# "For Our Children":
# Reproduction, the Family, and Neoliberalism in the Environmental History of the 1970s

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## Abstract of Dissertation

"For Our Children":
Reproduction, the Family, and Neoliberalism in the Environmental History of the 1970s

Oriented around the question of how American environmental politics came to be premised as "for the children," this dissertation draws on historical archives to analyze how reproduction and the family became key sites of environmental concern and intervention during the 1970s. Throughout the 1970s, diverse political actors leveraged claims to protect the future, often signified through children and unborn generations, to situate their visions of environmental reform. Across the dissertation, I demonstrate that understanding *why and how* this emphasis came to be requires situating American environmental politics within a broader cultural context of the 1970s in which neoliberal family values emerged as a dominant political and economic agenda, resulting in broad sweeping changes to how Americans understood themselves in relation to corporations, government, and society.

Across its chapters, the dissertation tracks four keywords at the heart of the 1970s transformations: privatization, deservingness, responsibility, and regulation. These concepts, I contend, became dominant frames for environmental politics during this period. In chapter one, I consider how oil corporations, and particularly Mobil Oil, capitalized on the oil crises to promote cultures of "privatization." In the second chapter, I examine how toxic waste activists in Love Canal, New York leveraged conceptions of "deservingness" in order to call for state accountability. In chapter three, I trace how "responsibility" shaped occupational health policies at an American Cyanamid plant in Willow Island, West Virginia, demonstrating how claims to protecting future generations

undermined the health of workers and surrounding communities. And, in chapter four, I analyze how environmentalists, specifically members of Zero Population Growth, called for solving overpopulation through intimate "regulation."

Rather than engendering a broad sense of social responsibility for a sustainable—and collectively sustaining—future, the four case studies in the dissertation demonstrate how assertions of protecting the children in the 1970s narrowed the scope of environmental politics to individual, rather than structural, solutions. The dissertation illustrates both the pitfalls and possibilities of environmental politics in the 1970s, providing lessons for those seeking alternate modes to care for environments and communities in the present.

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# Introduction

## I. Opening

The first Earth Day, on April 22, 1970, is often remembered as the start of the "environmental decade" and a turning point in post-World War II American culture. Interrupting broad assumptions of the postwar era's promise of generalized abundance and wellbeing, so the story goes, Earth Day raised the alarm that the "American way of life" was not only coming to an end, but perhaps already irredeemably compromised. Earth Day was announced in the *New York Times* in March 1970 which positioned the stakes of the event clearly. As Environmental Teach-In, Inc. described, "A disease has infected our country. It has brought smog to Yosemite, dumped garbage in the Hudson, sprayed DDT in our food, and left our cities in decay. Its carrier is man."[1] Following this indictment, the ad promised that Earth Day would represent an effort to "reclaim the environment we have wrecked." Earth Day was situated as an action which would interrupt complacency by imagining the implications of present-day patterns of production and consumption on the future; it was, in the words of the ad, a "day for looking beyond tomorrow" in pursuit of "a future worth living." Earth Day was thus framed as an intervention not only for existing Americans but for future generations. As the advertisement concluded, "Help make April 22 burgeon. For you. For us. For our children."[2]

Earth Day and the environmental fervor it represented did not, as environmental

[1] "April 22. Earth Day Ad in the New York Times.," *Give Earth a Chance: Environmental Activism in Michigan*, accessed May 7, 2025, https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/ environmentalism/items/show/385.
[2] "April 22. Earth Day Ad in the New York Times."

historians have addressed, appear out of thin air.[3] Following the deployment of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and resurging during Cold War conflicts in Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam, American culture and politics were deeply shaped by the existential threat of nuclear weaponry. This threat was central both to shoring up American empire internationally through refashioned colonial violence and to fostering cultures of nationalism and "dissociation" within the domestic space.[4] As theorist Joseph Masco writes, the United States has, since 1945, "hing[ed] the stability of everyday American life on the possibility of an impossibly sudden and total form of violence," thus resulting in a society in which politics are perversely filtered "through visions of an abrupt collective end."[5] Despite the efforts of the atomic industry and its regulatory bodies to domesticate radiation as a safe component of ordinary life, in the 1950s and 1960s, peace activists and scientists began to politicize the health effects posed by radiation, heightening public distrust of nuclear regulation by highlighting the danger substances posed to children's health in particular.[6] As Natasha Zaretsky writes, such efforts sought to position nuclear technology as "a crime against the future," with particular implications for the genetic health of unborn generations.[7]

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[3] For more extensive discussion of Earth Day and its historical context, see: Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-in Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (Hill and Wang, 2013); Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (2003): 525–54.

[4] Natasha Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation: Three Mile Island and The Political Transformation of The 1970s* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 15-56.

[5] Joseph Masco, *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making* (Duke University Press, 2021), 2-3.

[6] See: Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation,* 28-56; Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 9-23.

[7] Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation,* 28.

Concurrently, Americans became increasingly concerned about the problem of air pollution resulting from auto exhaust and industrial emissions, representing the underside of the post-WWII state investment in automobile infrastructure and military-industrial production.[8] Finis Dunaway charts the proliferation of gas mask imagery in the 1950s and 1960s which heightened anxieties of endangered futures, most notably for children.[9] Rachel Carson's 1963 *Silent Spring* brought environmental fears even closer to home through her analysis of chemical industry malfeasance and the resulting contamination of the American landscape and, crucially, its residents. *Silent Spring*'s apocalyptic vision of a worse tomorrow both heightened public skepticism of post-World War II industry and broadened public awareness of the permeability between human and nonhuman bodies and environments.[10] Paul Ehrlich's 1968 *The Population Bomb* promoted a different apocalyptic vision, this time of the proliferation, rather than enfeeblement, of bodies as a threat to human and planetary futures. In 1969, the Santa Barbara oil spill and the recurring fire in Ohio's Cuyahoga River resulting from industrial pollution sparked collective dismay at corporate irresponsibility and calls for both conservationist voluntarism and greater state regulation. The first Earth Day therefore marks an inflection point rather than a point of origin in postwar environmental consciousness.

Earth Day nevertheless remains a useful site of analysis because it brings together so many currents of its era, including mobilizations around Civil Rights, the New Left,

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[8] See: Christopher W. Wells, *Car Country: An Environmental History* (University of Washington Press, 2012).
[9] Dunaway, *Seeing Green,* 47-57.
[10] See: Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation*; Dunaway, *Seeing Green*; Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (University of California Press, 2006); Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Indiana University Press, 2010).

women's freedoms, labor, and opposition to the Vietnam War.[11] The forms of distrust of both corporate and state power and fears about the future marshalled and negotiated by Earth Day resonate with what Natasha Zaretsky describes as a broader narrative of decline in the 1970s which wedded a declensionist national narrative at the close of the "American Century" to anxieties surrounding the crisis of the American family.[12]

Within this web of connection, I am most interested in Earth Day's mobilization of children and future generations as the envisioned beneficiaries of environmentalism. The Earth Day announcement and its antecedents make clear the centrality of reproductive futurism to the environmentalisms which converged during the 1970s. As I go on to argue in this dissertation, during the 1970s reproductive and children's futures became critical sites of concern and intervention within environmental politics. Understanding why and how, I suggest, requires situating environmental politics within a broader cultural context of the 1970s in which support of neoliberal family values emerged as a dominant political and economic agenda, resulting in broad sweeping changes to how Americans understood themselves in relation to corporations, government, and society.

Across its four chapters, the dissertation tracks four keywords at the heart of the 1970s transformations, demonstrating how these terms bridge and inflect cultural, political economic dimensions of environmental politics: *privatization, deservingness, responsibility, and regulation*. These concepts became dominant frames for environmental politics within the context of this period. It is through these frames–of

[11] Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance,'" 525-54.
[12] See: Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

privatizing public resources, constraining who is deserving of care, diminishing a sense of common or collective responsibility in favor of individualized responsibility, and designating particular bodies as sites of coercive regulation–that the implications of narrowing the scope of environmental politics to various claims to protect children, reproduction, and the family become apparent. Undermining the very future generations that environmental politics were organized around, the dissertation shows how claims to protecting children and future generations often relied on narrowing the scope of concern to individuals and families, rather than fostering collective and systemic analyses of how human relationships to the environment might be made lastingly sustainable and equally sustaining to all. These episodes illustrate environmentalism's entanglement with the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the 1970s, in which the modern environmental movement was born.

## II. Tracing Neoliberal Family Values in the Environmental History of the 1970s

This dissertation is set within "the long 1970s," a period of particular significance for understanding how environmental, reproductive, and family politics were shaped by wider changes in political economy.[13] While at the start of the twenty-first century, historians felt the need to justify their emphasis on the seventies, assumed to be "an

[13] My use of the term "the long 1970s" is inspired by its use by Bruce J. Schulman in *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Free Press, 2001), xvi-xvii. As Schulman writes, "It is easy to mock the overwrought chronologies that lay such heavy weight on years that end with zero. But during the long 1970s, fifteen malaise-and mayhem-filled years, from 1969 to 1984, the United States experienced a remarkable makeover. Its economic outlook, political ideology, cultural assumptions, and fundamental social arrangements changed." I am not quite as faithful as Schulman to this particular range of years, but, like Schulman's, this project at times extends backwards into the 1960s and forwards into the 1980s, with, of course, the influence of the present on my reading of this past era.

eminently forgettable decade," in the intervening years a significant body of historical scholarship has flourished by attending to the social, cultural, political, and economic transformations the now "pivotal decade" inaugurated.[14] In this dissertation, I focus on the 1970s with forays into the years extending on either side of the decade. During this period, we can see how environmentalism was constituted by the political, economic, and cultural conditions in which it took shape.

As political and feminist theorists have contended, the politics of family values emergent in this era largely resonated with neoliberal economic policies which led to the curtailing of state spending on social supports as necessary to familial freedom, with the most adverse effects on families and communities outside of the normative white, middle class, heterosexual unit these policies privileged.[15] As historian Sara Matthiesen puts it, the "ostensibly 'cultural' politics" of family values "consistently carried policy riders."[16]

The neoliberal transformation underway in the 1970s would also exacerbate existing environmental crises. This disjuncture is visible, Julie Sze suggests, in the twinned effects of deregulation and privatization, not just of public services and

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[14] The term "pivotal decade" references Judith Stein's book of the same title, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (Yale University Press, 2010). See also: Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Free Press, 2001); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New Press, 2010); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013); Zaretsky, *No Direction Home*; Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

[15] Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism;* Cooper, *Family Values*; Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (Jan. 1994): 309–36; Sara Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived: Family Making and the Limits of Choice after Roe v. Wade*, (University of California Press, 2021).

[16] Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived,* 9.

institutions, but of racially unequally distributed exposure to pollutants and toxins, many of which did, in fact, have particularly adverse effects on children.[17] Additionally, as Rob Nixon argues, analyzing the effects of neoliberalism on the environment requires recognizing how neoliberalism's formula of "internalizing profits and externalizing risk" operates both spatially and temporally, such that risks are effectively outsourced to future generations.[18]

In their critiques of neoliberalism and the power hierarchies it sustains, scholars are careful to distinguish between the rhetoric of neoliberalism as oppositional to government or favoring "small government," and the reality of neoliberal policies, which often focused on creating favorable market conditions and redistributing of resources toward the security, surveillance, military, and police institutions that neoliberalism authorizes. The forms of governance that are sacrificed, however, are the functions of the social state, public utilities, forums for government accountability, and labor, industrial, and economic regulation.[19] Wendy Brown has argued that, in contrast to liberalism, neoliberal economic ideologies transcend the economic sphere such that all areas of life are subject to market values, rather than other, previous, systems of valuation. Therefore, the relationship between the market and the government is crucially altered from both

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[17] Julie Sze, *Noxious New York*, 9-10; Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (University of California Press, 2020), 51-5.
[18] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 29.
[19] Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, (Columbia University Press, 2019); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2003); Elisabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Duke University Press, 2014), 9-10, 175, 182; Elisabeth R. Anker, *Ugly Freedoms* (Duke University Press, 2022), 113-4.

liberalism and Keynesianism; under neoliberalism, the government role in the market is positioned as necessarily overreaching, inefficient, and detrimental to the production of profit. Neoliberalism thus administers both the merging of market interests with governmental interests and the political disempowerment of both the government and citizenry.[20]

Family values describes the rise of a conservative politics organized around the heteropatriarchal family and Christian morality that gained national prominence through political organizations and media in the 1970s. While historians' accounts of the exact origins of family values politics and the conservative coalition they inaugurated vary, it is frequently characterized as a reaction to several overlapping mobilizations: the Black Freedom movement and school desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s, which sparked massive resistance tactics and the initiation of parochial "segregation academies"; the feminist and gay liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which were met by the reinforcement of normative gender and familial politics; and leftist activism which critiqued the order installed by the family wage and called for the redistribution of wealth and expansion of social welfare, which was framed as a threat to free-market capitalism and existing hierarchies of power. Together, these touch points which make visible the intersection of race, sex, and gender which coalesced into a formidable cultural and economic politics in this era.

While the history of the "family values" period has typically focused on the rise of the New Right, an assemblage of Christian social conservatives and free market neoliberals which gained an increasing hold over American politics and culture in the

[20] Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism.*

1970s-1990s, the politics of the family extended beyond the confines of the Right and moved within and across the political spectrum, complicating the narrative of polarization and culture wars that typically defines this period.[21] Recent historical scholarship has demonstrated the continuities between conservative and liberal iterations of family values which cross partisan affiliation and indicate a more broadly emergent commonsense of normative family protectionism that took on the veneer of incontestability in this era. In this vein, historian Lily Geismer has argued that white, middle-class liberals of the 1970s-1990s generated alternatives to conservative family values which were nevertheless grounded in the defense and protection of children. The suburban liberals that Geismer analyzes focused their attention on fair housing, voluntary integration, antiwar and antinuclear activism, and environmentalism–initiatives which aligned with liberal families' material priorities surrounding taxation, property values, and equal opportunity–rather than issues like abortion, gay rights, and sex education, which occupied family values activists on the Right.[22] Despite their divergent focuses, these distinct forms of family values politics ultimately complemented one another in shoring up the privatization of the family, opposition to a robust welfare state, distrust of state intervention, and the racialized logic of personal responsibility, all of which had distinct implications on environmental politics.

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[21] See: Zaretsky, *No Direction Home*; Self, *All in the Family*; Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*; Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Zone Books, 2017); Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*; Linda Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market: The Emotions That Matter in Right-Wing America*. (Duke University Press, 1997); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

[22] Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 12.

Despite the growth of scholarship on the 1970s-era within the fields of social, cultural, and political history—work which has enabled a deeper understanding of such essential topics as deindustrialization and the fracturing of the New Deal consensus, Christian conservative mobilizations around reproduction and sexuality in the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade,* white working class opposition to busing and the defense of "de facto" segregation in the post-Civil Rights era, and the "Crisis of Confidence" in American governance—this body of work has, with notable exceptions, rarely integrated environmental history.[23] Environmental history, in turn, has not consistently incorporated these social, cultural, and political histories of the 1970s.[24] This disciplinary division obfuscates how environmental history was shaped by its social, cultural, and political economic conditions, and vice versa. As historian Jennifer Thomson writes in her analysis of environmental health in the 1970s and 1980s,

> Environmentalists neither spontaneously nor autonomously decided upon health as the most apt term for what they were aiming to protect. Rather, their multifaceted mobilization of the term derived from its cultural and political salience to the social justice struggles of the 1960s and 1970s…The broader social salience of health suggests that understanding the diversification of environmental activism from the 1970s into the present requires moving beyond an internally

[23] Recent works of postwar political and cultural history which engage environmental history include: Geiser, *Don't Blame Us;* Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation*; Meg Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump: The Energy Crisis and the Transformation of American Politics in the 1970s* (Hill and Wang, 2016).

[24] Recent examples in environmental history which engage postwar political and cultural history include: Christopher Sellers, Finis Dunaway, Erik Loomis, Jennifer Thomson, and James Morton Turner, "FORUM: Discovering the Environment," *Modern American History* 1, no. 3 (2018): 363-90; Robert Gioielli, "'Pruitt-Igoe in the Suburbs': Connecting White Flight, Sprawl, and Climate Change in Metropolitan America," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 65, no. 2 (2020): 213-230; Jennifer Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic: American Environmentalism and the Politics of Health* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Caleb Wellum, *Energizing Neoliberalism: The 1970s Energy Crisis and the Making of Modern America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023); Pollyanna Rhee, *Natural Attachments: The Domestication of American Environmentalism, 1920-1970* (University of Chicago Press, 2025).

> focused, self-referential history that features environmentalists as the central agents of environmental politics.[25]

Likewise, Natasha Zaretsky's *Radiation Nation* productively situates the Three Mile Island disaster of the late 1970s within the political transformations of the period, complicating historical narratives which reduce the story of the 1970s to "the rise of the right."[26] This approach makes visible "the considerable cross-pollination between left and right that took place during the 1970s," highlighting continuities of "waning public confidence in governmental institutions," "rising skepticism vis-à-vis official truth-claims," and "heightened awareness of bodily vulnerability" which were inextricably shaped by contemporaneous events including the Vietnam War and the feminist politicization of women's reproductive health.[27] Following Thomson and Zaretsky, I emphasize the relationships between the environmental movement and other social movements within the era, with particular attunement to feminism and activism surrounding reproduction in order to understand the role of children, both actually existing and imagined, in shaping the possibilities of environmental politics of the long 1970s.

## III. Centering Reproduction

During the 1970s, reproduction emerged as a crucial terrain of politicization and concern within environmental politics. Debates surrounding the contraction of state investment in social programs; state responsibility for ensuring environmental health and children's exposures to toxic waste; corporate and state oversight of occupational hazards

[25] Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic,* 10.
[26] Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation,* 6.
[27] Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation,* 6, 8-10.

and fetal protection; and the role of governments and individuals in regulating unrestrained population growth all hinged on reproduction as a means through which to mediate the outcomes of future generations, and, with them, national futures.

The 1970s thus represents a period of transformation within environmental *and* reproductive politics. Between the 1960s and 1980s, writes historian Rickie Solinger, "civil-and human-rights campaigns led by women began to define women's oppression as well as liberation as rooted in their sexuality and fertility," while political officials "put the sexuality and fertility of women of color at the heart of debates about the most pressing issues facing the United States, including civil rights, racial equality, poverty and welfare, urban decay, crime, citizenship qualifications, women's status, the 'population bomb,' communism, and foreign aid."[28] Following the first commercial distribution of the birth control pill in the 1960s, the liberalization and legalization of contraception—for use by married couples and for use by unmarried women—proceeded in close succession.[29] *Roe v. Wade,* the Supreme Court decision which legalized abortion on January 22, 1973, often represents the culmination of these radical changes within histories and popular memory. These legal and technological developments combined to newly distinguish heterosexual sex from procreation, fundamentally transforming pregnancy from a fate to a "choice." As Sara Matthiesen writes, following *Roe,* "pregnancy became a choice for motherhood rather than a precondition of

[28] Rickie Solinger, "Politics of Reproductive Rights in 20th-Century America," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 12-3.
[29] These legal changes were determined in Supreme Court decisions *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) and *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972). Solinger, "Politics of Reproductive Rights," 12-14.

motherhood."[30] The rapidity of these transformations belies the decades of work of diverse groups in pursuit of these aims, including feminists, reproductive rights advocates, and populationists, whose aims often aligned despite the range of underlying and often conflicting motivations which drove them.

As scholars of reproduction have demonstrated, the framework of choice, while seeming to suggest the culmination of the project of reproductive rights in the 1970s, instead marks its limits.[31] Solinger assesses, "the right to choose" is "intimately connected to the possession of resources."[32] Recognizing how conceptions of "choice" emerge from a neoliberal frame, Solinger writes, "'Choice' puts 'rights' in the arena of the marketplace."[33] Prior to and following *Roe,* women whose analyses of gender were inextricable from race and class recognized that the legalization of abortion could not assure full reproductive autonomy, encompassing contraception and abortion rights and access and, as Angela Davis put it, "the right to reproduce."[34] Coercion and resource maldistribution had long shaped rights and access to reproductive autonomy, and would prove to be influential in shaping the relationship between environmentalism and reproduction in the 1970s.

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[30] Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived,* 5.
[31] See: Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002)*;* Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Pantheon Books, 1997); Laura Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump* (University of California Press, 2017); Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors the Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (Routledge, 2005); Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived.*
[32] Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers,* 6.
[33] Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers,* 7.
[34] Angela Y. Davis, "Outcast Mothers and Surrogates: Racism and Reproductive Health in the Nineties," in *American Feminist Thought at Century's End: A Reader*, ed. Linda S. Kauffman (Blackwell, 1993) cited in Solinger, "Politics of Reproductive Rights," 15.

Within this project, the concept of "stratified reproduction" is of particular use when examining environmentalism's role in shaping the history of reproductive health and bodily autonomy. Drawing from the work of Shellee Colen, Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp used the term "stratified reproduction" to consider the "power relations by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered."[35] The concept raises key questions including "Who defines the body of the nation into which the next generation is recruited? Who is considered to be in that national body, who is out of it?"[36] Analyzing stratified reproduction makes visible the process through which hierarchies—of gender, race, class, (dis)ability, and nationality—are "made to appear inevitable."[37] Stratified reproduction is visible in the context of political economic developments which undercut social spending in order to secure corporate profits, within hazardous waste remediation which prioritizes white homeowners over Black renters, in the case of women industrial workers given the "choice" between having children and working in environmentally unsafe conditions, and in relation to longstanding patterns of curtailing the reproduction of the poor, the disabled, and the racialized in service of better futures for imagined generations.

