domestic, and agricultural worker – help to shape the type and extend of women's activism" (Johnson 108). Women often draw on facets of these roles to aid them in activism. For example, according to this theory, women would naturally be concerned with the well-being and health of those within their domain, such as children.

To continue on this topic, there must be the assumption that certain behaviors are inherently masculine and others are feminine. While there are clear contradictions to this argument, to streamline analysis the following arguments will be made on the basis of a distinct duality among gender roles. The masculine side includes all that is industrialized and violent. This includes structure development, working outside the home, silence, and a lack of nurturing attitude. On the other hand, the feminine side would include the aforementioned women's roles, such as nurturing children, feeding the home, and emotional connections. Dianne Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayter, and Esther Wangari examine this distinction in their essay, "Gender and Environment: A feminist political ecology perspective." They examine gender roles in relation to the woman's demand to

obtain resources. Under the women's responsibilities they list: "The most common forms of gendered responsibilities for resources include: 1. Responsibility to procure particular inputs or products for home use (such as fuelwood, water, milk, and medicinal herbs in rural areas…) 2. responsibility to manage particular resources (such as protection of water sources, maintenance of community forests, and soil conservation in rural areas…)" (Rocheleau et al. 13). If women are typically responsible for the obtaining and distributing these goods, it is implied that it is also their responsibility to assure that they are safe and healthy. Therefore, if a resource is not healthy to serve to her family, or to utilize in her home, it is the woman's responsibility to correct this deviation. This role, as household provider or goods, links women to their role as activists.

In the process of providing goods for their family to provide, there is also an emphasis on the health of their children as a result of consuming the goods that are provided to them by their mother. Specifically, this brings breast milk into question. Reaffirming the relationship between infants and their mother, breast milk is often seen as a sacred link between mother and child. If breast milk were contaminated, or poisoned, it would mar their relationship and modify the traditional role of "mother." It is in a woman's interest to defend the child's well-being, and it is implied that she must protect her breast milk to do so. As mentioned earlier, Susan Antonetta chronicles her first mouth of breast milk to have been poisoned by pesticides. Winonna LaDuke examines the impact of contamination on native women's breast milk as well. Katsi Cook, a Mohawk woman of the Akwesasne reservation on the border of New York and Canada, explains the link between the chemicals and women's breasts. She says that women accumulate toxins like PCBs, DDT, Mirez, HCBs that are dumped into their waters by major corporations. Being that they are lipophilic, "they are stored in our body fat and are excreted primarily through breast milk. What that means is that through our own breast milk, our sacred natural link to our babies, they stand the chance of getting concentrated dosages" (LaDuke 18-19). Katsi Cook was correct; the infants were consuming high doses of chemicals through their mother's breast milk. She organized a research project called "The Mother's Milk Project" where they studies fifty new mothers, who ate fish from the contaminated St. Lawrence River, over a few year period. Their study revealed a level of PCBs in breast milk that was 200% higher than the rest of the population. Katsi

reveals, “I’ve got myself 0.108 parts per billion of mirex, 22 parts per billion PCBs, 0.013 parts per billion HCBs, and 13/947 parts per billion DDC in my breast milk” (LaDuke 19).

Aside from the reservations, there is a similar pattern of contamination in American women’s milk. Dr. Sandra Steingraber discusses, in her book *Living Downstream*, the toxic levels of chemicals found in American women’s breast milk in relation to consumable goods. She writes, “Since 1951, surveys of human milk in the United States have consistently shown contamination by an array of persistent, chlorinated chemicals… By 1976, roughly 25 percent of all U.S. breast milk was too contaminated to be bottled and sold as a food commodity” (Steingraber 238). This means that women, in their attempts to nourish their infants, are actually poisoning them with chemicals that are directly linked to children’s cancers. Dr. Steingraber continues to emphasize the damage done by contaminated breast milk; she states, “We see why infants are at special risk: residues of fat-soluble pesticides contained in the food eaten by nursing mothers are distilled even further in breast milk. In essence, breast-feeding infants occupy a higher rung on the food chain than the rest of us” (Steingraber 168). Knowing the extremely detrimental effect that breast feeding can have on an infant, women must now question whether breast feeding is the best choice. This violation of a traditional celebration of the bond between mother and child caused for the Mohawk tribe’s women to become enraged. LaDuke writes, “Mohawk mothers voiced their anger at the contamination and the impact on their way of life. ‘Our traditional lifestyle has been completely disrupted, and we have been forced to protect our future generations’” (LaDuke 20). Their passion for activism rose out of their realization that the traditional maternal role had been poisoned, and therefore stolen from them by the offending corporations.