This analysis of power is at the center of another recurring concept in this project: reproductive freedom. The movement for reproductive freedom active in the 1970s

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[35] See: Shellee Colen, "Ch. 5 'Like a Mother to Them': Stratified Reproduction and West Indian Childcare Workers and Employers in New York," in *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, ed. Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (University of California Press, 1995), 75–102; Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna R. Rapp, "Introduction: Conceiving the New World Order," in *Conceiving the New World Order*, 1-16.
[36] Ginsburg and Rapp, "Introduction," 3-4.
[37] Ginsburg and Rapp, "Introduction," 3-4.

developed an analysis of reproduction which affirmed the right to control one's reproduction through access to contraception and birth control *and* through freedom from coercion by sterilization abuse. As historian Felicia Kornbluh describes, the movement for reproductive freedom in the 1970s, a predecessor to reproductive justice, espoused a framework which "encompassed everything from fighting for abortion rights to opposing sterilization abuse, advocating universal childcare, battling police violence, and trying to ensure that parents had enough income to raise their children in safety and dignity."[38] Advocates of reproductive freedom thus incorporated aspects of the contemporaneous abortion rights and birth control movements' campaign for the legalization and promotion of access to contraception and abortion while contesting the assumption that these alone would ensure reproductive autonomy. This analysis was generated through and from the experiences of women of color, particularly Black, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Indigenous women and those designated within the elastic category of disabled. The concept of reproductive freedom provides a lens through which to recognize and challenge stratified reproduction's differential valuation of reproductive futures.

## IV. Conceiving "The Child"

The use of children as symbolically versatile representations of futurity proliferated in environmental politics during the 1970s and onward. In *Seeing Green,* Finis Dunaway argues that one of the ways in which such an analysis of power and inequality has been elided is in the framing of environmentalism as a universalist project. Projected universalism, images of vulnerable white children–as victims of the present and

[38] Felicia Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life Is a Human Life: My Mother, Our Neighbor, and the Journey from Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Justice* (Grove Press, 2023), 6.

"emblems of the future" –have been employed to evoke the ubiquity of environmental danger and to provoke public reaction. As Dunaway writes, "Within the context of popular environmentalism, children's bodies provide a way to visualize the largely invisible threats of radiation, toxicity, and other environmental dangers."[39] Yet by consistently conflating whiteness with universality, such images also work to conceal the unequal distribution of environmental harm across race and class divisions, wherein black and brown communities are exposed to greater environmental danger in the places where they live, work, and learn, as well as the structural inequalities and social processes that produce environmental injustice.[40] Likewise, in *The Child to Come: Life After Human Catastrophe,* Rebekah Sheldon traces the literary and cultural archives of the 1960s to the present which center reproductive futurism and the image of the "child to save" as central tenets of environmental and climate discourses. Sheldon describes this period, which saw the development of the atom bomb, the circulation of the first satellite images of Earth from space, and the routinized production and implementation of synthetic insecticides and pesticides, as an era in which "the child came not only to signal the future but to sentimentalize a rescue that is, in a profound sense, more important than the child who is its putative subject."[41] In this dissertation, I root this phenomenon in the specificity of the

[39] Dunaway, *Seeing Green,* 3.
[40] Dunaway, *Seeing Green*, 3, 51, 58-9. Here Dunaway references the environmental justice framework developed by working-class Black communities and defined in the 1990s. See: Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality* (Westview Press, 1990); Vernice D. Miller, "Building on Our Past, Planning for Our Future: Communities of Color and the Quest for Environmental Justice," in *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*, ed. Richard Hofrichter (New Society Publishers, 1993), 128–35.
[41] Rebekah Sheldon, *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 5, 7.

1970s as a historical moment within environmental politics, considering how children, unborn generations, and the family became central to envisioning environmental futures.

Outside of environmental studies, cultural historians of late 20th century have cataloged the contests over "the children" that reverberated within the 1970s-1990s amidst what politicians and cultural commentators framed as a the "crisis of the family." During this era, childhood innocence was employed by parents, politicians, and media for a broad range of issues, including school busing, sex education, anti-gay discrimination, abortion restriction, and the expansion of the carceral state.[42] Although frequently invoked in racially neutral terms, the form of innocence these mobilizations conjured was deeply racialized; as feminist legal scholar Dorothy Roberts has contended, "the powerful Western image of childhood innocence does not seem to benefit Black children. Black children are born guilty."[43] Analyzing the carceral logics of child protection, Erica Meiners writes that invocations of the child are "complex and flexible."[44] While "invoking real or imagined children produces an irreproachable purity, a trump card," the "core artifact associated with childhood, an a priori association with innocence, is buried, unacknowledged" in the context of black and brown youth.[45] Given these multiple tendencies, Meiners warns, "Forefronting children —imagined and not—shields from view other transactions…While child protection is invoked in organizing across the

[42] Geismer, *Don't Blame Us*; Janice M. Irvine, *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (University of California Press, 2002); Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*; Paul M. Renfro, *Stranger Danger: Family Values, Childhood, and the American Carceral State* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Self, *All in the Family.*
[43] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body,* 17.
[44] Erica R. Meiners, *For the Children? Protecting Innocence in a Carceral State* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 2-4.
[45] Meiners, *For the Children?,* 2-4.

political spectrum, unacknowledged in these strategies are the meanings and associations embedded within, and consequently coproduced by, the child."[46]

Queer theorists such as Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman have influentially analyzed the seemingly ubiquitous fixation on children as the primary subject of politics in the last decades of the 20th century. At issue, Edelman argues, is how the trope of "the Child" as an uncontestable icon of futurity results in forms of social and political compulsion toward pronatalism; in effect, this dominant framework presupposes that the future is predicated on the repression of non-procreative sexualities.[47] Lauren Berlant, likewise, argued that the framework of "infantile citizenship" circumscribes the public sphere, privatizes intimacy as exclusive to the normative family, and compels patriotic attachment in service of the imagined subject of national futurity, the Child. Like Edelman, Berlant views infantile citizenship as coercive precisely because it is positioned as apolitical and universal–as they write, "This citizen form figures a space of possibility that transcends the fractures and hierarchies of national life."[48]

Building on and challenging these analyses, scholars including Alison Kafer and Jules Gill-Peterson have analyzed how the archetype of "the Child" in queer theory falters when matrices of difference are taken into account. Kafer writes, "The always already white Child is also always already healthy and nondisabled; disabled children are not part of this privileged imaginary except as the abject other."[49] Jules Gill-Peterson complicates

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[46] Meiners, *For the Children?,* 4-6.
[47] Lee Edelman, "The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive," *Narrative* 6, no. 1 (1998): 21-2.
[48] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1997), 27-8.
[49] Here Kafer is also building on the work of José Esteban Muñoz and Heather Love. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 32-3. See also:

this emblem of reproductive futurity further in relation to trans and multiply marginalized childhoods, arguing,

> If childhood is already a very dangerous time and space for children in the United States, trans childhoods—and, so much more specifically and insistently, *black* trans and *trans of color* childhoods, *nonbinary* trans childhoods, *low-income* trans childhoods, *disabled* trans childhoods, and *undocumented* trans childhoods—have been evacuated of formal meaning and abandoned by adults as less-than-human precincts, caustic reminders of the effects of a culture in which the delusional adoration of the rosy figure of the Child abuts the most heinous quotidian modes of violence in the lives of real children.[50]

As these scholars emphasize, the discursive incontestability of abstracted children in the late 20th century bears little resemblance to the material conditions encountered by the actual children living through this era.

As this dissertation tracks, children have been mobilized extensively within environmentalism as the means through which to imagine desired futures. This imaginary became especially prominent in the 1970s as reproductive technologies, combined with an activated anti-abortion movement, brought renewed emphasis to the fetus as the signifier of a vulnerable future child. The increased attention to maternal health and its impacts on fetuses and infants in the 1970s and 1980s was based in long historical roots. During the early 20th century, theories of the "right to be well born" circulated in response to the new sciences of genetics and heredity and social changes including urbanization, new waves of immigration, and the changing racial composition of the United States. As historian Sara Dubow catalogues, in addition to eugenics (the most pervasive theory and practice), prenatal culturism argued that heredity was in part

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Julie Passanante Elman, *Chronic Youth: Disability, Sexuality, and US Media Cultures of Rehabilitation* (New York University Press, 2014).

[50] Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), viii.

determined by a pregnant woman's thoughts and behavior and euthenics argued heredity could be "improved" through control over external environments.[51] Dubow concludes that, despite their differences, each of these theories relies on the premise of linking infant and national health and justifying reproductive intervention and coercion to ensure particular national futures.[52] As the rhetoric of "improvement" and "well born" implies, each of these theories was bound up in nativism, white racial supremacy, and ideas about able-bodiedness and health which were employed to coercive ends.[53] Each of these theories was also developed in the midst of the criminalization of abortion and debates over the indivisibility versus the individuality of the fetus and mother in legal and medical forums, which saw early discussions of fetal personhood and "maternal-fetal conflict" which resurged in the 1960s and 1970s.[54]

During the postwar period, Americans became increasingly aware of the at times adverse relationship between physical health and technological advances. Zaretsky, in analyzing anti-nuclear repertoires developed by the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) in the 1950s and 1960s, Women Strike for Peace in the 1960s, and Another Mother for Peace in the 1960s and 1970s, argues that later conceptions of the defense of the "rights of the unborn" were shaped by this earlier phase of anti-war and anti-nuclear activism.[55] As Zaretsky traces, white self-identified mothers problematized

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[51] Sara Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn: A History of the Fetus in Modern America* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 24.
[52] Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn*, 24-5.
[53] Rayna Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America* (Routledge, 1999), 18.
[54] Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn*, 22-23.
[55] Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn*, 39-41.

nuclear weapons testing by contending it abridged the rights of unborn generations.[56] Simultaneous awareness of the impact of diethylstilboestrol (DES) and thalidomide, medications framed as methods of "enhancing" female reproduction, on fetal development heightened public anxiety surrounding the relationship between maternal and fetal health and bodily vulnerability to technological interventions.[57]

Developments in reproductive health in the postwar period reshaped cultural, political, and legal understandings of "the unborn." In the 1960s, amniocentesis began to be used to assess and diagnose chromosomal conditions including Down syndrome, and in the 1970s and 1980s, reprogenetic technologies enabled new ways of constructing fetal health in law and medicine.[58] Other medical innovations developed linkages between maternal "environments" and fetal health; in 1973 the University of Washington first identified fetal alcohol syndrome and linked it to pregnant women's alcohol consumption, in 1977 the American Cancer Society used fetal sonograms to demonstrate the risks of smoking, and in 1981 the surgeon general's office warned about the risks of drinking alcohol during pregnancy.[59] The temporal convergence of the abortion and anti-abortion movements with environmental mobilization resulted in heightened scrutiny of the unborn as the imagined beneficiaries of environmentalism's progress.

Theorist Claudia Castañeda describes the inherent futurity of the figure of the child is central to its "value as a cultural resource." As Castañeda, writes, the child, when

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[56] Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn*, 39-41.
[57] Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation,* 95, 214; Julie Sze, "Boundaries and Border Wars: DES, Technology, and Environmental Justice," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (Sept. 2006): 796-798.
[58] Rapp, *Testing Women,* 27-9; Dorothy Roberts, "Privatization and Punishment in the New Age of Reprogenetics," *Emory Law Journa*l 54 (2005): 1353.
[59] Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation*, 95.

invoked for diverse political ends, represents "a potentiality rather than an actuality, a becoming rather than a being."[60] Geographer Cindi Katz describes children as key sites through which anxieties about the political economic future, the geopolitical future, and the environmental future" are mediated.[61] Departing from earlier periods of history in which children went from economic asset to liability, Katz writes, children in the postwar period increasingly came to signify "both an economic and psychic investment in the future."[62] The precise nature of this imagined futurity is examined in the following section.

## V. Imagining Healthy Futures

Essentially linked to children, reproductive health has long been a site at which diverse actors stake their imaginaries of the future. Historian Laura Lovett describes how women engaged in Progressive-era conservationism acted under the banner of maternalism by encompassing forestry, soil, and water within "their roles as protectors of future generations and of the home."[63] As Lovett explains, for such figures, "children

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[60] Claudia Castañeda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2002), 1.

[61] Cindi Katz, "Cultural Geographies Lecture: Childhood as Spectacle: Relays of Anxiety and the Reconfiguration of the Child," *Cultural Geographies* 15, no. 1 (Jan. 2008): 6.

[62] Katz, "Cultural Geographies Lecture," 10.

[63] Laura L. Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 124. For discussion of maternalism and American empire and statecraft more broadly, see: Brianna Theobald, *Reproduction on the Reservation: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940* (University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (Vintage Books, 1983); Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*; Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (University of California Press,

were a natural resource that needed management as much as forests did to insure future prosperity."[64] Such projections of the future, as scholars including Lovett, Sara Dubow, Rebecca Kluchin, Alexandra Minna Stern, and Joanna Schoen have examined, were historically connected to projects of racial purity, with nativism and eugenics traveling hand in hand with early 20th century conservationist imaginaries.[65] Leveraging "fitness"–for civilization, for citizenship, and for reproduction–has long been a tool for those whose visions of progress and futurity were premised on the exclusion and regulation of racialized others.[66]

Environmentalist visions of the future also concretized norms around sexual normativity, health, and able-bodiedness. As disability studies scholar Julie Elman writes, "Through overlapping and mutually reinforcing discourses of racial, sexual, and disabled 'deviance,' reproductive controls based on eugenic notions of the heredity of deviant behavior played out in the sexual containment and policing of adolescent bodies to ensure

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2003); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

[64] Lovett, *Conceiving the Future,* 110.

[65] Lovett, *Conceiving the Future,* 124; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 2015); Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn*; Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980* (Rutgers University Press, 2011).

[66] As Jess Whatcott describes in *Menacing for the Future,* in addition to forms of direct reproductive coercion, prisons–disability institutions and migration detention centers–control reproduction of communities by obstructing the means for communities to create and sustain families and kinship. In the United States, what Whatcott defines as "carceral eugenics" have disproportionately targeted racialized (particularly Black, Indigenous, Puerto Rican, Mexican) and disabled communities as a means of controlling the future of the national body. See: Jess Whatcott, *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics* (Duke University Press, 2024); Jael Silliman and Anannya Bhattacharjee, *Policing the National Body: Sex, Race, and Criminalization* (South End Press, 2002).

and protect future 'fit' generations."[67] During the Progressive era, birth control advocates and governments promoted the sterilization of those deemed deviant, nonnormative, or unfit as a means of controlling national futures.

Such premises have remained salient within environmental politics in the late 20th century and into the present. For instance, disabled scholar and artist Eli Clare describes a series of Sierra Club advertisements in its "Beyond Coal" campaign, including one which featured an image of a pregnant woman overlaid with the text, "This little bundle of joy is now a reservoir of mercury." Such images, he argues "use disability to make an argument about the consequences of environmental destruction."[68] Emblematic of what Clare calls the "cautionary tale" approach, these advertisements promote fear and discrimination rather than solidarity:

> Seemingly the ads ask us to act in alliance with the people most impacted by the burning of coal. But digging down a bit, the Sierra Club twists away from solidarity, focusing instead on particular kinds of body-mind conditions—asthma, birth defects, cancer, learning disabilities—transforming them into symbols for environmental damage. This strategy works because it taps into ableism. It assumes that viewers will automatically understand disability and chronic illness as tragedies in need of prevention and eradication, and in turn that these tragedies will persuade us to join the struggle."[69]

Such forms of exclusion persist within environmental scholarship relating to health and reproduction. As theorist Jina B. Kim assesses, "...while studies of environmental racism invariably reference disability to denote environmental harm, few if any address the

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[67] Elman, *Chronic Youth*.
[68] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017), 55-6.
[69] Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 55-6; See also: Eli Clare, "Notes on Natural Worlds, Disabled Bodies, and a Politics of Cure," in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Stacy Alaimo, Sarah Jaquette Ray, and Jay Sibara (University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 242–66.

phenomenon from a critical disability perspective. In these primarily sociological studies, which seek to 'quantify, measure, and prove that environmental racism exists,' disability is a constitutive feature of environmental racism but is treated simply as a transparent measure of inequity."[70]

Disability is perhaps most present in considerations of the future, in which disabled people and environments are held up as evidence of environmental degradation. Importantly, scholars including Nirmala Erevelles have complicated earlier scholarships' "implicit assumption here that the acquisition of a disabled identity always occurs outside historical context," instead insisting that disability represents "not as the condition of being but of becoming."[71] Such a perspective, Erevelles contends, makes visible disability's intersections with axes of race, gender, and sexuality with which it is co-constituted within the historical context of transnational capitalism.[72] Queer, feminist, and disability scholars have generated alternative modes of thinking about the future which, as theorist Sunaura Taylor envisions, considers the entanglement of the disablement of nature and the disablement of human beings as a site for solidarity rather than blame, exclusion, or neglect.[73] Taylor reflects, in conversation with scholars including Nirmala Erevelles and Jina Kim, that "Disability can, and often does, emerge

[70] Jina B. Kim, "Cripping East Los Angeles: Enabling Environmental Justice in Helena María Viramontes's Their Dogs Came with Them," in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Stacy Alaimo, Sarah Jaquette Ray, and Jay Sibara (University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 502–30.
[71] Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17, 26.
[72] Erevelles, *Disability and Difference,* 6.
[73] Sunaura Taylor, *Disabled Ecologies: Lessons from a Wounded Desert* (University of California Press, 2024), 5, 10-11.

from profound injustice. Yet at times, disability can also help make the world anew."[74]

Alison Kafer's meditations on disabled futures are particularly instructive when examining how deep-seated assumptions about the future, continuity, and health in the context of reproduction and children should be displaced in order to make room for alternatives.[75] As Kafer describes,

> How one understands disability in the present determines how one imagines disability in the future; one's assumptions about the experience of disability create one's conception of a better future…If disability is conceptualized as a terrible unending tragedy, then any future that includes disability can only be a future to avoid…In this framework, a future with disability is a future no one wants, and the figure of the disabled person, especially the disabled fetus or child, becomes the symbol of this undesired future.[76]

Resisting this projection of a "healthy" future, she argues, requires making space for greater complexity: "there is a difference between denying necessary health care, condoning dangerous working conditions, or ignoring public health concerns (thereby causing illness and impairment) and recognizing illness and disability as part of what makes us human…sketching out some of the potential differences is exactly the work we need to be doing."[77] Kafer contends that reproductive and disability justice groups can learn from one another.[78] This, in turn, is the kind of coalitional thinking that informs my approach to analyzing environmental politics–its possibilities, and its shortcomings–during the 1970s.

## VI. Overview of Chapters

[74] Taylor, *Disabled Ecologies,* 13.
[75] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 3.
[76] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 2-3.
[77] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 4.
[78] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 162-8.

Oriented around the question of how environmental politics came to be premised as “for the children,” this dissertation draws on historical archives to analyze how reproduction and the family became key sites of environmental concern and intervention during the 1970s. Within the scope of this dissertation, capitalism is understood within a particular historical phase of emergent neoliberalism defined by a cultural politics of family values in the 1970s, in which, I argue, four concepts became dominant frames: *privatization, deservingness, responsibility, and regulation.* While I draw on each concept to analyze a particular case study, each term also resonates with the other chapters. The dissertation as a whole is interested in how these concepts defined the possibilities of environmental futures.

The first chapter examines how Mobil Oil’s public relations program contributed to cultures of privatization during the oil crises of the 1970s. Analyzing Mobil's public relations, television sponsorship, and educational activities, the chapter tracks the oil industry's efforts to present its own interests as aligned with those of future generations in order to justify state disinvestment and environmental deregulation. Building from the work of scholars, journalists, and activists who have excavated the oil industry's deflection campaigns in relation to climate change, this chapter attends to the cultural dimensions of the industry's campaign. I argue the oil industry’s public relations activities in the 1970s contributed to “cultures of privatization,” particularly as they relate to children and the family as the primary symbols of social welfare. I make this argument through my close reading of the cultural politics of "advertorials"–which present an advertisement in the form of an editorial, followed by my analysis of Mobil's sponsorship of the Children's Television Workshop and the proliferation of industry-sponsored

educational materials in the 1970s. Through these programs, the oil industry promoted the protection of children's futures as a key site of negotiation in the early days of the environmental movement.

The second chapter analyzes how notions of "deservingness" were mobilized by activists and state officials as they responded to hazardous waste contamination at Love Canal, ultimately leading to divisions between community members in their respective visions of remediation. Love Canal holds a place of significance within environmental histories of anti-toxics activism, with its prominence in national news coverage and significance in environmental policymaking resulting in the standardization of the story it represents. Within the typical narration of Love Canal, self-described housewife activists won governmental and corporate accountability by advocating for their children's health, culminating in the passage of the Superfund Act in 1980. I take a different approach by situating Love Canal activism within the history of racialized family values and stratified reproduction in the United States, focusing on how race and homeownership became critical dividing lines between those viewed as worthy of public attention and, with it, state redress and those whose health and economic needs remained unmet. Whereas previous scholarship has focused on the activism of white women within the Love Canal Homeowners Association, I focus on how claims to "deservingness" were leveraged within the interactions between homeowners and their lesser-known neighbors, a group of poor and majority Black single mothers who formed a Renter's Association to advocate for the marginalized needs of public housing residents. The chapter is based in archives from Love Canal community groups as well as in the media coverage of Love Canal which narrated its unfolding to national audiences, shaping its significance in

environmental history.