In addition, women’s lack of representation in large scale government forces them to affect policy in other ways. The political system is a patriarchal game, whose rules do not include the presence of women. When women want to make a change, they must take the situation into their own hands. Also, the patriarchal system is completely profit driven, and does not value health and wellness. Rocheleau and her colleagues write, “The system does not address their needs, and so they act collectively to secure the necessary

conditions to guaranty subsistence, protect the health of their families, and the integrity of the surrounding ecosystem" (Rocheleau et al. 16). Women's activism, combating the political marginality of most women, works to provide for feminine concerns, which includes their children's well-being. As a result, "[t]heir activism usually begins locally on matters critical to their own lives, their homes, and their families" (Rocheleau et al. 16). As women deviate from the traditional binary system, where women are not accepted into the masculine realm of politics, we also see changes to gender roles. The louder political voice women have the greater sense of agency and empowerment. Rocheleau et al. 18) Women gain more self-determination, and shift the gender binary system away from the image of a helpless woman who needs her husband to protect her. The main venue for women's environmental activism is the Grassroots movement. It offers an organization for women to get involved to promote change, but also encourages the utilization of their skills on a new playing field. As will be discussed later with Patricia Nonnon, women's nurturing and communication skills are used for the progress of the movement, which goes on to benefit all people. Rocheleau continues, "These grassroots organizations, with their significant involvement of women, are stressing the value of all human beings and their rights to satisfy basic human needs, including food security and health" (Rocheleau et al. 18). Joni Seager reaffirms this concept, in her essay "'Hysterical Housewives' and Other Mad Women: Grassroots environmental organizing in the United States." She writes, "In the great majority of cases, women become involved in environmental issues because of their concern for the health of their family; they organize around 'women's' issues of health and safety, family and children" (Seager 276). This theme has played out with previously mentioned female activists of environmental justice, and rings clear with Patricia Nonnon.

Before the Pelham Bay Landfill, Patricia Nonnon was a typical Bronx mother. The main goal of her day was to take care of her children and home. She had no political experience and even less experience with the environment. Seager points out that this is a common phenomenon. She says, "Many women who are now environmental leaders were, initially, reluctant activists' most grassroots women report little prior community activism, little environmental knowledge, almost no experience in public speaking or organizing; many describe themselves modestly as 'mere housewives'" (Seager 276).

This would include Nonnon. Meanwhile, the effects of the landfill were already becoming apparent. Patricia Nonnon's daughter, Kerri, was sick with acute lymphocytic leukemia. While waiting in the hospital for her daughter to receive a treatment of chemotherapy in 1983, she met other mothers with the similar plights. She suddenly noticed a pattern that the majority of the children receiving treatments that day lived in close proximity to a landfill. In fact, she met mothers of four girls from a four block radius of her home in Country Club. "There were too many sick children for it to be a coincidence," she said. She asserts that there is a direct link between the toxins dumped on the landfill and the cancer clusters the plague the nearby neighborhoods of Country Club, Pelham Bay, City Island, and Spencer Estates. Nonnon first reached out to the community to gain support for the cleanup movement. This was the start of the long legal proceedings that are still dragging on today.

Nonnon tried to contact local officials and organizations for help, but she had difficulty getting people to return her calls. The city kept insisting that the landfill posed no threat to local residents. Finally, she contacted New York State Assemblyman, John Dearie, who also lived in Country Club. When he heard Nonnon's case, he immediately pledged to help. "Nonnon and Dearie were proving an effective team. He provided her with legitimacy and access to power. She gave him grassroots backing. Together they launched a two-pronged campaign aimed at lighting some fires under the slow-moving state and city bureaucracies and also at mobilizing the neighborhood against the landfill" (Dreifus 125). They knew they needed to gather more information regarding the prevalence of diseases; together, Dearie and Nonnon set up a telephone hot-line for people to report incidences of cancer and rare illnesses in the area. (Nonnon) By 1988, she kept a call log of more than 300 reports. Incidences included: "25 reported cases of childhood leukemia; 61 of multiple sclerosis; 10, lupus; 9, Hodgkin's disease; 6, rare blood diseases, and a range of birth defects" (A Bronx Landfill Raises Concern over Diseases). She recalls carrying around notebooks with children's information scribbled inside, noting the patterns of the sick children and their addresses. With no reporting experience, Nonnon went with her instincts. Seager notes this trend; she writes, "As grassroots environmental watchdogs, women often see it to their advantage that they have been socialized to listen to their 'gut feelings.' Grassroots activists know how to tap

specialized expertise when they need it, but they do not let the presence of 'blue suits' on either side of the fence dictate their agenda" (Seager 282). While Nonnon took advantage of her own "blue suit," she moved forward with the environmental movement to clean up her daughter's playground. Once she had the data to confirm her suspicions, she took the information public. Nonnon, along with local residents, formed the Pelham Bay Task Force. The main purpose of the Task Force was to put pressure on the city to properly test samples, maintain testing, and implement changes. The duo also created a Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC). If the city was not going to take testing seriously, they were going to do it for them. The two groups examined the hazardous effects of the landfill on the community. This evidence proved invaluable in later court proceedings. (*Nonnon v City of New York* 3)

Nonnon and Dearie continued to gain public exposure for the landfill. After creating a letter writing campaign from angry mothers and holding press conferences at the site, the media finally picked up the story. Then, in 1987, the movement gained momentum when the New York State DEC moved the PBL up on the EPA's Superfund list. Rising from "low priority" to "Class 2 Hazardous Waste Site," the PBL finally got the funding needed to start examining the damage to the land, air, and water. But while workers drilled core samples and leachate drains, they hit setbacks. At times, it would be virtually impossible to drill through boulders or cars. In 1990, the Task Force realized that the leachate was leaking. The reality was that "the Department of Sanitation, by its own admission, discharges approximately 10,000 gallons of Leachate daily and that cadmium, chromium, cobalt, iron, zinc, cyanide, and nickel are substances contained in this discharge and it is causing degradation and irreparable harm to Eastchester Bay and the Long Island Sound which are used to swimming, fishing and recreational activities" (Gerbino 1). While trying to contain the toxic chemicals, more were seeping into the lives and bodies of local residents.

In 1989, Kerri Nonnon died due to a staff infection after an aggressive course of chemotherapy. With the loss of her daughter, Patricia Nonnon became driven towards a new course of action. While she was still active in the Pelham Bay Task Force, she collected data and sued the city. The lawsuit, Nonnon v City of New York, represented thirteen children and two adults who were diagnosed with cancer. All of the plaintiffs,

except four, suffered from a common form of childhood cancer, acute lymphocytic leukemia. (Bx. Dump Poisoned, Killed Kids - Now City Must Pay: Residents 8-9). The courts, however, were reluctant to allow the trial because of insufficient evidence. But, after a legal struggle, it proceeded. "The city, which argued that the residents had not been able to show a casual connection between the landfill and the cancer cases, said it would appeal" (Court Backs Suit over Cancer near Bronx Landfill). Despite the city's argument, the trial went to the Appellant Court on June 6, 2006. The Albany County Bar Association documented the update in their August 2006 newsletter. They stated:

> The Appellate Court allowed a law suit by New York City residents alleging exposure to trichloroethylene and other toxic chemicals from a city-run landfill caused children to contract cancer to proceed to trial. Applying the *Frye* standard for review of proposed expert witness testimony, the Court held that plaintiffs submitted sufficient proof by epidemiologists and toxicologists so as to meet their burden of showing credible medical evidence which is generally accepted in the scientific community. The decision allows the matter to proceed to trial involving consolidated claims of over twenty residents of the Bronx alleging personal injury emanating from the City's Pelham Bay Landfill. The suits allege that during fifteen years the City negligently allowed illegal hazardous waste to be dumped at the site. The landfill, which is now closed, was categorized as an inactive hazardous waste site by the state DEC in 1983. (Albany County Bar Association 9)

The case's approval to proceed was a great victory for Nonnon. The judge sided with the Bronx residents; in his statement, he said, "To dismiss the lawsuits, the judge wrote, 'would deny redress to these plaintiffs, who are living in an area where they are being systematically poisoned by environmental contaminants'" (Collazzi 40). When asked about her goals with the trial, Nonnon said she wants the city to be held accountable and to maintain the capping. Mainly, she says, she wants to make sure no other children get sick, so that her daughter did not die in vain.