The third chapter contextualizes the emergence of so-called "fetal protection policies" within industrial workplaces in the late 1970s within environmental, labor, and reproductive rights politics during this period. Centered on an exclusionary policy established at chemical manufacturer American Cyanamid's plant in Willow Island, West Virginia, the chapter focuses on how corporations purported to claim responsibility for the health and safety of the unborn in order to justify excluding women of "childbearing age" from working in proximity to hazards including lead. In order to comply with the policy and retain their union jobs, five women obtained sterilization procedures under pressure from American Cyanamid corporate and medical representatives. As activists at the time noted, such policies entailed "fixing the worker, not the workplace," demonstrating the coercion at the heart of such claims to protection as well as the failure of regulatory policy and the judicial system to eradicate hazards from the workplace. It closes by tracking the work of a labor-feminist-environmental coalition, the Coalition for the Reproductive Rights of Workers (CRROW) to create a broader understanding of social rather than personal responsibility for the health of all workers. CRROW's approach was, here, crucially informed by contemporaneous theorizations of reproductive freedom. With an emphasis on responsibility, both in the sense that 1970s corporations claimed responsibility for protecting the health of future generations through exclusionary policies and in the claims generated by activists that the state was responsible for ensuring healthy conditions for *all* workers, this chapter highlights the limits of concepts of choice, both with regard to reproduction and to labor. In this chapter, I analyze archives from the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers, the union

representing workers in the Willow Island plant, and CRROW to consider how these groups interwove the concerns of labor, reproduction, and the environment.

Chapter four traces the history of environmental populationism in the early 1970s, examining the individuals and organizations most active in constructing population as an environmental problem to be solved through control over reproduction. Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb* (1968) and co-founder of Zero Population Growth (ZPG) in 1969, contributed to a broader reconsideration of the postwar economy of production and consumption's role in degrading the environment. Yet, crucially, Ehrlich assigned responsibility for this degradation to overpopulation, the problem of "too many people," rather than the structural organization of the economy and the maldistribution of resources it required. Rather than regulating the economy, Ehrlich and ZPG pressed for the regulation of reproduction. By promoting "intimate regulation," environmental populationists represented children not as beneficiaries of environmentalism but as its antagonists, positioning women as ultimately responsible for ensuring planetary equilibrium and earthly futures through the public and private regulation of reproduction. After tracing its antecedents, the chapter focuses on ZPG, emphasizing the organization's role in promoting a commonsense of intimate regulation through its fragmentary alliances with reproductive rights and feminist groups. ZPG is perhaps the most well-known organization which brought together the concerns of environmentalism and reproduction in the 1970s. The organization is of particular interest to me because it understood itself, and was understood, as a grassroots populationist movement, distinct from "establishment" organizations and government bodies. Within the organization, I find extensive debate and variation in how individual members understood population as a

problem, how and whether they saw women's rights and reproductive autonomy as a means to an end or a valuable end in and of itself, and whether they saw the stakes of the overpopulation problem as justifying coercive, rather than solely voluntary, forms of sexual regulation.

While I narrate each of these case studies separately, there are, I hope, numerous points of intersection where the chapters meet. Chapters two and three make clear the limits and possibilities of regulatory agencies to prevent and mitigate environmental harm; chapters three and four demonstrate the precarity of the line between choice and coercion; chapters one and two exemplify the racialization of claims to protect children's interests. Although the dissertation features presidents and policymakers, I am most interested in the actors–activists, social movements, corporations, and organizations–who pushed for and against particular policy outcomes as horizons of possibility.

In the conclusion, I relate the questions–about political economy, the state, and the equal provision of care and resources–raised by the environmental history of the 1970s, to questions we are facing in the present. These case studies represent both pitfalls and possibilities of environmental politics in the 1970s which provide lessons for those seeking alternate modes to care for environments and communities in the 2020s.

Ultimately, the dissertation analyzes how diverse actors leveraged claims to acting in defense of children and future generations as they responded to the increasingly apparent environmental problems of the 1970s, attending to the projects this emphasis both enabled and foreclosed.

## Chapter 1: The Oil Crises and Cultures of Privatization

### I. Introduction

A 1975 *Wall Street Journal* column begins with an unlikely anecdote describing how a group of California school children sent a package of letters and a check representing 1,334 pennies they'd collected to Rawleigh Warner Jr., then-chairman of Mobil Oil. This donation was made in response to a recent Mobil advertorial featuring a large illustration of *Sesame Street*'s Big Bird and entitled "Endangered Species" which highlighted the series' vulnerability and dependence on private funding.[1] The article goes on to describe a typical letter from the group of students expressing, "Dear Mobil Oil: Most people are mad at you but we like you. Thank you for helping Big Bird Stay on TV. We are glad to help too."[2] The students' donation, the article argues, was significant not in terms of its monetary contribution but what it demonstrated about the success of Mobil's public affairs program in redefining the company's image as a socially conscious corporation working in the interest of the public good.

As this column demonstrates, the oil industry's public relations programs, in addition to establishing and broadening the parameters of corporate "free speech," denying climate science, and obstructing international regulatory measures which would limit the worst

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[1] Mobil Oil, "Endangered Species," Advertisement, *The New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1974, sec. 1, 33.

[2] Michael J. Connor, "Arguing Back: Mobil's Advocacy Ads Lead a Growing Trend, Draw Praise, Criticism," *The Wall Street Journal* (May 14, 1975), 1. Within public relations, "advertorials"—a term that combines advertisements and editorials—are described as "paid messages in the media sponsored by organized interests to create and sustain a favorable political environment to pursue their respective goals." See: Clyde Brown and Herbert Waltzer, "Every Thursday: Advertorials by Mobil Oil on the Op-Ed Page of *The New York Times*," *Public Relations Review* 31, no. 2 (June 2005): 197–208.

effects of a rapidly warming planet, were mobilized to endorse particular cultural values.[3] In the 1970s, in the midst of oil crises, environmental activism, and growing distrust in corporate power, the oil industry educated the public about its vital role in maintaining the stability of the economy and the "American way of life"—often represented through the family and, particularly, children.[4] Through "petro-pedagogical" programs, oil corporations intervened in public debates surrounding energy, economic redistribution, social programs, and education, aligning the interests of future generations with the interests of free market capitalism broadly and the oil industry specifically. [5] By bringing

[3] This chapter is indebted to the scholars and journalists who have analyzed oil industry deflection campaigns in relation to climate change. See: Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (Bloomsbury Press, 2010); Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes, "Assessing ExxonMobil's Climate Change Communications (1977–2014)," *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 8 (Aug. 2017): 084019; Amy Westervelt, *Drilled,* podcast, (2019- ), https://rigged.ghost.io/; Robert J. Brulle, Melissa Aronczyk, and Jason Carmichael, "Corporate Promotion and Climate Change: An Analysis of Key Variables Affecting Advertising Spending by Major Oil Corporations, 1986–2015," *Climatic Change* 159, no. 1 (Mar. 2020): 87–101; Emily Atkin, "Introducing: The Fossil Fuel Ad Anthology," July 12, 2021, https://heated.world/p/introducing-the-fossil-fuel-ad-anthology (accessed Apr. 11, 2023); Katie Worth, *Miseducation: How Climate Change Is Taught in America* (Columbia Global Reports, 2021); and Melissa Aronczyk and Maria I. Espinoza, *A Strategic Nature: Public Relations and the Politics of American Environmentalism* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

[4] For a discussion of how oil production and consumption came to be identified with the "American way of life," see: Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xi-xv. For examinations of the relation between children and environmental politics and literatures, see: Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Rebekah Sheldon, *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[5] Emily M. Eaton and Nick A. Day have argued that industry-sponsored teaching materials represent the "'pedagogical arm'" of the fossil fuel industry's "regime of obstruction" to climate policy. I draw on this term more broadly to discuss how public relations programs educated the public about the role of the oil industry in society. "Petro-Pedagogy: Fossil Fuel Interests and the Obstruction of Climate Justice in Public Education," *Environmental Education Research* 26, no. 4 (Apr. 2, 2020): 457–73.

attention to the oil industry's investments in children and families, particularly those racialized as "disadvantaged," public relations programs performed an important function of deflection for the industry, most notably with regard to environmental regulations.[6] Ultimately, during this period, oil corporations drew on public relations and sponsorship activities to highlight children as the beneficiaries of the industry's commitment to the future.

In this chapter, I examine how the oil industry's public relations activities in the 1970s contributed to "cultures of privatization," particularly as they relate to children and the family as the primary symbols of social welfare. Scholars of neoliberalism and its intersections with family values have traced how neoliberalism ushered in conditions of austerity wherein trust in the ability of government to promote social equality receded, with responsibility for well-being shifting from a role of the state to a role of the family.[7] This privatization of social responsibility is evident in oil industry framings of social welfare, including social and educational programs, as essentially dependent on the unrestricted growth and generosity of corporations. By examining how oil corporations' public relations endeavors promoted an understanding of children's futures as objects of private investment, this chapter contributes to the historiography of the oil industry and its participation in perpetuating environmental degradation, as well as historical and

[6] Like "inner-city" and, later, "at risk," in the 1970s "disadvantaged" was one of many race-neutral terms invoked in place of discussing structural causes of racial and economic inequality. Paul S. B. Jackson, "The Crisis of the 'Disadvantaged Child': Poverty Research, IQ, and Muppet Diplomacy in the 1960s," *Antipode* 46, no. 1 (2014): 191-2.
[7] For discussion how family values bridges neoliberalism and social conservatism, see: Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Zone Books, 2017); Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2019).

theoretical analyses of how neoliberal ideologies enforced the privatization of the family.[8] Caleb Wellem, moreover, has recently argued that energy history can meaningfully expand and revise understandings of the "dependence/independence" dualism, a "central binary in U.S. political and cultural history."[9] Through the examination of oil corporations' public relations programs, I argue, we can see how oil companies promoted a vision of public goods as dependent on private growth in a moment in which their power in American life was coming into question.

In this chapter, I focus on the assembled efforts of Mobil Oil in the 1970s as emblematic of the major oil corporations that dominated the oil industry as a whole.[10] Mobil Oil is significant in part due to the widespread attention paid to their public relations initiatives, including from other corporations which would embrace similar tactics, news outlets who were drawn into debates with Mobil over fairness in media, and government bodies that debated the growing role of corporate "speech" in

[8] For discussion of the framing of children of color as human capital who, through private investment, could produce returns, see: Jules Gill-Peterson, "The Value of the Future: The Child as Human Capital and the Neoliberal Labor of Race," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1/2 (2015): 182-190.

[9] Caleb Wellum, "The Use of Energy History," *Modern American History* 6, no. 2 (July 2023): 214. Natasha Zaretsky similarly examines the circulation of the dependence/independence dualism within the history of the oil crises in *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

[10] Particularly as the major oil corporations— including Exxon, Texaco, Gulf Oil, Mobil Oil, Standard Oil of California, Standard Oil of Indiana, and Shell—encountered criticism for their record profits during the oil crises of the 1970s, individual corporations, industry trade groups, and public officials alike recognized the political interests of the oil majors as shared, while distinguishing between the divergent interests of the majors and independent oil companies. See: Congressional Record, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess., Jan. 24, 1974, 726-28; *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Consumer Economics of the Joint Economic Committee,* 93rd Congress, 1st sess., "The Gasoline and Fuel Oil Shortage," May 1, 2 and June 2, 1973.

policymaking.[11] During the 1970s, Mobil pioneered developments in advocacy advertising and educational sponsorship activities which were central to Mobil's self-projection as a socially responsible participant in American society.[12] Mobil, as the most notably vocal oil major, acquired a reputation for speaking broadly in defense of the oil industry's interests.[13] By analyzing Mobil's public affairs activities during this period, I argue, the relationship between the oil industry and the construction of cultures of privatization becomes clear.

I begin with an examination of energy politics in the 1970s, examining the immense public debate over energy futures, environmental priorities, and the role of government in mediating the free market which was taken up by environmentalists, concerned citizens, everyday consumers, public officials, oil corporations, and the larger business community during this era. Shifting to the petro-pedagogical forms that became

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[11] See: Gerri L. Smith and Robert L. Heath, "Moral Appeals in Mobil Oil's Op-Ed Campaign," *Public Relations Review* 16, no. 4 (Dec.1, 1990): 48–54; Robert L. Kerr, "Creating the Corporate Citizen: Mobil Oil's Editorial-Advocacy Campaign in *The New York Times* to Advance the Right and Practice of Corporate Political Speech, 1970–80," *American Journalism* 21, no. 4 (Oct. 2004): 39–62; Brown and Waltzer, "Every Thursday," 197–208; Vanessa Murphree and James Aucoin, "The Energy Crisis and the Media: Mobil Oil Corporation's Debate with the Media 1973-1983," *American Journalism* 27, no. 2 (2010): 7–30; Burton St. John, "Conveying the Sense-Making Corporate Persona: The Mobil Oil 'Observations' Columns, 1975–1980," *Public Relations Review*, 40, no. 4 (Nov. 1, 2014): 692–99.

[12] David Vogel defines advocacy advertising as a specialized form of advertising "whose purpose is to persuade the public of the merits of the corporation's view on a particular issue." Mobil's innovations in the 1970s serve as a paradigmatic case study. *Fluctuating Fortunes* (Basic Books, 1989), 216-17.

[13] In 1979, journalist Robert Sherrill described the 1970s as "a decade in which headlines such as 'Oil Giants Exploited Energy Shortage, Probers Charge' — a vintage piece from *The Washington Star* — have appeared almost as regularly as Mobil's ads proclaiming the industry's innocence." See: Robert Sherrill, "The Case Against the Oil Companies" *The New York Times Magazine* (Oct. 14, 1979), 32; Rawleigh Warner, Jr., Letters: "If Our Government Went Into the Oil Business," *The New York Times* (Aug. 8, 1979), A22.

important sources of deflection in this period, I then analyze Mobil Oil's public relations program, focusing on the treatment of education and welfare in Mobil's newspaper advertorial program and Mobil's sponsorship of the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) in the 1970s. I then move to a discussion of oil corporations' production of industry-backed educational materials, which were widely used due to some of the very strains on public education that neoliberalism would exacerbate in the coming decades. Ultimately, I examine these petro-pedagogical forms to illustrate their participation in the construction of cultures of privatization which framed racialized projections of children's futures as dependent on the oil industry.

## II. Corporate Activism and Environmental (De)Regulation in the 1970s

During the 1970s, American dependence on fossil fuels was newly contested within mainstream political cultures. The 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, which sparked renewed environmentalist consciousness and mobilization, led to strident critiques of the oil industry's neglect of the environment, transcending self-conscious environmentalists and reaching into the center of public life. Within the Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights, entered into the Congressional Record in 1970, activists affirmed, "We must develop the vision to see that in regard to the natural world private and corporate ownership should be so limited as to preserve the interest of society and the integrity of the environment."[14] The first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, likewise, demonstrated a widespread questioning of the relationship between the postwar political

[14] Congressional Record, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., Jan. 20, 1970, 498-99.

economic order and environmental degradation.[15] Responding to these mobilizations, the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a transformation in policy approaches to regulating corporate "externalities." Legislation including the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1970), amendments to the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act (1972), and the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970) signaled government's willingness to regulate the practices of industry. Shortly thereafter, the 1973-4 oil crisis, and, later in the decade, the 1979 oil shock, generated widespread concern regarding the future scarcity of oil supplies and calls for greater exploration and deregulation that directly conflicted with the environmental protections established just a few years prior. The oil crises intersected with other long-term developments in American political economy, converging with a decline in economic growth, a rise of unemployment amidst deindustrialization, and inflation, as well as changes in political culture in which Americans reevaluated their relationship to government and the scope of its administration over public life. Within this climate, the increasingly embattled oil industry drew on technologies of public relations to align itself with the public interest, positioning itself as a benefactor of social welfare and government as a source of inefficiency and economic stagnation. In the process, the

[15] The first Earth Day also demonstrated the tensions underlying the coalition making up the environmental movement in this period, including disagreements between New Left and countercultural groups and established conservation groups over the analysis of capitalism's role in environmental problems and Black activists' criticisms of Earth Day's language of universalism, race-neutral assessment of environmental hazard, and marginalization of the concerns of working class and poor African Americans. Nathan Hare, "Black Ecology," *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 6 (Apr. 1970), 2-8; Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, revised ed. (Island Press, 2005), 148-58; Dunaway, *Seeing Green,* 57-62.

industry "retooled the notion of public interest in their image."[16]

From the perspective of the industry and its allies, the regulatory ethos of the New Deal, "tax-and-spend" tenets of post-WWII liberalism, and extension of social programs under the Great Society had resulted in the overextension of the federal government, which had impeded the otherwise effective functioning of the free market. In the early 1970s, oil corporations and trade associations warned that government regulations, including price controls, environmental standards, and the ban on the Trans-Alaska oil pipeline would stifle discovery and production, ultimately straining the domestic energy supply.[17] Business historian David Vogel describes how, unlike earlier precedents, regulatory policy from 1969 and onward throughout the 1970s enacted sweeping change across industries—including in environmental, occupational health and safety, consumer protections, and tax reform. [18] Representing a "kind of Great Society for the private economy," this wider reach resulted in corporations becoming "conscious of their common or class interests."[19] In response, the oil industry assembled to recast its role in American society through the projection of corporate social responsibility.

The oil industry's efforts to project itself as socially responsible in the 1970s are grounded in longer historical roots. The "petro-pedagogical" projects of Mobil and the broader oil industry in the 1970s drew on earlier paradigms, including the flourishing of

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[16] Espinoza and Aronczyk, *A Strategic Nature,* 120.
[17] Huber, *Lifeblood,* 118-119; Meg Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump: The Energy Crisis and the Transformation of American Politics in the 1970s* (Hill and Wang, 2016), 34-6, 47, 66; David Nye, *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies* (MIT Press, 1998), 218.
[18] Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes,* 13, 59.
[19] Ibid.

public relations—termed the birth of the "corporate soul"—in the postwar era.[20] The oil industry's efforts are consistent with the longer trajectory of postwar "corporate liberalism" charted by Jennifer Delton, wherein social responsibility came to be understood by business leaders as central to ensuring conditions of long-term profitability, such that "doing the right thing" was viewed as economically advantageous.[21] By promoting private solutions to social problems, industry could supplant government interventions and forestall taxation.[22] Likewise, Elizabeth Fones-Wolf has argued that during the postwar period, business leaders increasingly endeavored to shape not just social and economic policies, but the "less obvious" domain of ideas and values, in an effort to remake Americans' understandings of their relationships to corporations and to the state.[23] In order to accomplish this, corporations "constructed and sold a specific vision of the reciprocal relationship of businesses and citizens that stressed mutual rights and responsibilities."[24] Sidelining alternate visions of economic redistribution, the oil industry advocated for limited regulation and maximal growth,

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[20] See: Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (University of California Press, 1998).
[21] Jennifer Delton, "The Triumph of Social Responsibility in the National Association of Manufacturers in the 1950s," in *Capital Gains: Business and Politics in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Richard R. John and Kim Phillips-Fein (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 183-87.
[22] Ibid., 191. See, for example: Mobil Oil, "Don't shoot the piano player…he's doing the best he can." Advertisement, *New York Times,* May 9, 1974; Mobil Oil, "Windfall Profits or Windfall Tax?" Advertisement, *New York Times,* Apr. 12, 1979.
[23] Scholars have questioned the idea of business as a "monolithic force capable of manipulating people and institutions at will." Fones-Wolf, however, contends that divisions between individual firms were less significant than the "unity of purpose within much of the business community on certain key issues, in particular, the necessity of halting the advance of the welfare state and of undermining the legitimacy and power of organized labor" Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-60* (University of Illinois Press, 1994), 5-7.
[24] Ibid.

projecting itself as a "good neighbor" which would, in return, acknowledge its responsibility to the public good.[25]

This stance resonated with the wider efforts of the business community to reignite its promotion of free market ideals in the face of social movements' rejection of corporate power and public officials' embrace of new regulations during the 1970s. Emblematic of this reorientation toward offensive, rather than defensive, responses to industry's critics, the 1971 "Powell Memorandum" translated a posture into a program of action. The memo, officially entitled "Attack on American Free Enterprise System" was written by corporate lawyer and soon-to-be Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell to Eugene B. Snydor, education director of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The Memo attributed the unpopularity of business to attacks that were emerging from New Left antiwar activists, radicalized college students, and "respectable liberals and social reformers" like Ralph Nader, consumer-protection advocate whose *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile* alerted many readers to corporate irresponsibility, specifically within the auto industry. According to Powell, the efficacy of these critiques was the result of the American public's ignorance of the capitalist system and the apathy of business to challenge these attacks.[26]

Powell argued that business must counter the emerging commonsense that the free enterprise system operated only to serve itself, challenging the targeting of corporate tax incentives— described in media as "tax breaks," "loop holes," and "tax benefits"— as

[25] Ibid., 6.
[26] Lewis F. Powell, Jr., "Attack on American Free Enterprise System" (Aug. 23, 1971), Lewis F. Powell, Jr. Papers, Washington and Lee School of Law Scholarly Commons, 1-34.

working solely "for the benefit of business." Rather, he argued, "it is dismaying that many politicians make the same argument that tax measures of this kind benefit only 'business' without benefit to 'the poor.' The fact that this is either political demagoguery or economic illiteracy, is of slight comfort. This setting of the 'rich' against the 'poor,' of business against the people, is the cheapest and most dangerous kind of politics."[27] In order to improve the public perception of business, Powell outlined a multi-step plan of action which included developing textbook evaluation, building up conservative interests on school boards, funding faculty positions at universities, and producing economics education materials.[28] He also pushed businesses to introduce paid advertisements which, rather than advocating specific products or supporting institutional images, would actively endeavor to "support the system."[29] Such efforts, Powell argued, would enable the business community to recover lost ground in public authority, including in political arenas connected to consumerism and the environment.[30] While not directly referenced as an inspiration of the Mobil public affairs program or oil industry sponsorship practices, the Memo illuminates key concerns of the business community in this era which align with Mobil's and others in the industry's efforts to deflect opprobrium through a defense of corporations' societal role.[31] While resonant with wider business cultures advocating

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[27] Ibid., 7.
[28] Ibid., 15-20.
[29] Ibid., 23-24.
[30] Ibid., 25.
[31] Although the Memo's initial distribution was restricted to high-ranking leaders of the Chamber of Commerce, journalist Jack Anderson obtained a copy and reported on it in *The Washington Post* in September 1972, shortly after Powell's Supreme Court confirmation. Though Anderson sought to expose Powell's immoderacy, some business leaders noted at the time that the publicity had only enabled the Memo's ideas to spread. While I have not found reference to the Powell Memo within available Mobil documents, there is a documented connection between Mobil Oil and free market institutions like the

for free market ideologies and policy translations, the activities of the oil industry complemented the long-term constitution of oil, in particular, as integral to and synonymous with the postwar, privatized "American way of life" in a moment in which this equation was actively contested.[32]

Over the course of the 1970s, many of the environmental policies installed at the beginning of the decade came under fire. American oil consumption doubled between 1950 and 1974, and by that point the U.S. had long been the world's largest consumer of oil.[33] In 1973, OPEC price hikes and the Arab oil embargo resulted in a steep decline in the American oil supply. [34] As soon as the energy crisis became widely discussed and felt by American consumers, captured emblematically in images of snaking gas lines, oil industry groups responded to intensified scrutiny by framing recent environmental policy

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American Enterprise Institute (AEI); as Herman Schmidt, general counsel of Mobil, remarked in a letter addressed to AEI trustees, "AEI has the program, we have the contacts." Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of The Conservative Movement From The New Deal To Reagan* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 158, 160-62, 174.