Although the city knew about the toxic levels of "volatile" chemicals since the reclassification of the PBL to a Level 2 Superfund site, the results of the illegal dumping were revealed and publicized in Nonnon v City of New York. Various scientists, from both the SAC and the city's panel, testified on their findings. "Forensic toxicologist Dr. Jessie Bidanset, concluded that the Department of Sanitation allowed 59 hazardous chemicals to be dumped at the landfill, including two chemicals – tricholoroethylene and

tetrachloroethelene – linked to lymphoid leukemia" (Collazzi 40). He continued, "[t]o a reasonable of toxicological certainty… the presence of known carcinogens emanating from [the landfill] in the form of landfill gases, leachate, groundwater contamination and soil contamination have been the cause of a greater than usual cancer, leukemia, and Hodgkin's disease rate" (Collazzi 40). Dr. Neugenbauer, another scientist of the SAC, "concluded that the rate of acute lymphoid leukemia for the period 1988 to 1996 among children living closest to the landfill was 3.4 times higher than the rate among children living furthest from the landfill." (*Nonnon v City of New York* 7) The health impact is obvious: people are contracting and dying of cancer. From a social standpoint, "People using the beach, boaters, and fishermen are potentially at risk from contaminants leaving the landfill and entering Eastchester Bay." Regardless of the high levels of toxic chemicals, "[b]athers also continue to swim at Orchard Beach, which is jammed on weekends regardless of its location in the landfill's back yard. Although Bay waters may not be the safest place for swimming, beaches cannot be closed on the basis of toxicity alone" (Winlarski A4).

Susanna Antonetta, on the other hand, takes a different route in environmental activism. She did not join a grassroots organization and sue Union Carbide or the Oyster Creek nuclear power plant, but she investigated the situation and publicized her findings. She recounts her experience searching for answers in her book, *Body Toxic*. She writes, "So we all kept ingesting the water and it becomes in the nineties my obsession to find out why our well was declared unsafe, as if that answer won't be just another set of questions. I worked as a journalist once. I have reporting skills. I make telephone calls, hour after hour of them. Mostly I listen to message machines. EPA sends me to DEP, which sends me to ATSDR, which sends me to the county Board of Health, which says it has no records" (Antonetta 115). By publishing this information, it inspires others to do more with the situation. Just as Patricia Nonnon went public with her findings in order to promote change, Antonetta does the same. The main difference is that Antonetta does not leave her feminine world of research and venture out into the masculine world of environmental policy change. Seager points out the difficulties women activists face when they do not have financial and political support, like Nonnon had. She continues, "[F]or local environmental activists – especially women's organizations – with limited

resources, it is difficult to actually create and sustain broader networks among the hundreds of small groups scattered across the country. Because government agencies and large corporate organizations operate at a national scale, they have tremendous advantages over the local groups that may oppose them…" (Seager 278). This theme carries back to the idea of environmental exploitation. Wealthy areas are not targeted to be the recipient of toxic waste because they have the means to fight back. With local grassroots movements, however, the organization leaders must go to work every day to support their family. They also do not have millions of dollars to funnel into legal fees, unlike the corporations they are fighting. Without funds, the attempts toward change shift back to being a grassroots movement and back to theme of women as activists for environmental justice.

In examining the PBL as a facet of the environmental justice movement, it is clear that the affluent patriarchal companies damage the environment for the less wealthy women and children. At the same time, "while 'environmental justice' describes an environmental movement and a civil rights movement, it also describes a *woman's* movement, and… a feminist movement" (Verchick). Robert Verchick, in his paper "Feminist Theory and Environmental Justice," examines the impact of female activists and feminine legal theory on the environmental justice movement. While one may question how an environmental movement is feminist, he explains the link; he says, "Many activists, as the primary caretakers of young children in the home, attribute their work to a special concern for family health and safety. They see their work as the natural extension of the nurturing and parenting role" (Verchick). Patricia Nonnon agrees with his correlation. When asked how motherhood impacts her to clean up the toxins on the landfill, she responded that women are "nurturing" and that aspect of motherhood "drives you" to do what you can. (Nonnon)