[32] Huber, *Lifeblood,* xii-xvii.

[33] Zaretsky, *No Direction Home,* 78; Hannah Ritchie, Max Roser and Pablo Rosado, "Energy: Oil Consumption," *Our World in Data,* 2022, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/oil-consumption-by-country?time=latest.

[34] David Nye argues that the term "energy crisis" had become common in American politics and media, even prior to the OPEC price hikes and Arab embargo that took place sequentially in the fall of 1973. Along similar lines, Timothy Mitchell argues that the widespread use of the "oil crisis" framing obscures "changes in multiple fields, involving various agents, into a unique event, so that a single moment, with a single agent appears responsible for a collapse of the old order"—in this case, the movement of power in oil pricing from consuming countries to producing countries, and with it, the upending of the "postwar petroleum order" governed by the United States. See: Nye, *Consuming Power,* 218; Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Verso, 2011), 173-200.

as the scapegoat.[35] Increasingly, environmentalist and conservationist calls for reimagining American consumption patterns came up against industry and political efforts to promote "energy independence," which would cement the role of fossil fuels in America's energy futures.

During the 1970s, the oil industry's public relations campaigns intervened within a changing political terrain, as presidential administrations shifted between energy policies that required the conservation, or, alternately, the increased production and de-regulation, of oil. On November 7, 1973, with the Watergate investigation already underway, Richard Nixon's Federal Energy Administration introduced Project Independence, an initiative which endeavored to free the U.S. of reliance on foreign energy producers by 1980, encouraging both voluntary conservation measures at the level of the individual home and the development of alternative energy sources.[36] By November 16, 1973, Nixon authorized the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which had previously been restricted after fierce activism of Indigenous groups, environmentalists, and fishery unions and due to regulations imposed by Indigenous land claims and the National Environmental Policy Act.[37] Upon becoming president, Gerald Ford likewise used the recession and Project Independence to justify environmental deregulation, supporting the weakening of restrictions on offshore drilling, drilling on

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[35] For analyses of gas lines and popular reactions to the oil crises, see: Dunaway, *Seeing Green*, 110-1; Huber, *Lifeblood,* 97-99, 108-110; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump,* 80-1; Zaretsky, *No Direction Home,* 84-5.
[36] Zaretsky, *No Direction Home,* 98; Huber, *Lifeblood,* 103-108.
[37] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy,* 191; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump,* 66; Peter A. Coates, *The Trans-Alaska Pipeline Controversy* (Lehigh University Press, 1991), 175-7, 187-188, 217-222.

federal lands, and nuclear power.[38] Later, Jimmy Carter's energy plan authorized the passage of the National Energy Act on October 15, 1978, absent the extensive conservation measures he'd previously envisioned, as the legislation was reduced to weakened regulations on national gas and utility rate reform and tax incentives.[39] Ultimately, price controls would be eroded by Ronald Reagan, who ended them entirely under the first executive order of his presidency on January 28, 1981.[40] This measure was interpreted as signaling a shift in national oil policy, affirming the oil industry's view that the narrowing of government intervention and liberation of market forces would more effectively resolve the energy problems of the 1970s and the future.[41] Amid the "oil gluts" of the 1980s, as prices fell and supplies rose, the earlier "conservation consensus" lost political traction.[42]

Alongside the attenuation of previously established environmental legislation, social programs were framed by free market conservatives and many white middle-class consumers as incompatible with the new era of resource scarcity. Energy crises provided an alibi for the kinds of cuts conservatives already desired. While, materially, cuts to social programs would not take shape on a national level until the 1979 oil shock, in the

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[38] Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump,* 147; Nye, *Consuming Power,* 219-20.
[39] Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump,* 179-180, 185, 193-4.
[40] Ibid., 271.
[41] Ibid., 271-2.
[42] Caleb Wellum, "Energizing Finance: The Energy Crisis, Oil Futures, and Neoliberal Narratives," *Enterprise & Society,* 22-3; Interestingly, by the late 1970s some environmentalists favored decontrol, anticipating that oil consumption would decline if consumers bore the unregulated costs. See: Wellum, "'A Vibrant National Preoccupation': Embracing an Energy Conservation Ethic in the 1970s," *Environmental History* 25, no. 1 (Jan. 2020): 85–109.

early 1970s these shifts took place locally and discursively.[43] During the oil shortages caused by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Carter would ultimately endorse the narrowing of social programs as a desired policy objective, undermining the New Deal compact and complying with social and market conservatives' positioning of social programs as dispensable. In his 1980 budget proposal, Carter expanded foreign aid and defense spending while limiting the growth of domestic social programs, prompting the resistance of many in his own party.[44] As assessed by Senator Edward Kennedy, "the Administration's budget asks the poor, the black, the sick, the young, the cities and the unemployed to bear a disproportionate share of the billions of dollars in reductions in Federal spending."[45] Carter did, however, sign the Crude Oil Profit Tax into law on April 2, 1980, which would produce general revenue that could be directed toward the subsidy of energy costs for low-income families, offsetting some of the effects of cuts to unemployment and welfare benefits.[46] Yet despite Carter's intentions, oil companies themselves came to see the tax as a small price paid in exchange for the scaling back of price controls, and, in the absence of a profits tax, the notoriously undertaxed oil industry would largely evade extensive regulatory consequences.[47]

Mobil's public relations programs in the 1970s demonstrate how the oil industry more broadly attempted to shift the public perception of responsibility for the oil crises

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[43] For example, during the 1973-4 crisis, fuel scarcity was used as a rationale to delay school desegregation achieved through busing programs. Frank Van Der Linden, "Antibus Factions Gaining," *Camarillo Daily News,* Dec. 24, 1973, 14; "Busing Foes Jump on Energy Crisis," *Detroit Free Press,* Dec. 27, 1973, 7-A; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump,* 65-6.
[44] Ibid., 198.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 257-8.
[47] Ibid., 258.

from corporations' unrestricted power to government's excessive interference in the free market. Mobil engineered a brand of "free private responsible enterprise" which affirmed its responsiveness to customers, worldwide environmental concerns, and "people's aspirations for a better life."[48] Through this framing, Mobil positioned itself as a social benefactor, more capable than government of ensuring the security of American economic futures and, ultimately, social welfare. By equating its own interests with those of children and future generations, Mobil naturalized its role in the continuity of the "American way of life."[49]

## III. Advertorials: Privatizing the Public Good

In 1976, Herbert Schmertz, then-vice president of public affairs for the Mobil Corporation, reflected on Mobil's effort to alter its public image amidst the changing political climate of the 1970s which, in Schmertz's words, had authorized the scapegoating of oil corporations.[50] Beginning in the early part of the decade, Mobil Oil had developed a set of public relations tactics to counter the rising opposition it faced from the modern American environmental movement and what it viewed as an overly intrusive federal government.[51] One such mechanism was weekly advertisements in *The New York Times* editorial section, beginning in mid-1971.[52] This form of promotion was, as Schmertz described, less an effort to promote a product than a "political campaign"

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[48] Mobil Oil, "Free private responsible enterprise?" Advertisement, *The New York Times,* Sept. 7, 1972.
[49] Huber, *Lifeblood,* xii-xvii.
[50] Herbert Schmertz, "Idea Advertising: Talking to New Audiences," *Electric Perspectives* vol 6, no. 76 (1976): 2-3.
[51] Ibid., 7.
[52] Brown and Waltzer, "Every Thursday," 198.

focused on fundamental issues of American values around government and capitalism.[53] Its placement in the *Times* was intended to reach high level policy decision-makers.[54] In response to the success of the *Times* campaign, Mobil placed weekly advertisements in *The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times,* and the eastern edition of *The Wall Street Journal*.[55] Mobil also expanded its reach during periods of particularly intensive scrutiny: during the 1973-4 oil crisis, Mobil advertorials were published within 103 newspapers across the U.S.; in 1976, the company advertised in over a hundred papers as Congress deliberated over an ultimately unsuccessful antitrust bill that would require the break-up of oil corporation monopolies.[56] Mobil also experimented with additional modes of communicating with the public, including the weekly *Observations* column, which took on a conversational tone addressed to the average reader and was published in the Sunday newspaper supplements *Parade* and *Family Weekend,* and contributions to *Reader's Digest*'s "Business Roundtable," intended as a "mini course in economics" from the underrepresented perspective of big business.[57]

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[53] Laurence Jarvik, "PBS and the Politics of Quality: Mobil Oil's 'Masterpiece Theatre,'" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 12, no. 3 (Jan. 1, 1992): 254.
[54] Smith and Heath, "Moral Appeals in Mobil's Op Ed Campaign," 49. Mobil's advertorial campaign can be likened to utility industry publicists purchase of advertisements in exchange for the publication of corporate-authored essays in small town newspapers. See: Daniel Robert, *Courteous Capitalism: Public Relations and the Monopoly Problem, 1900-1930* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023).
[55] Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes,* 217-8.
[56] Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes,* 217-8; Robert Sherrill, "Operation Op-Ed: Mobil News That's Fit to Print," *The Nation,* Jan. 27, 1979, 71.
[57] The *Parade* and *Family Weekend* supplements were distributed in 43 U.S. newspapers, including the *New York Times,* and at its peak in mid-1980, the "Observations" column reached about half of American households. St. John, "Conveying the Sense-Making Corporate Persona," 694; Philip H. Dougherty, "Advertising: New Series at Reader's Digest," *The New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1975, 57.

Mobil's advertorial program was controversial in its time. A 1976 *Fortune* magazine's appraisal of the public affairs program, entitled "Public Relations Isn't Kid-Gloves Stuff at Mobil" assessed that "few corporations, if any, can rival Mobil in the aggressiveness and consistency with which it speaks out in defense of its interests, the interests of the oil industry, and what it perceives to be the national interest."[58] A 1979 *Nation* article titled "Operation Op-Ed: Mobil News That's Fit to Print" argued "it is highly unlikely that any reasonably intelligent person can fail to see through the patina of Mobil's enlightenment …Mobil's ads preaching the doctrine of unlimited and unregulated economic growth as the best way of lifting up the poor…are poorly disguised arguments against conservation and environmental laws."[59] However, Mobil itself saw the campaign differently. Measuring the impact of its public relations program over a period that included two energy crises and forceful environmental activism, Mobil's leadership understood its initiative as successful. In 1980, Schmertz declared, "We have established a franchise for a particular kind of view and have developed a free-market constituency that is growing."[60] By 1982, Mobil's in-house review of the "Evolution of the Mobil Public Affairs Program" concluded that its programming had "enabled the company to become part of the 'collective unconsciousness' of the nation."[61]

The political implications of these ads did not go unnoticed by policymakers.

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[58] Irwin Ross, "Public Relations Isn't Kid-Gloves Stuff at Mobil," *Fortune* (Sept. 1976), 106.
[59] Robert Sherrill, "Operation Op-Ed: Mobil News That's Fit to Print," *The Nation,* Jan. 27, 1979, 74.
[60] Randall Poe, "Masters of the Advertorial," *Across the Board* 17 (Sept. 1980), 17.
[61] Mobil Oil, "Evolution of Mobil Public Affairs Program, 1970-1981," (1982), II-A/1. https://www.climatefiles.com/exxonmobil/mobil-collection/1982-evolution-of-mobil-public-affairs-program/

Within its campaign in the early 1970s, Mobil used its platform to actively defend the industry's rate of profit, particularly as oil majors' reports of record profits amid the 1973-4 oil crisis generated extensive media attention and public outcry.[62] In January 1974, the Senate's Subcommittee on Investigations held an inquiry into the profits and taxation of the oil industry.[63] The committee's chairman, Senator Henry M. Jackson argued, "The American people want to know if this so-called energy crisis is only a pretext, a cover, to eliminate the major source of price competition —the independents— to raise prices, to repeal environmental laws and to force the adoption of new tax subsidies."[64] The hearings were met with opposition from oil executives, with the president of Gulf Oil U.S.A. describing the hearings as "absolute nonsense" akin to a "criminal trial."[65] The industry framed greater taxation as an obstacle to exploration and research, while politicians in favor of regulation protested the industry's evasion of taxation. Of particular issue was the oil industry's special status with regard to taxation, as oil companies avoided paying income taxes to the United States by deducting the taxes they paid to other nations and through the oil depletion allowance, a tax subsidy that allowed drillers to deduct a quarter of their revenues from their taxable income in order to incentivize new production projects.[66] The relationship of "private" enterprise to public

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[62] See, for example: Mobil Oil, "Now, about those record profits of ours…," Advertisement, *New York Times,* Aug. 16, 1973; Mobil Oil, "Anyone who says the energy crisis was a surprise hasn't been reading this newspaper," Advertisement, *New York Times,* Jan. 2, 1974; Mobil Oil, "Don't read these ads if you've made up your mind about oil profits," Advertisement, *New York Times,* Jan. 25, 1974.
[63] "...The Senate And Big Oil Are Already Fighting," *The New York Times*, Jan. 27, 1974, Section 4, Page 1.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump,* 19, 82-3.

subsidy generated by these tax policies is just one iteration of the "selective anti-statism" corporations consistently amplified during this period, denigrating the inefficacy of governmental power while relying on tax incentives and legislative exceptions.[67] Throughout the investigations, public interest organizations like Common Cause noted the pervasive issue of oil company contributions to political campaigns of members of the Senate Finance Committee as it considered whether to repeal industry tax breaks, highlighting the influence of industry pressure on energy and environmental policy.[68] Against party pressure, Ford would sign a tax bill into law just a year later which would finally do away with the depletion allowance, yet other forms of industry subsidy would remain intact.[69]

Also in 1974, Senator Gary Hart led a hearing before the Senate Committee on Commerce's Subcommittee on Environment regarding oil and utility company's advertisements. The hearing focused, in particular, on the question of whether corporations had qualified advertisements as institutional advertising, and therefore as tax-deductible business expenses, rather than political messages, which according to FTC regulations were not eligible for tax-exemption.[70] During this hearing, the Media Access

[67] According to Peter Roady, this conservative public opinion campaign to sow distrust in state administration of social programs and the legitimacy of taxation began long before the Reagan administration, with roots in the 1930s and 1940s. See: Peter Roady, "Selling Selective Anti-Statism: The Conservative Persuasion Campaign and the Transformation of American Politics since the 1920s," *Modern American History*, Apr. 27, 2023, 1–23.
[68] "8 in Senate Oil Tax Study Linked to Industry's Gifts," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 11, 1975, sec. 1; Peter Milius, "Compromise Weighed On Oil Depletion Bill," *The Washington Post*, Mar. 11, 1975, A2.
[69] Milius, "Compromise Weighed."
[70] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce: Subcommittee on Environment, *Energy and Environmental Objectives,* 93 Congress, 2nd session, Feb. 4/May 6/Jul. 18 1974.

Project, a public-interest lobbying group, presented a set of documents correlating the timing of the publication of oil industry advertisements to particular legislative and de-regulatory initiatives in 1973-4. These connections included the oil industry's efforts to legalize the previously banned Trans-Alaska oil pipeline, expand offshore drilling, eliminate price controls, and suspend emissions controls in order to conserve fuel.[71] In 1973, for example, a series of Mobil ads focused on "educating" the public about the oil crisis and urging oil conservation, typically featuring pen and ink illustrations of families carpooling, commuting on pogo sticks, and expounding upon the rewards of completing numerous errands in one trip.[72] Within these ads, Mobil appealed to families by repeatedly isolating "pollution-control equipment" in new car models as causes of energy inefficiency leading to the crisis.[73] Deflecting accusations that the industry was profiting excessively from oil crises, Mobil identified excessive government regulation as the cause of Americans' economic instability and argued only the private market, rather than public institutions, could capably address the needs of the most vulnerable.

Alongside its efforts to shape energy policy, Mobil sought to position itself, and the free market more generally, as sponsors of the public good. In 1972, Mobil opined that the era of "free enterprise" had been replaced by "responsible enterprise," in which big businesses would increasingly bear in mind the needs of society in addition to the

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[71] U.S. Congress, *Energy and Environmental Objectives,* 74-7.
[72] Mobil Oil, "Starting today, we want to show you how to get along on less gasoline," Advertisement, *New York Times,* May 3,1973; Mobil Oil, "Okay, everybody, into the pool," Advertisement, *New York Times,* May 10, 1973; Mobil, "Dumb Bunny," Advertisement, *New York Times,* May 17, 1973; Mobil Oil, "She Plans to Save a Gallon a Week," Advertisement, *New York Times,* May 24, 1973; Mobil Oil, "Smart Drivers Make Gasoline Last," Advertisement, *The New York Times,* May 31, 1973.
[73] These ads referenced the catalytic converter, which began to be introduced into new car models in the early 1970s in compliance with a new EPA regulation.

needs of shareholders. Yet, this public beneficence, they noted, hinged on private accumulation, "because no company can be very responsive unless it is profitable: only a company that does well can do good."[74] Moving beyond “pure image ads” to take positions on social issues, many of the advertorials produced in the 1970s focused on social welfare and education. In these ads, Mobil promoted its own investment, both conceptually and literally, in education and social programs with children at their center. In its view, due to the essential limits of government, public institutions were dependent on the private market for both capital and expertise.

A 1972 ad focuses on a work co-op program in a Manhattan high school called the High School Service Program. In text appearing alongside an illustration of two teenagers, one white and one Black, together conducting an oil change, Mobil describes the contrast between the typical educational failure of the school, where "attendance…is apt to be about 30 percent of the total enrollment," and the Mobil service station program, which "averages 95 percent week in and week out." As they describe, students in the program "do real work. They are paid good salaries. And they stay in school–with a new interest in math and reading, because they've begun to appreciate the importance of these subjects in the working world." The ad ends with Mobil's commitment, spurred by the support of the New York City Board of Education, to launch similar courses in additional cities, "So other kids can learn and earn. And drop in, not out."[75] This ad speaks to a series of concerns of the 1970s that meet at the intersection of family and the economy,

[74] Mobil Oil, “Free private responsible enterprise?” Advertisement, *The New York Times,* Sept. 7, 1972; Kerr, *The Rights of Corporate Speech* (LFB Scholarly Pub, 2005)*,* 51-2.
[75] Mobil Oil, “The Way These Haaren High Kids Work is an Education,” Advertisement, *The New York Times,* Feb. 3, 1972, sec. 1, 33.

including the decline of American industrialism, the rise of unemployment, and anxieties regarding young people "dropping out" of normative, productive citizenship.[76] It also positions Mobil as more effectively supporting students' economic opportunities than standard public education, presenting its investments as successful interventions in children's futures.

Another ad from 1974 features a young Black woman positioned with a camera in a photo over the headline, "I'm determined to get where I want to go." As the ad goes on to explain, "Janine *will* get where she wants to go. Because of her attitude. She's eager to work. And to take advantage of the available opportunities. Like those provided by the businesses and foundations (Mobil Foundation among them) that fund the Jobs for Youth Summer Work Scholarship Program."[77] Like the High School Service Program, this ad highlights the work ethic of young students who are eager to participate in a burgeoning economy, and whose opportunity to do so relies on Mobil's generosity and, underlying it, continued growth and profitability. The ad represents Janine as embodying her own economic risk, promising security to those with the right attitude toward work in the free market. It applauds her responsible entrepreneurialization of the self while praising private enterprise for sustaining the promise of equal opportunity in place of economic equality.[78] The emphasis on young people of color in many of these ads does important

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[76] For discussion of how industrial decline and changes in the viability of the masculine breadwinner mapped on to perceptions of family decline, see Zaretsky, *No Direction Home* and Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

[77] Mobil Oil, "I'm Determined to Get Where I Want to Go," Advertisement, *The New York Times,* 6 Jan. 1977, sec. 1, 28.

[78] My analysis here is inspired by Jules Gill-Peterson's "The Value of the Future." See also: Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism,* 38-9.

work of eliding both the relationship between free market capitalism and economic injustice and papering over the disproportionate effects of fossil fuel-induced environmental racism on Black communities, then and now.

This framing of private enterprise as the solution to government inefficacy similarly accompanied Mobil's approach to welfare. Mobil endeavored to position social programs—and the well-being of the poor— as dependent on the unimpeded success of the free market. While it never publicly opposed welfare programs wholesale, Mobil argued that social programs for the poor were the province of corporate sponsorship rather than government. This approach aligned with a neoliberal emphasis on charitable giving rather than economic redistribution as a solution to structural forms of inequality, particularly as inequality maps onto race and gender. This is summed up in a 1972 advertorial: "Partly because of its ability to adapt–which is simply another word for responsive change–private business remains the most productive element in our society and on balance the best allocator of resources."[79] In a 1975 "Business Roundtable" feature, Mobil argued for a "pay-the-piper principle," suggesting that, in the context of the regulation of the oil industry, citizens failed to consider the economic costs of environmental regulations— "In the final analysis, the bill lands in your lap." Yet, they contended, "somehow we seem to abandon this logic when we venture upon 'social goals' — from poverty programs to health care to aid to education," advocating for a more moderate approach, they argued, "in setting each new social goal, we, as the people

[79] Mobil Oil, "Capitalism: Moving Target," Advertisement, *The New York Times,* Oct.12, 1972, sec. 1, 46.

who ultimately pay, must ask ourselves: Are the benefits worth the costs?"[80] Mobil reaffirmed this premise in a 1976 advertorial, contending, "The social programs our country has developed—Social Security, Medicare, Aid to Dependent Children, child nutrition and school lunches, housing for the elderly, to name a few–are among the best in the world despite their flaws and inefficiencies, which can be corrected. But if we as a people unduly inhibit economic growth in the private sector, the United States will not long be able to afford such programs on anything like the present scale. It is just that simple."[81] The ad, however, is short on an explanation of exactly how Mobil's uninhibited growth materially functions to benefit the social programs they reference. Less than a month later, an advertorial entitled "Social mobility or class warfare" similarly emphasized that restrictions of economic growth came at the greatest cost to the most marginalized:

> "If it becomes clear to everyone that the economic pie isn't going to get appreciably bigger, every group will begin fighting for a larger piece of that static pie. Women, blacks and other racial minorities, and young people of all backgrounds will be the hardest hit. College graduates will find job-hunting even tougher. More and more of them will have to take jobs lower in the economic scale. This will further squeeze every minority and everybody else. Rising social strife can create a backlash against efforts toward cleaner air and water and toward the funding of health services and education…Economic growth is the last, best hope for the poor and for all the rest of us. Sheer distribution of income cannot do the job. We must create a steadily larger income pie."[82]

In this zero-sum game, Mobil insisted its own profitability was essential to the security not just of the very environmental regulations it campaigned against, but also to the most

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[80] Mobil Oil, "You Pay For What You Get," Advertisement, *The Reader's Digest*, Oct. 1975, 212-3. Cited in Kerr, *The Rights of Corporate Speech,* 82.
[81] Mobil Oil, "Social Programs and Economic Growth," Advertisement, *The New York Times*, Apr. 15, 1976, sec. 1, 33.
[82] Mobil Oil, "Social Mobility or Class Warfare?" Advertisement, *The New York Times*, May 6, 1976, sec. 1, 37.

vulnerable classes of Americans. Tying its own interests to those of children and marginalized groups, Mobil participated in constructions of cultures of privatization which saw deregulation and privatization as means of achieving, rather than undermining, social and economic equality.

## IV. Sponsoring Children's Education on the "Petroleum Broadcasting Service"

The reinvigoration of Mobil's Public Affairs Program in the 1970s expanded beyond print media to television. Television sponsorship became a prominent platform for private corporations seeking to address consumer constituencies in the 1950s and 1960s.[83] In the late 1960s, just as children's television reform activists, such as Action for Children's Television, criticized commercial television as degrading to children and pushed for educational alternatives, public television increasingly sought private investment in public programming. [84] Early on, the Children's Television Workshop, responsible for *Sesame Street* (1969- ) and, later, *The Electric Company* (1971-1977), recognized the need for business and industry support of educational public television. From the start, CTW founders argued that educational television suffered from structural limitations on its funding in both production and distribution, leaving it on unequal terms with commercial television.[85] The founders of CTW nonetheless insisted that *Sesame*

[83] For discussion of earlier sponsorship activities taken up by corporations and foundations in the 1950s, see: Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New Press, 2010).
[84] Robert Morrow, *Sesame Street and the Reform of Children's Television* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 121-2.
[85] "Remarks by Joan Ganz Cooney before the Senate Commerce Sub-community on Communications Hearings on Public Broadcasting Act (S. 1242)," Apr. 30, 1969, Box 118, Folder 2, CTW, UMDSC.

*Street* could serve a vital social role of making early childhood education accessible and working to lift "disadvantaged" children out of poverty.[86] In comments before Senate hearings on the Public Broadcasting Act (S. 1242) in 1969, CTW Executive Director Joan Ganz Cooney expressed the potential of CTW programs to support young children's learning gains in the years before formal education begins, a determination based on recent research which found that, "There is no ground for believing that a child's academic fate is sealed by his seventh birthday…[However] In terms of sheer economy, it can be shown that the earlier the investment in systematic intellectual development is begun, the higher the rate of return."[87] Cooney describes how CTW's programming would act as a stopgap measure in the absence of state funded preschool:

> "Because these studies pointed to the fact that America may be literally squandering its most precious natural resources by ignoring the development of the intellectual capability of its young, a number of opinion leaders…began calling for formal schooling for all children at age four, at public expense. While the reaction was laudable, the economic realities of such a suggestion were – and are – fearsome. One estimate said it would cost nearly $3 billion to add the several million children to the school rolls – not including the cost of building classrooms to handle them."[88]

It was in this context that the Ford Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, and U.S. Office of Education moved to fund "a unique joint experiment to determine whether the medium of television…can be effective in teaching preschool children."[89] As Heather Hendershot notes, although CTW founders never positioned *Sesame Street* as an alternative to broad

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[86] Morrow, *Sesame Street*, 5.
[87] "Remarks by Joan Ganz Cooney," Children's Television Workshop records, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries. Hereafter cited as CTW, UMDSC. Here, Cooney is quoting Dr. John Fisher, president of Columbia Teachers College, in a 1968 report from the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children" to President Lyndon B. Johnson.
[88] "Remarks by Joan Ganz Cooney," CTW, UMDSC.
[89] Ibid.

scale school reform, the limited cost of *Sesame Street*–which, its founders argued, could be financed for as little as a penny per child per day– appeared as a "comparatively cheap alternative to structural school reform."[90] Initially planned as a two-year experiment, CTW had an initial budget of $8 million, “with participation on a 50-50 basis by public and private sources.[91] In March 1970, Bob Hatch, the program’s public relations account executive, sent letters to potential corporate backers, outlining the various forms of support required to enable the series to reach its intended audience, including billboard ads in inner-city neighborhoods, subsidy of utility bill and welfare check inserts, and grants to support utilization of *Sesame Street* among target demographics.[92] Such fundraising directives demonstrate key tensions in how *Sesame Street* envisioned its audience and purpose, often conflating poverty with Blackness and poor Black communities with inner-cities; Black community organizers like Dorothy Pitman Hughes, for example, criticized CTW’s professed efforts to alleviate Black poverty as a strategy to win grants and support.[93] By June 1970, Mobil Oil had stepped in as a corporate sponsor with “long range interest” in supporting CTW.[94]

During this period, Mobil was most well-known for its sponsorship of PBS’s *Masterpiece Theater,* with primarily British and historical fiction series carrying a

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[90] Heather Hendershot, *Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation Before the V-Chip,* (Duke University Press, 1998), 142. For an example of Children's Television Workshop's "penny per child per day" projection, see: "Role of Private Foundations in Public Broadcasting," Hearing before Committee on Finance, (Sept. 9-10, 1974), 118. https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/role1.pdf.
[91] “Remarks by Joan Ganz Cooney,” CTW, UMDSC.
[92] Memo, Bob Hatch to John Stahr, Mar. 2, 1970, Box 114, Folder 28, CTW, UMDSC.
[93] Abby Whitaker, “*Sesame Street* and the City: Revitalizing the City through Popular Culture” *Journal of Urban History* (Nov. 24, 2024), 10-1.
[94] Letter, Robert Davidson (CTW Director of Development) to Herbert Schmertz, June 25, 1970, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.

connotation of high culture to public television. This sponsorship has been identified by scholars as well as Mobil itself as core to the company's public relations success in the 1970s and onward, with one scholar nicknaming the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the network of stations on which *Masterpiece* aired, the "Petroleum Broadcasting Service."[95] Alongside this more famous sponsorship, in the 1970s, *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company* became noted components of what one ad called "The Mobil Season," a full line-up of Mobil sponsored series and specials.[96] Sponsorship of CTW series in the early 1970s offered Mobil a different kind of visibility than its sponsorship of adult programming. Whereas *Masterpiece Theater* was intended to appeal to elite consumers, *Sesame Street* was designed with an explicit goal of equalizing opportunity to access to early childhood education. *Sesame Street* gained an early reputation as an outlier in children's television, both in its production structure and its content.[97] The series promoted itself as the "first time that television has been used for some kind of socially useful purpose," and was recognized as "epitomiz[ing] programming free of commercials."[98] For Mobil, support for public television programming earned public favor that could be translated to political approval; as one PR official described, "These

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[95] I borrow the phrase "Petroleum Broadcasting Service" from Jarvik, "PBS and the Politics of Quality," 254. David Vogel notes that "approximately half of all corporate funds contributed to public television during the 1970s came from the oil industry," leading to the parody of the PBS moniker. *Fluctuating Fortunes,* 216. Mobil Oil, "Evolution of Mobil Public Affairs Program, 1970-1981," (1982) https://www.climatefiles.com/exxonmobil/mobil-collection/1982-evolution-of-mobil-public-affairs-program/.
[96] Mobil Oil, "The Mobil Season," Advertisement, *The New York Times,* Oct. 2, 1974, 23. For examples of how sponsorship supported Mobil's reputation, see: "Mobil Gives $250,000 to Aid New Children's TV Series," *The New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1971, 72; Gene I. Maeroff, "'The Electric Company' TV Program Found Helpful to Children," *The New York Times*, Mar. 28, 1973, 94.
[97] Morrow, *Sesame Street*, 121-2.
[98] Ibid.

programs build enough acceptance to allow us to get tough on substantive issues."[99] Critical public relations scholars Maria I. Espinoza and Melissa Aronczyk have noted that PBS's status as public, non-commercial television transitively offered legitimacy to Mobil, such that Mobil's voice could be "perceived as public and noncommercial."[100] In its sponsorship of public television, therefore, Mobil avoided charges of commercialism and instead claimed to act as a benefactor of the public good, a claim which was bolstered by its explicit appeal to investing in "disadvantaged" children and their educational—and therefore, economic—futures.

Mobil's relationship with CTW began with its underwriting of free copies of *Sesame Street Magazine,* a publication including games, cut-outs, and illustrated features that was intended to complement the series and reinforce children's learning.[101] The magazine's distribution was made free to a large disadvantaged population and by subscription to those who can afford it.[102] Mobil proposed distributing copies from its filling stations directly, noting that Mobil had more inner-city gas stations than any other oil company.[103] As a condition, they asked that CTW announce on the air where the publication could be obtained, with reference to Mobil stations, while making it clear that no purchase would be necessary.[104] In its promotion of the partnership to station owners, Mobil framed the magazine distribution as "a chance to perform an important community

[99] Sherrill, "Operation Op-Ed," 65.
[100] Espinoza and Aronczyk, *A Strategic Nature,* 117.
[101] Memo, Joan Ganz Cooney to Utilization City, "Sesame Street Magazine," Sept. 22, 1970, Box 114, Folder 37; Letter, Robert Davidson (CTW Director of Development) to Herbert Schmertz, June 25, 1970, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.
[102] Memo, Joan Ganz Cooney to Utilization City.
[103] Letter, Bob Davidson to Joan Cooney, Bob Hatch, Tom Kennedy, and Gene Aleinikoff, Apr. 14, 1970, Box 114, Folder 32, CTW, UMDSC.
[104] Ibid.

service at no cost to you or your neighbors" and an opportunity to "build good will at your station," expounding, "Fifteen stations in the Watts area of Los Angeles are participating in the program. Your inner-city neighbors will appreciate that you are trying to help their children and will drive in for free copies."[105] An ad announcing Mobil's funding of the magazine with an illustration of two toddlers, one white and one Black, encouraged readers to pick up a copy and provided a list of distribution centers.[106] Next to its logo at the bottom of the page was a sign off in *Sesame Street* fashion — "Free Sesame Street Magazines are brought to you as a public service by the letters m, o, b, i, l."[107]

As announced at an October 1970 news release, Mobil's grant of $250,000 would cover the cost of a total of five million giveaway copies of the four issues of the Magazine to be printed alongside the 1970-71 broadcast season; Mobil, in turn, would receive credit via a cover blurb for all of the English language giveaways of the first issue of the season.[108] According to CTW, the circulation of the first issue (2.4 million) would rank it 20th among the nation's magazines were it a commercial publication, and the highest circulating children's magazine.[109] In an accompanying statement from the founder and president of CTW, Joan Ganz Cooney remarked, "Mobil Oil…has demonstrated a sense of community concern and social awareness in the finest sense of

[105] "Good News From Mobil," October 8, 1970, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.
[106] Mobil, "Starting November 9, there'll be more things for your kids to do on Sesame Street," Advertisement, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Memo, Bob Hatch to Joan Cooney, "Briefing Paper for Mobil Oil News Conference," Oct. 19, 1970, Box 114, Folder 38, CTW, UMDSC.
[109] Ibid.

those qualities…We also share and admire their optimism for the youth of America."[110]

Mobil's sponsorship was praised beyond CTW's leadership. In a letter addressed to Mobil, one writer from Olean, New York attested, "I have been a Mobil credit card holder for ten years and have always been pleased with your products and services. I just want to thank you for providing the funds that enabled the Sesame Street Magazine, to be distributed to kindergarteners in my community."[111] Another letter, written on behalf of Robla Preschool in Sacramento, California, thanked Mobil for the magazine booklets, remarking, "We, in the field of education, appreciate receiving material of this nature from the private enterprise segment of our society."[112] Alongside this praise, Mobil received letters from individual parents, public school librarians and teachers from across the country seeking copies.[113]

While sponsoring the CTW, Mobil also ran attention-grabbing advertisements in the *New York Times* attesting to the need for private sponsorship of public educational programming. One ad, from 1971, features multiracial children donning graduation caps and gowns, alongside the headline, "After Sesame Street, what?"[114] The ad announced the introduction of *The Electric Company,* a literacy education series created by CTW for children who had aged out of *Sesame Street*. Another *Electric Company* promotion ran under the headline, "Why America needs another Electric Company," and described the

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[110] "Statement by Joan Ganz Cooney," Oct. 21, 1970, Box 114, Folder 38, CTW, UMDSC.
[111] Letters to Mobil Oil Corporation, Jan. 5, 1971, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.
[112] Letters to Mobil Oil Corporation, received Jan. 7, 1971, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.
[113] Letters to Mobil Oil Corporation, received Feb. 6, Feb. 9, and Mar. 1, 1971, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.
[114] Mobil Oil, "After Sesame Street, What?" Advertisement, *New York Times,* 1971, https://pin.it/24n83ix..

program's goal of tackling illiteracy as "generat[ing] a different kind of power."[115]

An ad running in 1974 that featured the aforementioned image of an endangered Big Bird, described "financial pains" experienced by the CTW amidst substantial funding cuts.[116] The ad emphasizes both the demonstrable needs of the workshop, which reached nine million children, and the responsibility of corporations to contribute. It then highlights Mobil's role in keeping *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company* on the air, "So we are giving $100,000 to help keep the shows on the air. And we're asking other corporations to lend a hand too. Put your money where the kids are. Help keep Big Bird on the big tube."[117]

Mobil's sponsorship of CTW was not universally viewed as a disinterested contribution to the public good. In a *Newsday* editorial, for example, columnist Patrick Owens described the "Endangered Species" ad as arresting but contended that its message rang false, under the headline, "This Oil Company Needs Help; Send Money."[118] Owens recounted a friend who reacted by writing to Mobil's president, parodying the ad, "Big Car looks healthy enough, just ask any of the 9,000,000 kids who sit for hours in the back of their parents' car; in lines, waiting to purchase gasoline. This time could be spent watching *Sesame Street.*"[119] Owens, separately, asked a Mobil publicist how much Mobil was spending to advertise its $100,000 gift to CTW. He learned that Mobil had spent $55,843 in promotion of the donation in *Forbes, Fortune,*

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[115] Mobil Oil, "Why America Needs Another Electric Company" Advertisement, *New York Times,* Oct. 14, 1971.
[116] Mobil Oil, "Endangered Species."
[117] Ibid.
[118] Patrick Cowan, "This Oil Company Needs Help; Send Money," *Newsday,* Apr. 4, 1974, from Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.
[119] Ibid.

*Business Week, Time, The New York Times, Newsday, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post.* The publicist, however, framed the campaign as a catalyst for other corporations to make similar contributions. This rationale was echoed by Mobil's chairman, Rawleigh Warner, Jr. in "An Open Letter to American Business," which kept up the messaging that represented Big Bird and his friends as "endangered species" needing of rescue. The letter asserted that "foundations and government money helped launch the shows through the Children's Television Workshop, but their funds are designed to start projects like these, not sustain them."[120] A similar letter drafted by Herbert Schmertz specified that the U.S. Office of Education had needed to cut its support to $3 million for the 1974-5 season.[121] Warner concluded with a call for other corporations to join Mobil in its funding support, signing off, as in the ad, with the call to "Put your money where the kids are."[122]

And, it seems, Children's Television Workshop agreed with Mobil's framing of its role. Joan Ganz Cooney, in a letter addressed to Herb Schmertz, wrote to this effect, "I have been trying to reach you to tell you how grateful we are for the Mobil gift and ad campaign," adding that IBM had inquired while General Telephone & Electric Corporation had already sent its own gift.[123] As Abby Whitaker describes, the 1974 CTW funding crisis significantly altered CTW's reliance on government investment as it increasingly sought to balance its reputation for noncommercialism while depending on

[120] Raleigh [sic] Warner, "An Open Letter to American Business, Subject; An Endangered Species," Undated, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.
[121] Letter Draft, Herb Schmertz, "Dear (Moneybags)," Undated, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.
[122] Raleigh [sic] Warner, "An Open Letter to American Business."
[123] Letter, Joan Ganz Cooney to Herb Schmertz, Mar. 22, 1974, Box 118, Folder 3, CTW, UMDSC.

commercial partnerships.[124] Consequently, in 1974 CTW moved toward "neoliberal thinking as executives moved away from imagining *Sesame Street* as a public good that should be funded by the federal government, and prioritized thinking of itself as a self-supported nonprofit with *Sesame Street* being its most lucrative commodity."[125] In this way, corporate backers contributed to CTW's privatization while furnishing its reputation as supporting the public good.

Mobil's relationship with CTW extended into the late 1970s, including its support for the initial series production of Gilded Age social history *Best of Families,* which ran for one season in 1977.[126] Mobil agreed early on to financially back the first season, yet correspondence between Schmertz and CTW leaders demonstrates friction in their working relationship. In March 1977, Bob Hatch, then CTW's Vice President for Public Affairs, described Mobil advertising support as "a problem and an opportunity at the same time," explaining, "Mobil will doubtless do some advertising in a unilateral way and for their own corporate purposes."[127] He then laid out Mobil's approach to public relations as uncompromising, noting that Mobil had strict guidelines for the display of underwriters and insisted on writing its own ads.[128] Referring broadly to "the Mobil problem," Hatch suggested that a pattern of disagreements and last minute revisions had made the partnership untenable, noting it would need to be managed by higher-ups

[124] Whitaker, "*Sesame Street* and the City," 13-4.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Memo, David Britt to Joan Cooney, "Mobil Support for History Series," Oct. 16, 1974; Letter, Joan Ganz Cooney to Herb Schmertz, Aug. 5, 1976, Box 97, Folder 26, CTW, UMDSC.
[127] Memo, Bob Hatch to Paul Firstenberg, "Best of Families, Promotion Funding Needs and Plans," Mar. 22, 1977, Box 101, Folder 1, CTW, UMDSC.
[128] Memo, Bob Hatch to Paul Firstenberg.

thereafter. [129] These disagreements make clear the underlying tensions between Mobil and CTW**;** just as CTW staff recognized that Mobil's contributions helped to keep CTW programming afloat, they understood how the partnership underwrote Mobil's own reputational interests. Ultimately, Mobil's public-facing alignment with *Sesame Street* and educational television for "disadvantaged children" enabled Mobil to present itself as invested in public goods as they became increasingly privatized.

## V. "Petro-Pedagogy" in the Classroom

A January 1973 Mobil advertorial opened with a set of questions: "You being gouged on prices? Just how much *do* leading U.S. manufacturing corporations make on each dollar of sales?" According to Mobil, "if you guess zero, you'll be a lot closer than most people." Like many of its communications in this period, this ad argued that Americans mistakenly misperceived the extent of the oil industry's profits, in part due to a pervasive anti-business atmosphere. The solution to this perceived "widespread economic illiteracy," they proposed, was education: "We teach young people everything from Latin grammar to Japanese flower-arranging, but virtually nothing about our own economic system. (The economic system that is, in fact, so productive that it has made possible the most widespread public education in the history of the world.) The result of this curricular anomaly is that teachers and their students tend to have the same lack of understanding."[130]

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[129] CTW's internal communications provide a sense of how Mobil's sponsorship activities were interpreted by the recipients of its fundraising endeavors, as well as CTW's recognition of how the positive perception of CTW was functionally transferred onto Mobil through this partnership. Memo, Bob Hatch to Paul Firstenberg.
[130] Mobil, "Croesus, Inc.," Advertisement, *The New York Times,* Jan. 4, 1973, 37.