Verchick continues to examine environmental justice as a feminist movement. He continues, "The movement pursues goals important to women's lives… [W]omen remain the primary caregivers in their homes and communities, the responsibility over family health remains an immediate and primary goal for them" (Verchick). Women's roles, as mothers, place them in the traditional role of "caregiver." If a child is ill, the mother is, generally, the one who takes the child to the hospital. As seen with Nonnon, while sitting

in the waiting room of Sloan Kettering Hospital, she met the mothers of other children with similar illnesses. Women united under the traditional form of caregiver, but under a new roof. While previously the home was the woman's place, the hospital waiting room became their new territory.

Verchick also examines the feminine aspect of the environmental justice movement on the basis of environmental policy. He poses questions to suggest biases in environmental protection. He asks, "How does law fail to take into account the experiences and values of women, particularly those whose daily lives are afflicted with environmental problems? [and,] how might some features of the law reflect nonneutral values associated with white patriarchy?" (Verchick) In this case, we must examine the area surrounding the Pelham Bay Landfill and Barnegat Bay. As mentioned earlier, the majority of the land around the landfill and Antonetta's summer home is used recreationally by families. Eastchester Bay is a resource for swimming, and Pelham Bay Park is an all-around epicenter of recreational activities. From basketball courts to leisurely walking trails, on a beautiful day, it is always crowded with families. Antonetta, similarly, accounted vacations spent at her summer home with her mother and cousins. They took long walks through the wooded areas and put a strong emphasis on the healthful benefits of swimming in the Bay. Antonetta even mentions that her parents, more often her mother, took her to the water to swim every day. (Antonetta 149) With men as the traditional breadwinner, it leaves women to accompany children to the park or the bay on a warm day. Both Antonetta and Nonnon stress the mother-child relationship that was exercised at the public park and backyards. Antonetta's mother took a more observatory role, whereas Patricia Nonnon mentioned memories of accompanying Kerri to the Eastchester By to teach her to swim. As a result, women and children were exposed to the dusty haze from the PBL and the Oyster Creek facility; also, they were exposed to the chemicals in the water from the runoff at a higher rate than their husbands. While men do use the bay for recreational fishing, with work schedules, it is not on the same magnitude as women. Also, with men bringing home fish for their families, they are furthering the contamination of children's bodies. This is also seen with local vegetable gardens in the Bronx and berry patches of New Jersey. While the instance with the elderly people dying of stomach cancer is only one example, vegetable patches grown on

contaminated soil is a daily reality. As the water runoff poisoned the water table, the soil also became toxic. In growing food on the soil and feeding it to children, it is furthering their toxicity.

In order to examine the reasoning and effect of the landfill, we must return to the separation the community into the feminine and the masculine. While traditional roles are often challenged, for this case, we shall return to the aforementioned binary system. The masculine system created technology and waste, which later needed to be disposed. Carolyn Merchant states, in her book *Radical Ecology*, "The earth is dominated by male-developed and male-controlled technology, science, and industry" (Merchant 202). In this process, the patriarchy discarded their byproducts of success onto a feminine image: a mound of earth. Hence, men poison women through their conquest for technological advancement. Merchant continues to discuss the relationship between "women's reproductive biology" and "male-designed technology." The women must take up the role of activism to combat man's progression. Women activists "expose hazardous waste sites near schools and homes as permeating soil and drinking water and contributing to miscarriages, birth defects, and leukemia. They object to pesticides and herbicides being sprayed on crops and forests as potentially affecting children and childbearing women living near them" (Merchant 203). Patricia Nonnon accepted this role when she took up political arms against the city. But she is not alone. Aside from the local mothers working with her in the Pelham Bay Task Force, there have been other women with similar plights. Merchant raises the incidence of the Love Canal, which ironically occurred the same year the PBL closed. The Love Canal, like the PBL, is a women's issue because a study found "a higher than normal rate of miscarriages, stillbirths, and birth defects" (ibid). While traditionally women are not politically active, Merchant states that they get involved when they or their family suffers birth defects, leukemia, or other forms of cancer. She continues, "Love Canal is a story of how lower-middle-class women who had never been environmental activists became politicized by the life and death issues directly affecting their children and their homes and succeeded in obtaining redress from the state of New York" (ibid). While the women of Love Canal had their victory against the state, Nonnon's battle against the city still continues on. This is also seen with Winonna LaDuke's Native American women's activists, such as Katsi Cook and Judy

DaSilva. In addition to those two women, there are countless other mothers and daughters who step up to represent their tribes against corporations. Across these stories, women, some who had not graduated high school, joined together to fight to protect their families. They adopted their own version of a masculine role in order to combat patriarchal pollution.