In this ad, Mobil portrays its public relations platform as a pedagogical tool to "explain to people just how well the *system* works," yet also gestures more concretely to an already unfolding program of industry interventions in public education curricula. [131] As Elizabeth Fones-Wolf charts, corporate leaders endeavored to influence education beginning in the early 1940s, but increasingly after WWII, as part of a larger effort to influence cultural values.[132] Drawing on advertising tools, business leaders promoted the economic value of education as "akin to capital invested in a business enterprise."[133] Frank W. Abrams of Standard Oil and the Committee for Economic Development, for example, regarded education as essentially linked to economic productivity and growth, contending, if "our hope of an advancing American economy involves reducing costs, increasing individual productivity, and devising better ways of doing things, we must consider that we have a major interest in helping American education."[134]

In support of this initiative, corporations developed teaching materials as a means of directly communicating with teachers and students.[135] The production and distribution of business-sponsored teaching materials, including booklets, films, lesson plans, and comic strips, proliferated during the postwar period.[136] Described in *Public Relations Journal* in

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Industry groups like the National Association of Manufacturers, Center for Economic Development, and the Chamber of Commerce, as well as individual corporations including Standard Oil, Gulf Oil, and Alcoa, engineered a series of practices, including philanthropic contributions to higher education, educator conferences for university faculty and secondary education teachers, and speakers bureaus. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise,* 189, 193-94, 196-97.
[133] Ibid, 198-9.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid., 199.
[136] Ibid., 203.

1957, industry-sponsored materials "came of age" in the postwar period.[137] Partnerships between industry and educational organizations, in particular the National Science Teachers Association, resulted in the production of standards for sponsored materials, which included the following tenets: "1. Keep 'Advertising' to a Minimum, 2. Avoid Unfair Slanting or Bias, 3. Plan Materials to Fit the Curriculum, 4. Keep Materials Easy to Read, and 5. Make Them Interesting."[138] According to the article, science was a particularly fertile terrain for partnerships due to the rapidity of new developments and the wide reach of the subject among students as schools increasingly encouraged careers in science and engineering.[139] Along these same lines, a *New York Times* article describing the trend in 1959 noted that "an estimated one in five major corporations" supplied teaching aids, viewing this distribution as "both a responsibility and an opportunity" to connect with future consumers and "build a favorable corporate image."[140] As the distribution of sponsored materials grew, their use in classrooms became normalized as a means to supplement tight school budgets and keep curriculum up to date. By the late 1950s, a publication from the National Science Teachers Association contended "teachers and administrators have greater confidence in industry and in the motives behind industry's offerings to schools." Granted that the materials were "to some extent motivated by self-interest," business was increasingly understood to

[137] Mary June Burton, "Sponsored School Materials are 'Coming of Age," *Public Relations Journal* 13 (Apr. 1957), 8-9.
[138] Ibid., 9, 18-19.
[139] Ibid., 18.
[140] Alexander R. Hammer, "Aids to Teachers Are Building Big Potential," *The New York Times,* Jan. 4, 1959.

have “a real interest in the welfare of all the people.”[141]

Responding to the anti-business climate intensified by environmentalists and consumer protection activists, industry-sponsored educational materials once again proliferated in the 1970s. In 1979, Sheila Harty, a researcher at the Ralph Nader-founded Center for Study of Responsive Law, published an analysis of what she termed "instructional advertising" in *Hucksters in the Classroom: A Review of Industry Propaganda in Schools.* In it, Harty offered an explanation for why schools, particularly at this historical moment, were so susceptible to industry propaganda. As Harty described, this receptivity was built into education’s funding structure; with most of the annual educational budget going to salaries, utilities, and food services, teachers relied on free print and audio-visual materials to keep up with new curricular demands.[142] This was particularly true in subjects like nutrition, consumer economics, energy, and environmental science, which Harty characterized as "areas of vested interest for utilities, manufacturers, and other corporate enterprises."[143] While companies could benefit from directly promoting products, Harty argued that materials often went "beyond the product," to express political ideologies.[144]

According to Harty, industry-sponsored energy education efforts often focused on elementary education, with materials including films, comic books, and cartoon graphics. Harty framed many of the materials, and the free market values they promoted, as a

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[141] Burton, “Sponsored School Materials,” 8. The quoted excerpts come from a National Science Teachers Association article entitled “How Science Teachers Use Business-Sponsored Teaching Aids.”
[142] Sheila Harty, “Hucksters in the Classroom: A Review of Industry Propaganda in Schools" (Center for the Study of Responsive Law, 1979), 2-3.
[143] Ibid., 2, 15.
[144] Ibid., 11-12.

response to the Powell Memorandum. With this broader politicization of the business community as a backdrop, the fossil fuel and broader energy industry's emphasis on educating students about free enterprise as much as energy in this period becomes more directly comprehensible. Harty noted that films and television series are especially useful to industries looking to reach students in the classroom due to the minimal evaluation of the educational integrity of the materials by comparison to textbooks.[145] An educational film called *Solar Energy,* one part of *The Capitalist Energy Primer* multi-media package*,* seemed initially to be supportive of solar energy, and included testimonials of solar energy users, before framing it as unreliable and expensive, an instance of "big hopes and dreams" which was neither practical nor rational.[146] Instead, the film proposed that the "future depends on a healthy economy today" which will come from "the oil and petroleum industry," while "coal and nuclear power will prime the energy pump for the future until alternative energy sources are possible."[147] Such materials supported the self-presentation of the oil industry as an engine of economic growth necessary to American progress and welfare.

Access to sponsored educational materials was facilitated through the publication of resources like the *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Aids* series, published annually between 1955 through 1996.[148] The editors of the books framed the series as a source of cooperation between industry and education. Within the guides, industry

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[145] Ibid., 91-92.
[146] Ibid., 53-54.
[147] Ibid.
[148] For this chapter, I've reviewed editions of *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Aids* from 1969-1978 (editions 15-24), which are held by the Library of Congress Periodicals Collection.

materials were promoted alongside materials distributed by government and foundations. For example, in the first edition to include environmental education in 1970, the guide included materials from environmental organizations and government services—a pamphlet on air pollution from the National Wildlife Foundation, a conservation activity booklet from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a series of texts entitled "The World Around You" from The Garden Club of America. [149] These texts were set alongside materials sponsored by oil corporations and industry associations, including a booklet entitled "Conserving Our Wildlife" from Standard Oil Company of California, a packet of charts and maps entitled "Oil Producing Industry in Your State" from the Independent Petroleum Association of America, and a booklet on environmental conservation efforts in the oil industry entitled "Protecting Our Resources" from the American Oil Company.[150] Such positioning framed the oil industry as a worthy participant in environmental education, as well as a socially conscious actor in environmental politics. Although it was not the sole source of sponsored materials, private industry possessed resources with which to overwhelm competing voices.[151]

Other sponsored materials included a Union Oil Company of California booklet entitled "Petroleum and the Environment," which used comics to highlight the role of the petroleum industry in combatting pollution; several American Petroleum Institute sponsored texts entitled "Facts About Oil," "Earth Science and Energy," and "Chemistry and Petroleum" which included how-to experiments and demonstrations; and Phillips

[149] Suttles, ed., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 16th ed. (Educators Progress Service, Inc., July 1970), 39-46.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise,* 207-10.

Petroleum's "The Magic World of Petrochemicals" booklet, which detailed the role of "modern magicians" (petrochemical scientists and engineers) in producing football helmets, toys, medicines, and "all those thousands of fabulous things that come out of this new world and make your own life more enjoyable."[152] Some materials addressed the oil crises of the 1970s directly, such as Amoco Oil Company's "Living With Energy" package including a 26 minute film, lesson plan, and activity sheets that promised to guide students through "the complex dimensions of the energy problem" to which there were no "easy, clearcut answers," or a brochure telling the story of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline sponsored by Alyeska Pipeline Service Co.[153] In 1971, Phillips Petroleum Company, Standard Oil Company of California, and Shell Oil Company each individually produced booklets claiming to tell the "Story of Oil and Gas," "The Story of Oil," and "The Story of Petroleum," respectively.[154] The booklet provided by Phillips, for example, presented the narrative as an "adventure tale" and positioned oil as having an inextricable role in American progress; as the promotional copy notes, "We should be glad that people went on this adventure, for both oil and gas have helped so much to give us our wonderful way of life."[155] Such materials celebrated the oil industry's essentially positive and seemingly fixed role in American life, contributing to a larger fossil fuel commonsense while making it relevant to young students.

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[152] Patricia H. Suttles, ed., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 17th ed. (Educators Progress Service, Inc., July 1971), 44-5, 127, 131; Suttles, ed., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 21st ed. (Educators Progress Service, Inc., July 1975), 135-6.
[153] Patricia H. Suttles and Kathleen Suttles Nehmer, eds., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 23rd ed. (Educators Progress Service, Inc., July 1977), 46, 142.
[154] Suttles, ed., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 17th ed. (July 1971), 153-4.
[155] Ibid.

As Americans experienced the second oil crisis of the decade, a renewed emphasis on "energy education" offered the fossil fuel industry a foothold in classrooms nationwide.[156] Amid the 1979 oil crisis, teachers were encouraged to prepare themselves to teach the new field of energy education. *The New York Times* reported in November 1979 that "more than 1.5 million energy-related booklets were distributed to teachers by the Department of Energy in the last 12 months," as part of a "multimillion-dollar national effort." According to Dr. Helenmarie Hofman, associate director of the Project for an Energy-Enriched Curriculum at the National Science Teachers Association, energy education was intended to "infuse" all areas of the existing curriculum. Hofman suggested that, despite existing demands on teachers, there remained interest in teaching the subject: "Teachers who've had to cope with Career Ed, Drug Ed and Sex Ed don't need Energy Ed, too, but they do want to teach it."[157] Another educator, assistant superintendent for instruction in a public school system, noted that in addition to this practical interest, the new emphasis on energy education was due in part to pressure from state-level Departments of Education and the Federal Department of Energy. In some cases, educational programs focused on reduction of school energy use, home conservation education, and renewable, and especially solar, energy projects. Others sought to empower students to learn about the legislative process in social studies classes, where lessons including "How an Energy Bill Becomes Law" enabled students to learn about the relationship of energy systems to democratic power.[158]

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[156] Jimmy Carter, "Proclamation 4738—National Energy Education Day," Mar. 20, 1980, *The American Presidency Project,* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250146.
[157] James Feron, "Energy Crisis Is Making Impact In Classrooms and Textbooks," *The New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1979, sec. Section EDUC, 1.
[158] Ibid.

Yet in other cases, the emergent field of energy education was shaped by oil industry interests and counter-environmental values. In 1980, a Joint Congressional Resolution initiated the founding of The National Energy Education Development Project, a fossil fuel industry-backed organization which, beginning in 1980, began providing free lesson plans and curricular materials. Alongside this initiative, Jimmy Carter designated March 21, 1980 as National Energy Education Day.[159] Among others, initial corporate underwriters included utility, petrochemical, and oil companies including Mobil Oil.[160] Upon its founding, NEED offered schools annual memberships for $25 per year that enabled access to a catalog of educational materials, focusing on classroom activity guides for teachers.[161] As part of the industry's ongoing intervention in the education system, the initiative was intended not only to reach young students as future workers, but also to promote particular ideas about American economic and energy futures.[162] Oil industry interventions into public education such as these promoted the values of the private market, aligning the best interest of future generations to the objectives of capital.

## VI. Conclusion

[159] Jimmy Carter, "Proclamation 4738—National Energy Education Day," Mar. 20, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250146.
[160] Consumer Reports, "Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at Schools," *ZILLIONS: For Kids From Consumer Reports,* Press Release, part 1, Jan. 1, 1998.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Several journalists have cataloged their recent efforts. See: Katie Worth, "Climate Change Skeptic Group Seeks to Influence 200,000 Teachers," *Frontline*, Mar. 28, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/climate-change-skeptic-group-seeks-to-influence-200000-teachers/ (accessed Feb. 9, 2023). Jie Jenny Zou, "Inside the Oil Industry's Not-so-Subtle Push into K-12 Education," *The Hechinger Report*, June 15, 2017, http://hechingerreport.org/oils-pipeline-to-americas-schools/ (accessed Feb. 9, 2023); Emily Atkin, "The Fossil Fuel Industry's Public School Takeover," Mar. 4, 2020, https://heated.world/p/the-fossil-fuel-industrys-public (accessed Feb. 9, 2023).

During the 1970s, the oil industry positioned itself as a socially responsible member of society, promoting its investments in social welfare and the public good— emblematized through children and families— in order to resist government regulation and sustain its capacity for profit and growth. Presenting itself as aligned with the interests of "disadvantaged" children, Mobil and the oil industry more broadly participated in privatization and deregulation, thus aiding in ushering in the neoliberal politics of the family which would take hold in this period. The public relations and sponsorship activities undertaken by Mobil in the 1970s signal changes in political economy and its cultures to come in the following decades. In its 1982 report evaluating the efficacy of its public affairs program, Mobil described its intention to "increase our corporate giving in areas where the poor directly benefit, responding to the President's [Ronald Reagan's] appeal to business to help in areas where Federal aid has been reduced or eliminated. This will be a very selective process in which we will seek out the effective, the visible, and the imaginative."[163] While promoting private investment in children's futures as a replacement for state administered redistribution of wealth, Mobil and its industry counterparts developed three primary venues of address.

In news media, specifically its widely remarked upon advertorial program, Mobil commented on prominent social issues, including education and welfare, advocated for particular policy ends, including environmental and market deregulation, and promoted its investments in children's economic futures. These ads often specifically instrumentalized images or reference to Black children and families, suggesting Mobil's commitment to racial equality while undermining its material basis. Through its

[163] Mobil Oil, "Evolution of Mobil Public Affairs Program."

sponsorship of the Children's Television Workshop, Mobil gained credibility as a caring corporation, encouraging private investment in public educational television and naturalizing the role of private corporations in public goods. And, finally, Mobil and other oil companies produced sponsored educational materials which became a crucial resource in public education. Geared especially toward energy education, environmental science, and economics, the oil industry benefited from existing frailties in the public education system, wherein sponsored educational materials became a practical tool for under-resourced schools and teachers. In addition to towing the industry line regarding environmental "externalities" and the lack of industry accountability, these resources aimed to influence future generations by shoring up support for free market values.

Together, these petro-pedagogical forms participated in undermining state projects of economic redistribution, obstructing environmental protections, and exacerbating the "disadvantaging" conditions of the very children the industry claimed to protect. Within this equation, the oil industry portrayed its fate as tied to that of future generations while obscuring the extent to which the futures of these same generations would be made more precarious by the very cultures of privatization the industry underwrote.

## Chapter 2: Love Canal and Toxic Conceptions of Deservingness

### I. Introduction

In the intervening days between Friday, May 16 and Thursday, May 22, 1980, the leaders of the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA) reached an inflection point in their years-long struggle for remediation in the aftermath of toxic contamination. On the afternoon of May 16, 1980, Lois Gibbs, the leader of the LCHA, received a phone call from a representative of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regarding the results of chromosome studies recently conducted on Love Canal residents.[1] The results of the study would measure and predict the health effects of the residents' exposure to toxic waste, the subject of the LCHA's activism since the summer of 1978. The representative reported that the results had been leaked to the press, preventing the EPA from notifying affected individuals in advance of their publication. As EPA officials arrived to meet with affected families the following day, a media circus closely followed.[2] The news of the chromosome study results had reached the front page of *The New York Times* that same morning, projecting that just over 30% of the tested residents exhibited "rare chromosomal aberrations" which could be linked to cancer and "severe birth defects."[3] The study made the front page of *The New York Times* again the following day, this time featuring an image of an affected family and testimonies from

[1] Lois Marie Gibbs and Murray Levine, *Love Canal: My Story* (State University of New York Press, 1982), 142-4.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Irvin Molotsky, "Damage to Chromosomes Found in Love Canal Tests; Residents Not Yet Informed Damage to Chromosomes Is Found In Tests on Love Canal's Residents Names of Scientists Involved Families Began Leaving," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1980, page 1.

residents recounting their fears that "my kids might be dying" and accusations that "the president is killing us."[4]

As Gibbs recounted in a memoir published two years after the events, "the chromosome breaks meant an increased risk of miscarriages, stillborns, birth defects, cancer, or genetic damage, which could affect their children's children. The thought of cancer or genetic damage, understandably, frightened people."[5] Gibbs narrated the frustration she and her neighbors experienced while receiving these results; it was clear that there was nothing parents could do to help their children but to leave Love Canal, yet leaving was impossible if families couldn't afford to move. Gibbs recalled her neighbors' exasperation as she left a meeting with the doctors, yelling, "Damn you, EPA! Damn you, stupid government!"[6]

Over the following days, an ordeal unfolded which involved residents taking two EPA officials hostage in a dramatic media spectacle. Upon the release of the hostages, Gibbs offered government officials an ultimatum: "Here is the message we should deliver to Washington. Here are your EPA people. What you have seen us do here today will be a *Sesame Street* picnic in comparison with what we will do if we do not get evacuated. We want an answer from Washington by noon Wednesday!"[7] On Thursday, May 22, 1980, President Carter declared a second federal emergency at Love Canal, opening up the funding for the LCHA's desired relocation. Shortly thereafter, New York's Governor

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[4] Molotsky, "Findings of Cell Damage Lead E.P.A. to Weigh Need to Vacate Area; U.S. May Move New Group Living in Love Canal Area," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1980, 1, 37; Josh Barbanel, "Homeowners Are Bitter and Fearful as Results of Study Are Released," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1980, 1, 36.
[5] Gibbs and Levine, *Love Canal: My Story*, 143.
[6] Ibid., 144.
[7] Ibid., 154.

Carey issued a plan for a joint federal-state purchase of affected Love Canal homes on May 24, 1980. Gibbs recalls her celebration with LCHA members as a victory for Love Canal's most vulnerable: "We celebrated by taking the red carnations we had been wearing since taking the hostages and throwing them into the air, saying we were now free! Our babies would be safe from further exposure to Love Canal poisons."[8]

Meanwhile, on the day of Carter's announcement, Love Canal renters held a protest at City Hall to challenge existing federal plans to relocate canal area residents, which, they charged, discriminated against the poor.[9] While LCHA was by far the most visible resident group in the media coverage and state management of Love Canal, the Concerned Love Canal Renters Association came together in late September 1978 to advocate for the interests of residents of the LaSalle Housing Development, a federally subsidized housing project.[10] Of the renters, a majority of the families were Black, and many were single mothers who received public assistance.[11] On the day of the protest in

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[8] Ibid., 160.

[9] "Renters at Canal Protest Federal Plans," *Niagara Gazette,* May 22, 1980. Love Canal Newspaper Database, University Archives, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York. (Hereafter cited as LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.)

[10] Sources refer to the development as both the LaSalle development and Griffon/Griffin Manor. Griffon Manor refers to an earlier public housing development, from which many residents would eventually move into LaSalle for better conditions, resulting in the conflation of their names. I refer to the development as LaSalle here for clarity. Thad Komorowski, "Love Canal Renters No Longer 'Invisible,'" *Niagara Gazette,* Mar. 23, 1980. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.

[11] Estimates of the racial demographics of the development vary, with some sources saying between 80%, 66%, or 60% of the residents were Black (and presumably most of the remainder are white). Josh Barbanel, "For Love Canal Renters, 'The Project' Is 'a Prison," *The New York Times,* May 24, 1980, 25-26; Hay, "Recipe for Disaster."; Jorgette Theopolis, "A Re-Examination of the Love Canal Crisis: The Myth and the Reality" (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996); Renter's Association, MS0631001, Box 3 Folder 38, Love Canal Collection, Tufts Archival Research Center, Tufts University. (Hereafter cited as LC Collection, TARC.)

May 1980, Sara Herbert, the renter's association president, confronted the Niagara Falls city manager, noting that many LaSalle residents relied on public assistance and would be unable to evacuate to hotels without financial support. Therefore, Herbert argued, the government's promises to reimburse residents at a later date would exclude most renters from relocation. Herbert indicated that she would give the government a deadline to come up with a plan that included the concerns of renters, after which point, she noted, "Mrs. Lois Gibbs held her hostages – we'll hold ours too."[12] During the meeting, a large group of young children and teenagers staged a protest on the City Hall second floor balcony shouting "We want out" and carrying signs stating "We are human too" and "Damn the money–We want out."[13] Speaking to the press, Herbert made the comparison between the treatment of homeowners and renters explicit, contending, "Why should we have to live at the Love Canal and die just because we aren't fortunate? We don't have money to buy houses!"[14] Such comments pointed to the contradiction where Herbert and her neighbors were excluded from state environmental protections on the basis of their gendered, economic, and racial marginalization.

Like the LCHA, the Renter's Association was led by mothers who made claims to state responsibility on the basis of the neglect of their children's health.[15] Yet for the LaSalle residents, additional labor was required in order to secure even marginal

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[12] "Renters at Canal Protest Federal Plans," *Niagara Gazette,* May 22, 1980. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives. "City Hall Protest Staged by Renters in Canal Area," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* May 23, 1980. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[13] "Renters at Canal Protest Federal Plans."
[14] Ibid.
[15] My use of "state neglect" is informed by Sara Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived: Family Making and the Limits of Choice after Roe v. Wade* (University of California Press, 2021).

accountability; as one Renter's Association leader reflected, "You get the feeling that the reason you were overlooked is because...you really weren't looked at as a human being…But we don't feel that way...because as we stated to them we're just not homeowners but we got the same feelings and we love our kids just like the homeowners over there and we feel like if we're in any danger we should have the same protection that the home owners have."[16] While in the spring of 1980, homeowners celebrated the state funding of relocation and property compensation, renters, who encountered recurring assertions that they were "undeserving" of state resources, were ultimately marginalized from state responses to the crisis.

In the period between 1978 and 1980, the Love Canal became a household name synonymous with the newly nationally visible issue of toxic waste dumping. Between 1942-1952, Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corporation buried over 20,000 tons of toxic chemicals, including benzene and dioxin, in a partially constructed canal in Niagara Falls, New York. [17] In the following years, Hooker filled in the canal and sold the land to the Niagara County School Board, which built the 99th St. Elementary School on top of the enclosed canal and sold the remaining land for housing development. While the contamination was largely undetected in the first two decades, conditions reached a tipping point locally amid heavy rains in 1976, as corroded barrels and puddles of chemicals resurfaced.[18] Concerns raised by residents and local media finally reached state

[16] Blum, *Love Canal Revisited,* 84-5.
[17] "Love Canal: Timeline and Photos," University at Buffalo: University Libraries, Oct 2, 2023, https://research.lib.buffalo.edu/love-canal/timeline-and-photos; Colin Dabkowski, "A History of the Love Canal Disaster," *The Buffalo News,* Aug 4, 2018, https://buffalonews.com/news/local/ history/a-history-of-the-love-canal-disaster-1893-to-1998/article_5df93af9-e5fe-5ae4-be74-efed7dbf43ed.html.
[18] Theopolis, "A Re-Examination of the Love Canal Crisis," 14.

health officials who conducted health studies in the spring of 1978.[19] On August 2, 1978, the state health commissioner declared a state of emergency at Love Canal, ordering the closure of the 99th Street School and the evacuation of pregnant women and children under two years old from the two rings of houses adjacent to the canal.[20] The resulting crisis unfolded primarily between 1978-1980, expanding from a local disaster to a national news story. The widely reported activism of the LCHA gained public attention by foregrounding the health effects of contamination on children and unborn generations and the displacement of hardworking families from their previously safe homes. The crisis was quickly understood as the canary in the coal mine indicating a widespread problem. As a result, the handling of Love Canal set the precedent for the management of hazardous waste on a national scale.[21]

In subsequent years, Love Canal has also come to hold a significant role in environmental history. In the retelling of the Love Canal disaster, the hostage incident is an inflection point in a years' long struggle for homeowners, led by housewife activists; this struggle exerted the necessary pressure to secure resources from the government and solve the problem of Love Canal. Past histories of Love Canal have typically focused on Gibbs and the homeowners, analyzing how LCHA activists garnered attention by presenting themselves as housewives acting on behalf of their children, re-inscribing conservative notions of family and maternalism as they drew on feminist conceptions of reproductive health, bodily autonomy, and political agency.[22] These histories have largely

[19] "Love Canal: Timeline and Photos."
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] See: Elizabeth D. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism* (University Press of Kansas, 2008); Amy Hay, "Recipe for

placed LCHA activism at the center of Love Canal's historical narrative, informing its structure and where it begins and ends.[23] This focus is likely attributable in part to the intensity of the media coverage of Gibbs and the LCHA, and to the primary emphasis on Gibbs and the LCHA within formal archival collections at the State University of New York at Buffalo and Tufts University.[24]

Taking a different tact, this chapter attends to the activism of homeowners and their neighboring renters, side by side, critically analyzing how the racialized politics of children, reproduction, and property ownership shaped the outcomes and contingent resolution of the crisis at Love Canal. Although the "problem" of Love Canal was understood as endangered health, the solution proposed by homeowners and eventually by the legislation prompted by Love Canal, the 1980 Superfund Act, focused on property compensation. In homeowners' campaigns, the future of the family was consistently attached to the future of their property, a focus which ultimately shaped the solutions proposed to resolve the crisis. The slippage between these two domains, and the equation of the health of the family and future generations with the health of property investments, is the subject of this chapter.

This chapter evaluates how toxic conceptions of “deservingness” bolstered Love

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Disaster: Motherhood and Citizenship at Love Canal” *Journal of Women’s History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 111-134.

[23] See also: Richard S. Newman, *Love Canal: A Toxic History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Kyle Riismandel, *Neighborhood of Fear: The Suburban Crisis in American Culture, 1975-2001.* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020); Jennifer Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic: American Environmentalism and the Politics of Health* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

[24] Portions of the Tufts Archival Research Center’s holding of the Lois Gibbs Love Canal Papers (including Box 5) were not donated to Tufts until 2011, when the remainder of the collection was accessioned in three intervals from 2011-2017, making it inaccessible to some prior researchers.

Canal homeowners' claims to state resources for relocation and compensation while diminishing the claims of their renting neighbors. Environmental historian Pollyanna Rhee developed the term "ownership environmentalism" to attend to the centrality of a "political and social culture of homeownership" within the modern environmental movement inaugurated by the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969.[25] As Rhee argues, the environmental politics conceived in Santa Barbara, both before and after the oil spill, "established a metric to evaluate who deserved access to environmental quality" which "centered on the desires of the propertied."[26] The case study of Love Canal has many differences from Rhee's focus on affluent white residents of Santa Barbara; whereas Santa Barbara residents were concerned with "quality of life issues around open space and the rise of suburban sprawl," Love Canal residents—homeowners and renters alike—were concerned with their basic health and wellbeing of themselves and their families and the safety of the homes they counted on to support their families into the future.

In this sense, the story of Love Canal shares commonalities with the Black and working-class led environmental justice movement which was coalescing in this same period. Sociologist Dorceta E. Taylor describes the "marked shift marked shift in minority responses to environmental inequalities" during the 1960s and 1970s which "laid the groundwork" for the environmental justice movement. During this period, working-class majority-Black communities in Triana, Alabama, and Warren County, North Carolina linked environmental inequities with racial and social inequalities, mobilized for environmental health research and treatment, organized for improvement of

[25] Pollyanna Rhee, *Natural Attachments: The Domestication of American Environmentalism, 1920-1970* (University of Chicago Press, 2025), 3-4.
[26] Rhee, *Natural Attachments,* 4.

conditions and legal redress of harms, and generated frameworks which affirmed the human right to a safe and healthy environment.[27] Yet Love Canal's place in the history of environmental justice's origin story remains, necessarily, debated.[28] As Jennifer Thomson writes, the established historical narrative of Love Canal, which foregrounds the success of white homeowners in securing remediation, "cannot but constitute a sore spot for environmental scholarship and activism itself."[29] While Love Canal residents, including homeowners and renters, politicized the relationship between health and hazardous waste and developed innovative community-based health surveys to trace exposures and secure state remuneration—skills and practices that would prove to be central to the environmental justice movement—this chapter shows how homeowners also leveraged race and class stratification to position themselves as more deserving than their neighboring renters in direct conflict with the environmental justice movement's commitments to racial and social justice. Whereas, as scholar Julie Sze writes, "environmental justice was, and remains, about expansion, connection, and change," the history of Love Canal illustrates how environmentalism can be used to "maintain and regulate social stratifications."[30]

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[27] Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York University Press, 2014), 1, 6-19. See also: Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality,* 3rd ed (Westview Press, [1990] 2000); Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (MIT Press, 2007).

[28] Thomson here is specifically referring to Love Canal residents' weaponization of racial politics of belonging, in which white homeowners counterposed themselves against refugees from Cuba and Southeast Asia. For discussion of this broader debate, see: Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic,* 67-70.

[29] Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic,* 68.

[30] Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (University of California Press, 2020), 7; Rhee, *Natural Attachments,* 5.

I locate the source of this division in contemporaneous changes in political economy and culture. In this chapter, I draw on archival resources to analyze how the politics of family values, defined by the defense of normative familial futurity and the protection of white property ownership, shaped the outcomes of women's activism amid the Love Canal disaster. As historians and feminist theorists have contended, the politics of family values emergent in the 1970s resonated with neoliberal economic policies which saw the curtailing of state spending on social supports in favor of the privatization of personal responsibility, with the most adverse effects on families and communities outside of the normative white, middle class, heterosexual unit these policies privileged.[31] Within the history of the Love Canal disaster, family values moved within and across the political spectrum, resonating outside of assertedly conservative arenas, including in environmental politics centering the defense of the family, home, and children.[32] Love Canal homeowners promoted a genuine reframing of conservative discourses of the family in their call for corporate and state accountability, but within the circumscribed limits of race and class stratification. I argue that these politics shored up divisions between homeowners and renters, where property, rather than a more capacious conception of social investment, took hold as the primary solution envisioned to the

[31] For longer discussion of "family values" as a political movement and ideology, see: Robert O Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013); Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Zone Books, 2017); Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2019).

[32] See also: Lily Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton University Press, 2017)*;* Natasha Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation: Three Mile Island and The Political Transformation of the 1970s* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

crisis.

I begin by analyzing the stratification of reproductive politics at Love Canal, focusing on LCHA activists' prominent tactic of politicizing the health of children and future generations to gain media attention and pressure government officials, as well as the parallel efforts of women of the Renter's Association to make their own health concerns legible in order to secure needed resources.[33] While children's health is often at the center of the historical memory of Love Canal, in this chapter I consider how the sidelining of poor and Black children from conceptions of healthy futurity resulted in the comparative marginalization of their experiences of illness and impairment.[34] I then examine the gendered and racialized politics of welfare and state support as they were differentially mobilized and mapped onto homeowners and renters against the backdrop of emerging conditions of state austerity and disinvestment in the 1970s and 1980s. I analyze homeownership as a crucial platform and source of division within the activism at Love Canal, arguing that this emphasis is not separable from the affective and ideological investments in children and reproduction, but co-constitutive of the politics of the family as they emerged at Love Canal. The chapter ends by reflecting on the passage of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, also known as Superfund, in 1980, the first legislation to address hazardous waste on a

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[33] Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, *Conceiving the New World Order* (University of California Press, 1996).

[34] Regarding the historical memory of Love Canal, see, for example: Erin Blakemore, "Meet the Mom Who Took on Toxic Waste—and Won," *National Geographic,* Apr. 19, 2014, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/love-canal-lois-gibbs-toxic-waste; Keith O'Brien, *Paradise Falls: The True Story of an Environmental Catastrophe* (Knopf Doubleday, 2022); "Poisoned Ground: The Tragedy at Love Canal," *PBS: American Experience,* Season 36, Episode 4. Aired Mar. 27, 2024. https://www.pbs.org/video/poisoned-ground-the-tragedy-at-love-canal-pifecm/.

national level, which is typically framed as resolving the Love Canal crisis. By reflecting on the prioritization of property compensation within this legislation, I argue, we can better understand how the paradigms established within women's activism at Love Canal shaped and continue to shape environmental history, including through failures of coalitional possibility which might have enacted more expansive visions of state redress of environmental harms.

Ultimately, activism at Love Canal dealt a considerable challenge to corporate irresponsibility and a failure of state regulatory power, drawing national attention and resources to a previously unaddressed form of environmental harm. Yet the simultaneous prioritization of homeowners and neglect of renters by media and public officials resulted in a conception of environmental solutions which narrowly focused on protecting white familial futures and propped up racialized values of personal responsibility which perceive only the "deserving" as entitled to state support, marginalizing broader forms of solidarity within women's activism. The retelling of the Love Canal crisis has often replicated this marginalization by focusing primarily on the LCHA, whose campaign can be read in isolation as achieving a just resolution to the Love Canal crisis. By attending to this narrative differently, we can better understand the tensions, complexities, and contingencies within the history of women's environmental activism at a crucial moment within American environmentalism. We can also recognize how reproductive health and the protection of the family served as potential grounds of coalition between homeowners and renters yet ultimately served to divide them, such that the resolution of the Love Canal crisis in the Superfund Act would tend to some problems while neglecting others.

## II. Reproductive Futures and the Stratified Politics of Environmental Health

Following the initial evacuation of pregnant women and children living in closest proximity to the canal in August 1978, the LCHA, media, and government officials took up the narrative focus on the health of women, children, and "the unborn" (a category encompassing both fetuses and, more broadly, future generations).[35] Homeowner activists secured public attention and state resources in part through placing attention on future vulnerabilities, an understanding which relied on new ideas about reproduction and inheritance, and the new hypervisibility of the fetus in American life.[36]

Homeowner leaders were ultimately able to secure state attention and resources by framing the implications of environmental contamination in terms of their children's, and their children's children's vulnerability, a tactic which failed to generate similar momentum when drawn on by neighboring renters. The recognition of white children's health exposure to hazardous waste as an emergency, and simultaneous neglect of the exposure of Black, poor children, speaks to historical legacies regarding the Child as a means through which to project national futures. As Alison Kafer writes, "Queer kids, kids of color, street kids—all of the kids cast out of reproductive futurism—have been and continue to be framed as sick, as pathological, as contagious."[37] Kafer cites Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" as representative of this conflation of race, class, and disability which functions to exclude marginalized children from national futures, a project which is justified through the

[35] My thinking here is influenced by Natasha Zaretsky's analysis of a similar dynamic at Three Mile Island during this same period. Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation*, 38.
[36] See: Sara Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn: A History of the Fetus in Modern America* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
[37] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 32-33.

assertion that Black children are caught in a so-called "tangle of pathology."[38] As Kafer argues, Moynihan presented this entanglement as natural and inherent: "They are 'entrapped'...because this 'pathology' is endemic to black families; *the black family is always already sick*."[39] Resonating with Kafer's analysis, Black, poor families at Love Canal were treated as "self (and nationally) destructive"; the marginalization of primarily Black renters, therefore, was justified as a result of personal rather than social responsibility.[40]

In the midst of the renewed politicization of the fetus in the context of abortion rights from the 1970s and onward, invocations of the "unborn" and children's vulnerability as emblems of an endangered futurity proliferated in the homeowners' campaign and the media reaction to the crisis. In a 1979 EPA film entitled *Voices from Love Canal,* which focuses on the homeowners' experiences, Lois Gibbs explained how children's futures had become central to the LCHA's campaign. Gibbs explained, after a woman in Love Canal gives birth, "no one asks if the baby is a boy or girl, they asked if it's normal."[41] Similarly, in the 1982 documentary *In Our Own Backyard*, Gibbs recounts how she and her neighbors attracted sustained media coverage through their politicization, and at times instrumentalization, of children's illnesses and disabilities, describing: "It's horrible, you know, you have 'Playgirl of the Month,' we have 'Disease of the Month,' but we would take one person who had a child with major birth defects, and we would have some

[38] Ibid. Moynihan, a New York Senator during this era, would prove to be a central figure in the construction of solutions to the environmental crisis.
[39] Ibid. Emphasis mine.
[40] Tiffany Lethabo King, "Black 'Feminisms' and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family," *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 68.
[41] "Voices from the Love Canal," EPA, 0412.Eco.97, National Archives II, College Park.

sympathetic reporter interview her. And this gathered a lot of public sympathy, it demonstrated our plight, and it moved the politicians…"[42] Gibbs credited this method with health officials' eventual investigation of clusters of birth defects, cancers, miscarriages, and crib deaths that she mapped in terms of their proximity to stream beds fed by the canal, which she viewed as being ultimately essential in securing the evacuation of remaining residents.[43]

Love Canal activists' politicization of the interconnection of environmental and reproductive health relied on emergent understandings of genetics and disability made possible through recent scientific research. For example, a local news article published on the day following the newsbreak of the EPA's chromosome study report informed its readers of how toxic substances affected human biology, under the headline "Genetic Damage Changes 'Blueprints' for Humans."[44] Presented in pedagogical form, the article dated the historic recency of scientific knowledge of chromosomes and genetic abnormalities to the 1950s and 1960s, and noted that the science of "mapping" genes had only taken shape within the last few years. With regard to Love Canal, the piece went on to address scientific research on genetic abnormalities resulting from exposure to toxic substances, including incidence of cancer, birth defects, and chromosome damage, and linking the occurrence of chromosomal abnormalities to roughly one third of miscarriages.[45] As this chapter demonstrates, Love Canal was narrated in part as a lesson

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[42] Lynn Corcoran, *In Our Own Backyard,* Bullfrog Films, 1982.
[43] Corcoran, *In Our Own Backyard.*
[44] "Genetic Damage Changes 'Blueprints' for Humans," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* Mar. 18, 1980. Collection Part II: Box II: 1376, Folder 1, Daniel P. Moynihan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter cited as: DPM Papers, LOC.)
[45] Ibid.

in the relationship between environmental conditions and reproductive health.

In March 1980, Lois Gibbs presented data on the reproductive health effects of hazardous waste at Women and Life on Earth (WLOE): A Conference on Eco-Feminism in the '80s held at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.[46] As Gibbs recounted, "the most obvious effects we have found in Love Canal women is in the reproductive system." A neighborhood survey conducted by the LCHA found that within the outer rings of the Love Canal neighborhood, birth defects occurred at a rate of 56% and the miscarriage rate was between 50% and 75%. These densities had changed Love Canal women's reproductive decision-making and visions of their own futures; as Gibbs reflected, "If they conceive they must now wonder throughout their pregnancy if they will carry the baby full term, will it be still-born or birth defected and in some cases should I have an abortion. Pregnancy is supposed to be a happy time but for Love Canal women it brings many questions and fears."[47] As this testimony demonstrates, fears of future disability were often interwoven in residents' discussion of environmental health. Within homeowners' accounts especially, Love Canal interrupted an anticipated trajectory. As a result, residents increasingly questioned whether they would have "normal pregnancies" and "normal babies," and "whether our children will be able to have normal babies."[48] While, as Gibbs noted, reproductive health concerns were the most obvious and widely discussed, she noted other residents experienced migraines,

[46] WLOE was founded by a group of women active in anti-nuclear, peace, and women's movements in August 1979, following the Three Mile Island accident. Women and Life on Earth (WLOE) Records, Sophia Smith Collection, SSC-MS-00132, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.
[47] Lois Gibbs, "Opening Speech" (Mar. 21-3, 1980) ,WLOE Records, 03S-17, Box 1. Many thanks to Emma Schroeder for sharing this source with me.
[48] Ibid.

epilepsy, and what appeared to be high rates of breast and uterine cancer.[49] Gibbs and the LCHA worked to demonstrate that homeowners' health experiences were not random, but the deliberate result of state and corporate neglect.

Still, throughout the Love Canal saga, state and corporate officials repeatedly disputed the causal link between the health conditions of women and children and their exposure to hazardous waste. Immediately following the publication of the EPA report that opens this chapter, state officials and genetic researchers disputed the study's methodology and findings.[50] Doubt remained after the EPA released a scientific review in support of the earlier federal study's findings of chromosomal abnormalities.[51] A subsequent New York State Health Department report, which studied births and pregnancies among Love Canal residents, established further doubt of correlation. The study was unable to "correlate the geographic distributions of diverse pregnancy outcomes with chemical evidence of exposure," finding "no direct evidence of a cause-effect relationship with chemicals from the canal."[52] Moreover, it reported that only a "light-to-moderate excess" of miscarriages and/or low birth weights and a statistically

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Immediately following the publication of this article, state government officials and genetic researchers began to question the quality of the study and veracity of its results. See: Robin Herman, "Carey Criticizes Facets of Study On Love Canal," *The New York Times,* May 19, 1980, section B page 3. and Harold M. Schmeck, Jr., "Caution Urged on Data from Love Canal," *The New York Times,* May 20, 1980, C1, C7. Paul MacClennan, "Canal Study Review Stirs Dispute," *Buffalo Evening News,* May 20, 1980. Collection Part II: Box II: 1376, Folder 1, DPM Papers, LOC.

[51] "Irvin Molotsky, "New Review Backs Canal Genetic Data," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* June 18, 1980, Collection Part II: Box II: 1376, Folder 1, DPM Papers, LOC.

[52] Arthur Page, "No Canal Link To Problems in Birth Found," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* June 23, 1980, Collection Part II: Box II: 1376, Folder 1, DPM Papers, LOC.

insignificant rate of birth defects had occurred in the tested area.[53] The report, headed by Dr. Nicolas J. Vianna of New York's Bureau of Environmental Epidemiology and Occupational Health, was submitted for publication and rejected by the *Science* journal, with the editor publicly commenting that the study was scientifically unsound.[54] Gibbs, likewise, rejected the study's findings, calling it "bull" and inviting the Health Commissioner David Axelrod to "come to Niagara Falls to defend it personally." She also alleged that a number of area women who experienced miscarriage or other significant birth problems were not contacted by researchers.[55]

In order to challenge officials' refusal to take their reproductive health concerns seriously, LCHA activists involved children in public demonstrations. Resonating with Jennifer L. Holland's description of anti-abortion activism, activists at Love Canal productively used "the political slippage between fetus and child," by "ask[ing] children and young people to represent fetuses."[56] One widely reproduced image from an October 1978 protest features Gibbs standing alongside her children at the Niagara Falls City Hall whose signs read "Will I see age 7" and "Will I be able to have a normal baby."[57] Another

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[53] Ibid. The pregnancies studied were those of women living in the area bounded by 97th St. to the west, 103rd St. on the east, Colvin Avenue on the north and Frontier Avenue to the south. Based on the geographic bounds of the study, residents of the LaSalle Housing Development were excluded, representing another layer of the neglect of renters in the state response to the crisis.
[54] Arthur Page, "Pregnancies In Canal Area Found Normal," *Buffalo Evening News,* June 24, 1980, Collection Part II: Box II: 1376, Folder 1, DPM Papers, LOC.
[55] Marsha Ackermann, "Love Canal Pregnancies: State's Story Gets Rejection Slip," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* June 25, 1980, 28, Collection Part II: Box II: 1376, Folder 1, DPM Papers, LOC.
[56] Jennifer L. Holland, "'Survivors of the Abortion Holocaust': Children and Young Adults in the Anti-Abortion Movement," *Feminist Studies* 46, no. 1 (2020): 78.
[57] Penelope D. Ploughman, "Lois Gibbs and her children, Missy and Michael, carrying signs at Love Canal protest at the Niagara Falls, N.Y. City Hall," Oct. 16, 1978, MS100.D.17, Love Canal Images, State University of New York at Buffalo.

image from April 1979 features a young girl looking into the stroller of a sleeping baby, above whose head is positioned a sign that reads, "Our babies deserve a chance."[58]

This tactic was not always well regarded. For example, in February 1979, a resident of a neighboring town wrote a letter to the *Buffalo Courier-Express* criticizing the use of children as "Love Canal Pawns," referring to the psychological damage of engaging children in demonstrations as "another imminent atrocity being committed from the already disastrous Love Canal situation."[59] As the writer contended, "The need for support is great, but instead we turn them into a mini-circus parading them around with signs and reciting memorized lines…I believe the time has come to emancipate these young people from being the tools with which we manipulate government officials." Yet these criticisms did not deter the homeowners' strategy–for example, Gibbs published an op-ed in the *Niagara Gazette* later that year headlined "Doesn't Board like Our Children?" which goes on to inquire whether the Board of Education intended to "cripple our children for life with disease."[60] The piece concludes, "How many children must we sacrifice before someone stops forcing our children into unhealthy environments? Board of Education, please, look at the past, learn from it, before you plan the future."[61] For Gibbs and other members of the LCHA, the illnesses and impairments of children at

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[58] Ploughman, "Young girl and baby in carriage with sign 'Our babies deserve a chance' at Governor Carey's speech to New York State teachers at the Niagara Falls Convention Center" Apr. 27, 1979, MS 100.120, Love Canal Images, SUNY Buffalo.
[59] "Children Seen 'Used' As Love Canal Pawns," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* Feb. 29, 1979. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[60] "'Doesn't Board like Our Children?,'" *Niagara Gazette,* Aug. 7, 1979. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[61] Ibid.