Lin Nelson examines children as a facet of ecological feminist movement within Irene Diamond's anthology *Reweaving the World*. She points out that children are especially susceptible to continued exposure to low levels of toxins. She state, "Chemical sensitivity is fast becoming a haunting concern for parents, teachers, physicians, and psychologists who are seeing children with bizarre and baffling reactions to low levels of contaminants" (Diamond 179). She continues by raising the concepts of "poisoned playgrounds" and "contaminated classrooms." Children, being smaller versions of adults, have much lower tolerance to toxins than an adult. Also, they are exposed more consistently. Domestically, children are often exposed to toxins from their parents. Dr. Steingraber explains, "Some exposures may occur before birth. Children can also be exposed when these materials are carried into the home on their parents' clothes and shoes, through breast milk, or through exhaled air: because solvents are, in part, cleared by the lungs, parents can expose their children to carcinogens simply by breathing on them" (Steingraber 65-66). Children, however, are attacked on both fronts: indoors and outside. Whether they are playing in the street, in the park, swimming, or in transit, they are in the open air. In addition, while in school, widows are open, which exposes them further to airborne carcinogens. In the case of the PBL, the children attended local schools, which were within approximately one mile of the landfill. In Kerri Nonnon's case, her mother stated that Kerri loved to swim. With local private pool membership costs set beyond the means of most residents, Bronx residents are left to swim in contaminated waters. Kerri swam in Eastchester Bay every summer until she was diagnosed with leukemia. Justin Zeitlin, another child who died from leukemia, was also heavily exposed to the toxins on a daily basis. "Like other children involved in the legal case, he played in the park near the toxic mound of garbage, swam in water into which the dump drained, and breathed dusty green air that permeated the area" (Cancer Robbed Mom of Her Son 8). This issue is relevant to a mother's role with her child on two levels.

First, it robbed the children of their health, which aggravates a woman's role as healer.

With environmental justice, theory and activism play a cyclical role. When we look at women activists on the education side of the spectrum, such as Dr. Sandra Steingraber, Rachel Carson, Winonna LaDuke, and Susan Antonetta, we see that there is a link between their work and the writing of ecofeminist critics like Carolyn Merchant, Lynn Nelson, Robert Verchik, and Joni Seager. Ecofeminist writers of theory base their writing on the findings of scientist activists. Then, as a result, researchers examine the theory on a scientific level and produce more evidence to support or refute the theory. It is a cyclical process by which each writer bases their work off the publications of activists on the other side of the spectrum. The whole process revolves back around and starts over again: women researchers and writers feeding off each other's publications to further the environmental justice movement. At the same time, ecofeminist theory analyzes action. Theory is based on the actions, or lack thereof, of leaders of environmental justice cases. Writers document activism, which then inspires others to join the environmental justice movement. Hence, the cycle has no beginning. Critics feed off evidence from scientists, who write about a case, which is read by a person who is motivated to take action, who then writes criticism. Seager notes the importance of the relationship between science and environmentalism. She writes, "A related issue prompted by women's experiences is the nature of environmental knowledge. The value of the environmental work being done by women grassroots activists suggest the importance of expanding our notion of what constitutes appropriate environmental 'expertise,' increasingly, science is considered to be the primary tool of mainstream environmental analysis and the arbiter of environmental concerns…Mainstream environmentalism appears to be increasingly in the thrall of science" (Seager 281). The interlinking cycle benefits all the participants of the environmentalist system, and also aids the people who live in contaminated areas.

There is also an element of education within the cycle. Publishing implies educating the reader. As was apparent with Antonetta, there is a level of activism in publishing a book about environmental injustice. Similarly, ecofeminist critics push the movement forward by their writing. This belief, however, is not universally held. Andy Smith, in his essay "Ecofeminism through an Anticolonial Framework," writes,

"Ecofeminist theorists should not be content to see their writing or their university teaching as activism and be content to let others do the grassroots work" (Smith 33). He feels that popular academic feminist theorists turn a blind eye to the work of "community-based women." (ibid) But this sentiment does not recognize the contributions of widely read feminist writers. Without their publications, the topics of environmental justice and ecofeminism would not gain the momentum needed to push forward policy changes. These writers also serve to inspire women through their publications. Their work invites other women to empower themselves to make changes in their own environment.

As we examine the role that activism, education, and research has played in the environmental justice movement, we are compelled to look towards the future. Where are we going next? Furthermore, once we have the knowledge to designate dangerous chemicals, we must ask ourselves how we can adjust our lives to be healthier. This creates a conflict. People need to live their lives, but how can they fit activism and environmental safety into busy schedules while still maintaining a sense of normality. Patricia Nonnon still struggles with this concept. Running her hand through her hair, she sighed and said that she needed to "get back into" the case. She emphasized the desire to pursue the state of the landfill, to call the DEP and ask for the results of the latest water samples, but that there's so much else she needs to do. With a full-time job and grandchildren to look after, she finds it difficult to take the next step in towards activism. This is a common theme with activist women, where do you stop? What sacrifices do you make? And, when does it all end. For many women, it does not end. Susan Antonetta still struggles with the concept of safeguarding tomorrow for her adopted son, Jin. Unlike Nonnon, she moved away, in hopes of finding a safer place to raise her son. She writes, "At first I loved that we were bringing Jin to Bellingham. Koreans venerate mountains and water: the place felt accurate for him. Then I read in our *Herald* that this area, like Toms River, has an abnormal rate of children with cancer" (Antonetta 239). Like New Jersey, her new home is also sprayed with pesticides. She begs the question, "Can we leave? Would that really be leaving?" (Antonetta 239). She tried to leave New Jersey, but found the same contaminants in Bellingham, Washington. Is there a way to safeguard her child from the toxins that poisoned her body? In Antonetta's case, she tries to do

everything to protect him. She says, “I fed my baby Jin formula that smelled of oats and chalk and coated a spoon like cream. I filtered his water, even to cook rice. Now he eats organic vegetables, free-range chemical free meats, everything made in our kitchen, maybe grown in our compost heavy yard” (Antonetta 241). Is that enough to secure Jin’s health? While one would hope that it is, we are still left with the question: what else? What more can women do to unwork all the damage that we have done to the environment?

The two case studies, of the Pelham Bay Landfill and Antonetta’s summer home in Barnegat Bay, examine the illegal polluting of peaceful landscapes by patriarchal corporations. Damaging the women and their family’s bodies and way of life, they also attacked the women’s ability to trust the land to be safe for their families. There is a constant pattern, however, that these cases of environmental degradation occur in areas that are of a generally low socioeconomic level. This creates a theme of economic exploitation with illegal dumping. The residents of poorer areas do not have the time or funding to pursue large organizations who take advantage of the air of silence surrounding these communities. In addition, to compound matters, communities with lower income also depend more heavily on the land. They eat the food, whether hunting or fishing, and use the waters more recreationally than wealthier communities. As a result, they are exposed to higher levels of toxic chemicals that are found in the contaminated bays. Women, however, have risen into to activism to combat the attacks on their homes. The main commonality of women and these communities is the Grassroots Movement. By participating in the healing of their communities, women are empowered to take a more active role. Deviating from the gendered role of a submissive housewife, women have found a voice in these organizations and have owned the movement for their benefit. Theory reflects these changes in gender roles, and also comments on the link between the degradation of the environment and the declining health of women and children. But theory does not stop at books and essays; it functions as a spring board for research. The cycle of theory, research, and activism perpetuates the cycle for the better. Women are inspired by the progress and are given hope by stories of other women taking back the safety of their homes. Hence, as we look towards the future, we are left with open questions regarding where women should go next. While the

answer is unclear, it is hopeful. Women are gaining momentum and making great changes to protect their families. As we look towards the future, remediation will be a goal of the past and prevention will permeate environmental policy.

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