Love Canal were held up as signals of imperiled futures.[62] In this way, homeowner activists at Love Canal made claims to state response by problematizing the health of future generations.

To be sure, LCHA members raised an important critique of the state's failure to regulate environmental contamination and refused the reduction of environmental hazard to a matter of personal responsibility. These critiques, however, often relied on exceptionalizing their own experiences of injury and presenting their priorities as more urgent than those they deemed less deserving of state redress. It is in this way that the conceptions of deservingness mobilized by the homeowners was, itself, toxic.

Despite the slight distance separating LaSalle from homes in the emergency declaration area, its residents were consistently neglected by health studies conducted by homeowners, their advocates, and state officials. The neglect of LaSalle residents by the state and media was deeply felt as renters' reproductive concerns were marginalized on the basis of their relation to property ownership, the racialization of which was repeatedly refused by homeowners and state officials.[63] On December 21, 1978, Renter's

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[62] For discussion of the figure of the Child as a symbol of able-bodied, healthy futurity, see: Rebekah Sheldon, *The Child to Come: Life After Human Catastrophe* (University of Minnesota Press), 3-5, 35-6; Julie Passanante Elman, *Chronic Youth: Disability, Sexuality, and U.S. Media Cultures of Rehabilitation* (New York University Press, 2014), 46.

[63] For example, local officials faced criticisms that former Griffon Manor residents had not been contacted to participate in health studies, in contrast to a massive state-run search for former homeowners. Barbara Smith of the Niagara Falls NAACP chapter argued that "the decision to not look for former tenants is racially motivated." Following an announcement that former residents of Griffon Manor would be included within a new CDC study, New York Congressman LaFalce described the earlier allegations of discrimination as "hogwash." Mike Billington, “C-E Finds Health Tests Available For Griffon Ex-Renters,” *Buffalo Courier-Express,* June 26, 1980, C-E and G-26, 1. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.

Association member Eula Sanders submitted a letter to the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, where she described the "tremendous strain" on the LaSalle residents and the renter's association. In her account, the strain of living within hazardous environmental conditions was exacerbated by public officials' refusal of accountability for renter's health:

> We have people here that are very ill, and there is no one here to lift a finger to hear how we feel or care about our feelings. You know, if we lose an eye we can get a glass eye; if we lose an arm, we can get an artificial arm…But no matter what happens in our lives there is no substitute for life…We have accepted that we live in a chemical industry area. But we still have the right to life.[64]

Nearly a year later, in October 1979, a LaSalle resident wrote a letter to the editor of the *Buffalo Evening News* making clear the ongoing disparities in the state responses to homeowners and renters: "I have been reading the stories on the Love Canal crisis, and I find no mention of us. When I say 'us,' I mean the people that live in the LaSalle Development. We don't own homes, but we are still inhaling contamination."[65] She then linked the failure of the state and media to address LaSalle residents' reproductive health conditions, describing, "We have children that are sick from Love Canal. There are babies that have died from being born near the Love Canal. There are mothers who are pregnant in the development. What about us? Are we not included in the Love Canal? Just because we are not fortunate enough to own a house, are we to be excluded?"[66] This stratification of the reproductive concerns of primarily white homeowners and primarily Black renters in Love Canal, who ultimately organized separate campaigns, make clear

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[64] "Strain on Canal Renters," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* Dec. 21, 1978. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[65] "LaSalle Residents 'Want Out,' Too," *Buffalo Evening News,* Oct. 31, 1979. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[66] Ibid.

the racial limits of the politics of children's vulnerability as they were mobilized at Love Canal.

## III. Homeownership and the Regulation of Deservingness

The Love Canal Homeowners Association came together in part through a door-to-door canvassing project Lois Gibbs began in the summer of 1978, after learning that the 99th St. School, which her son attended, was built on top of a toxic waste dump. As Gibbs presented her petition demanding the closure of the school, she developed a shorthand script of compelling talking points: if the residents had children, she first addressed their vulnerability. If they had no children, she moved on to property values, noting, "your home is worthless, no one will buy it, it is all over the paper the area is poisonous," or, you "worked hard all your life, work was for nothing." As she wrote in her script, "children worked best, pocketbook second best; if you can show them how they are affected, they will become involved."[67]

During the height of LCHA activism, Gibbs noted in speeches that putting "homeowners" in the title of the organization was one of her earliest mistakes, resulting in renters feeling excluded from the start.[68] While in retrospect Gibbs framed the name choice as incidental, another LCHA leader, Debby Cerrillo, reflected that the title reflected homeowners' perception that renters had little stake in their homes: "they never used the word *renters* because we never thought about it at that particular time...It was people who had a financial stake in the area. And we figured if you're on welfare, and

[67] Lois Gibbs Speeches and notes circa 1980, MS063.001, Box 5, Folder 5, LC Collection, TARC.
[68] Ibid.

you're living in [LaSalle], get a life."[69] During the crisis, renters' primary concern was their exposure to health effects; initially left out of the emergency order, LaSalle was assumed to be free of contamination due to a cursory inspection and excluded from subsequent health studies until renters mounted opposition.[70] Several sources indicate that renters and homeowners' first diverged over the question of remedial construction work, when LaSalle residents circulated a petition to delay work until their members with health issues including asthma and emphysema could be evacuated.[71] The LCHA came down on the other side of the issue, arguing that pausing the work would delay their ability to sell their homes and move, ultimately hurting their children's health in the long run.[72] After this initial hurdle, the two groups largely proceeded separately.

Love Canal activists' claims to state resources were mediated by the shifting political economy of the 1970s-1980s, where, in the midst of recession, government welfare provision became increasingly politicized and racialized.[73] Numerous historians have documented the government subsidy of white suburban homeownership during the postwar period, through programs including federally guaranteed mortgages and tax deductions; these incentives were accompanied by a parallel program of racially

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[69] Adeline Gordon Levine*, Love Canal: Science, Politics, People* (Lexington Books, 1982), 33; Blum, *Love Canal Revisited,* 70-1.
[70] Renter's Association, MS0631001, Box 3, Folder 38, Love Canal Collection, LC Collection, TARC.
[71] Interviews, circa 1979-1980, MS063.001, Box 5, Folder 3, Love Canal Collection, LC Collection, TARC; Levine, *Love Canal,* 198.
[72] Renter's Association, MS0631001, Box 3, Folder 38, Love Canal Collection, LC Collection, TARC.
[73] Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (Jan. 1994): 309–36; Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors: The Welfare Rights Movement in the United States* (Routledge, 2005), 4-5.

discriminatory policies which effectively barred Black participation in the housing market.[74] Like the two-tier welfare system, the state funding of suburban entitlement programs was naturalized such that white homeowners understood themselves as having earned their homes through hard work, independent of government support and racist laws and practices.[75] These same assumptions underlay "ownership environmentalism," demonstrating how, as Rhee describes, homeowners' "legal and perceived belonging and possession of land…connoted improvement, investment, and worth" which, in turn, merited protection.[76]

Representative of this framing of entitlement, in late September 1978, a local resident, Thomas Slaiman, replied to an earlier letter to the editor in the *Niagara Gazette* which had argued that Love Canal homeowners should welcome the opportunity to be relocated temporarily to LaSalle, which was at that point officially considered to free from contamination.[77] Slaiman's response challenged the earlier letter writer's claims that homeowners should "be thankful" and that "prejudice and segregation have persisted too long." Dismissing the claims that homeowners' refusal of this option was racially motivated, Slaiman defended the homeowners' desire to move into housing "compatible with what they had": "These people have spent many years in fulfilling a dream of every family– to own their own home. Certainly, they deserve nothing less than what they have spent years in building."[78] For Slaiman, as for many LCHA activists, homeownership

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[74] Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 1, 9; Geismer, *Don't Blame Us,* 8-9.
[75] Fraser and Gordon, "A Genealogy."; Premilla Nadasen, *Welfare Warriors.*
[76] Rhee, *Natural Attachments,* 3.
[77] "'Prejudice Not the Issue,'" *Niagara Gazette,* Sept. 27, 1978. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[78] Ibid.

represented a hard-earned status, such that when homes were devalued by environmental causes, homeowners were owed state resources.

The same assumption was not held for renters seeking comparable housing to their units within the LaSalle Development. In this context, homeowners' entitlement was set against the perception that renters were not entitled to state accountability due to their reliance on more stigmatized forms of social services. During the economic recession of the 1970s and into the 1980s, white middle class Americans increasingly expressed resentment toward taxation which they saw as contributing to redistributive social programs, such as welfare, which would benefit racialized others, and particularly Black women, rather than themselves.[79] This logic of positioning largely white homeowners as "deserving" and majority Black renters as "undeserving" of state resources was a recurrent framing throughout the governmental response to the Love Canal crisis.

Alongside the neglect of their concerns, renters were exposed to scrutiny from neighbors as much as by public officials. A Renter's Association leader later recalled being told by a LCHA member that "You people are on welfare– someone is paying for you–you're already getting something. You aren't entitled to more."[80] Renters were put in the position of constantly defending the validity of their material investments in their homes; as one LaSalle renter noted, "If you come right down to it the majority in the development is paying more rent to the Housing Authority than the homeowners are

[79] Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 238-9; Cooper, *Family Values,* 130-1; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton University Press, 2007),126-7.
[80] Theopolis, "A Re-Examination of the Love Canal Crisis," 40.

paying in mortgages. And we don't have a deed."[81] Renters' affective investments in their homes were similarly ignored.[82] Despite the efforts of renters to demonstrate the unsuitability of other housing options to their needs, homeowners and officials assumed that renters should willingly relocate to other developments which typically lacked the space to comfortably fit their families, as well as the amenities and community they'd found in LaSalle. Renters had moved to LaSalle for many of the same reasons homeowners had chosen to live in Love Canal—the proximity of the school and local playground, sufficient space for their families, and access to nature.[83] Consequently, renters repeatedly endured the refrain of their critics to "move to another project if you don't like it," a blithe dismissal which neglects renters' assertions that they were trapped between inadequate options.[84] For renters, as compared to many homeowners, the prospect of relocation was made considerably more precarious due to the lack of high-quality public housing in the area and racial discrimination experienced in the local private housing market, issues which were sidelined in state responses.

Homeowners were unable to see themselves as existing in shared conditions as renters; as one LCHA member noted, "Those people over there [tenants], I can't

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[81] Blum, *Love Canal Revisited,* 70.
[82] For other instances in which public housing was defended by its residents, in contrast to typical framings of public housing as a "failure," see: Edward G. Goetz, *New Deal Ruins: Race, Economic Justice, and Public Housing Policy* (Cornell University Press, 2013); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (Oxford University Press, 2004).
[83] The only other local projects–Packard Court, Center Court, and Jordan Gardens–were located more centrally in Niagara Falls and lacked sufficient space for families with multiple children. Renters also feared higher rates of crime in other local developments. Thad Komorowski, "Love Canal Renters No Longer 'Invisible,'" *Niagara Gazette,* Mar. 23 1980. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[84] Komorowski, "Love Canal Renters No Longer 'Invisible.'"

understand them. They are raising the roof about being compensated...but there is nothing in the world keeping those people in their project. If they don't like it, why don't they move? I would."[85] Dorceta Taylor describes this very question—"why don't they move?" as a hallmark of environmental justice battles over racially unequal exposure to environmental hazards.[86] In the case of Love Canal such questions failed to recognize how renters'—many of them Black mothers—residential mobility could be structurally limited and neglected the alternate forms of investment renters had in their homes and communities. Homeowners frequently distanced themselves from "those people over there" in language and in tactics, understanding their families' needs as fundamentally distinct from the concerns of renters. As a result, Love Canal homeowners and renters remained divided through the crisis and its ultimately fractured resolution.

The portrayal of renters as undeserving of state redress, however, did not go unchallenged. Newspaper testimonies and letters written from Renter's Association members to various local officials underscore the renters' feelings of exclusion, as well as their refusal of this position. On September 28, 1978, the *Buffalo Courier-Express* reported that LaSalle residents had joined together to form their own pressure group to seek state aid for relocation and safety measures, which was announced at a meeting with Love Canal Task Force officials.[87] According to the article, Elene Thornton, then chairperson of the Renter's Association, claimed that LaSalle residents had been "singled out for neglect" by state researchers testing contamination levels in the area surrounding

[85] Blum, *Love Canal Revisited,* 69.
[86] Taylor, *Toxic Communities,* 2.
[87] "Griffin Manor Residents Form Group to Learn Of Love Canal Daugers [sic]," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* Sept. 27, 1978. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.

the canal, arguing, "We're told there's no health hazard in our area. How can anyone say that if there have only been random tests?"[88] She also posited that only a third of the LaSalle residents had participated in the blood testing program developed for canal residents because they had not been informed of its availability. While the state officials present dismissed the LaSalle Resident's concerns, the renters anticipated such challenges and enlisted the Niagara Falls chapter of the NAACP, which promised legal assistance to procure financial support for any LaSalle resident seeking evacuation. In early October, Thornton and the renter's association began plans for a private health survey of LaSalle residents, whom, Thornton insisted, had experienced similar health effects as renters living closer to the canal.[89]

Leaders of the Renter's Association were constantly put in the position of making the absence of an effective state response to their concerns visible to state officials. In October 1979, the Niagara Falls NAACP branch announced its opposition to a state legislative proposal regarding the relocation of Love Canal residents which excluded the LaSalle development from its parameters.[90] Barbara J. Smith, president of the NAACP chapter, argued the proposal "discriminates against the poor and is racist," reflecting a "tendency to exclude the project…from the beginning of the Love Canal crisis."[91] Smith challenged the denial of renters' entitlement to governmental accountability: "The tenants are not excluded from the negative effects of chemical contamination. They are residents

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[88] Ibid.
[89] "LaSalle Group Plans Private Health Survey," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* Oct. 8, 1978. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[90] "Love Canal Bill Rapped: LaSalle Unit Exclusion on Relocation Aid Hit," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* Oct. 12, 1979. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[91] Ibid.

and taxpayers of the state of New York and as such are entitled to the same considerations as other citizens."[92] Smith asserted that the New York state legislature had ignored LaSalle because, as a federally funded housing project, state officials mistakenly assumed that LaSalle residents' relocation was solely the responsibility of the federal government. Meanwhile, the federal government continued to refuse to accept responsibility for the crisis more broadly. When this legislation was later approved by Governor Hugh Carey, Smith contended that although the NAACP was not opposed to the state giving financial aid to homeowners, "giving aid to homeowners while denying aid to the tenants is discriminatory."[93] Compellingly, Smith argued that many of the homes considered for relocation in the proposed state package had been financed through the Federal Housing Administration or Veterans Association; as a result, homeownership at Love Canal was largely underwritten by public funding.[94] This claim made visible the ways in which private home ownership, like public housing, was subsidized by the federal government, challenging the positioning of renters as "undeserving" of state redress.

On May 24, 1980, following the renters' protest introduced at the beginning of this chapter, *The New York Times* reported on LaSalle residents' reactions to the Carter and Carey announcements, including Carey's assertion that the federal government should cover all costs of relocating the LaSalle tenants. [95] Focusing solely on the renters,

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[92] Ibid.
[93] "Relocation plan hit by NAACP," *Niagara Gazette,* Oct. 22, 1979; "NAACP Head Charges Bias in Canal Plan," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* Oct. 24, 1979; Henry D. Locke, Jr, "NAACP Raps Plan to Buy Canal Homes," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* Oct. 29, 1979. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Barbanel, "'The Project' Is 'a Prison."

the article features one of the few photos of Black children with their mothers in the media coverage of the Love Canal crisis. As the piece reports, despite their inclusion in the governments' announcement, residents doubted its efficacy. One tenant described, "I've been looking for months in the newspapers and I just can't find a place to live," while another noted, "We've been looking for an apartment for months. When I call for an apartment they say 'Fine, come take a look,' and when they see we're black they say it's been rented."[96] The same *Times* article also features a story on Carey's plan for permanent relocation, reporting "At Love Canal, the reaction to Governor Carey's proposal was split. At the Homeowners Association, Lois Gibbs…conclud[ed], 'I think it's fair, and I think the Feds should do it, real soon.'" In contrast, Sarah Herbert argued the proposed solution did little to meet the needs of renters: "'Don't tell me that.' She pointed south toward the 550 privately owned homes represented by Mrs. Gibbs. 'That's over there. That's just for the homeowners. That still doesn't include the renters. And I'm still drinking the same water that they drink. And I'm breathing the same air they breathe.'"[97]

In a different tone, the *Niagara Gazette* published a story on the same federal emergency order titled "Love Canal Renters No Longer Invisible," on May 23, 1980. According to the article, Herbert viewed the emergency announcement as "a good step…it's the first time since this began that we haven't been overlooked," in sharp contrast to her comments in *The New York Times* piece.[98] Still, the article makes clear

[96] Ibid.
[97] Selwyn Raab, "Carey Proposes Buying Houses at Love Canal," *The New York Times* (May 24, 1980), 25-26.
[98] Komorowski, "Love Canal Renters No Longer 'Invisible.'"

that Herbert continued to see a double standard in the government's response to homeowners as compared to renters. A renter named Judy Abrams, for example, remarked that if a Black woman had attempted the LCHA's hostage stunt, "she'd still be in jail now." Referring to the LCHA, Herbert denied the existence of tension between the two activist groups: "We don't hold them responsible for our problem…she [Gibbs] started from scratch and I can do the same." She added, however, "But you know what gets me? Everytime someone draws a map or talks about the Love Canal, we're never drawn or mentioned. It's like they want to ignore us or like we're not even here." Despite the preceding discussion, the article concludes on a more optimistic note, summing up Herbert's assessment as "she said Wednesday she's glad she's back on the map."[99]

For renters, however, visibility was at times accompanied by interference and surveillance. As Tiffany Lethabo King has noted, drawing on Kay Lindsay's critique of the Moynihan Report, the presumed privacy of the white family from the intrusion of the state fails to hold for the Black family, which is constituted in terms of its permeability rather than autonomy.[100] Whereas "white families are constructed as private and impenetrable spaces that protect white people…from the excesses of state power," the Moynihan Report's so-called Black matriarchal families stand in contrast as "porous spaces that the state enters obliterating any possibility of private space," thereby positioning Black families "outside of liberal humanist discourses that posit humans (and human families) as self-contained and inviolable, particularly from state abuses."[101] Throughout the fallout of the Love Canal crisis, LaSalle renters' eligibility for state

[99] Ibid.
[100] King, "Black 'Feminisms' and Pessimism," 76.
[101] Ibid.

support was contingent on being made permeable and available for scrutiny.

In July 1980, local officials generated greater scrutiny of welfare recipients from LaSalle, inquiring into whether the receipt of both public assistance and Love Canal related benefits—termed “duplicate payments,” or "double dipping"—was legitimate.[102] In an article published on the investigation, County Social Services Commissioner Thomas Keenan sent a letter to the state Social Services Chief "asking for clarification of the county’s responsibility to continue paying [LaSalle] residents on welfare who have accepted the federal government’s relocation offer of funds for meals and lodging at nearby hotels and motels," criteria which applied to 60 LaSalle families. Keenan described, “While I sympathize with the plight of the Love Canal residents, the duplicate assistance which our clients are receiving causes concern on the part of many legislators and taxpayers of Niagara County.” The article then listed the average amount of welfare payments received by LaSalle residents accused of receiving duplicate payments, representing the emergency relocation funds for food and housing as excessive. While calling for the permanent relocation for the Love Canal renters, Keenan noted their current living situation might be deemed preferable, suggesting that renters were unduly benefiting from their emergency relocation: “The families are all split up, and it’s not wise to allow people to live that way I guess because their day-to-day situation is so much better now with all the payments that they’re in no particular rush to move out of the area."[103] Despite receiving orders from the county to continue welfare payments to

[102] Kim Lukasiak, “Welfare Ruling Sought In Love Canal Relocation,” *Buffalo Evening News,* July 27, 1980, Collection Part II: Box II: 1376, Folder 1, DPM Papers, LOC; "Love Canalers On Welfare Due for Relocation," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* July 31, 1980. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[103] Ibid.

clients, which were necessary for LaSalle residents to continue to pay rent for their homes during their temporary relocation, Keenan aimed to stop what he deemed redundancy so long as it was "possible legally to do it." Insisting on "not just doing everything by the letter," Keenan planned "face to face" meetings between clients and Social Services representatives, presumably to exert pressure. None of the renters were quoted in the article, and therefore Keenan's claims were left unchallenged.

In August 1980, the Department of Housing and Urban Development announced that it would make a special rent subsidy program available to LaSalle residents seeking to relocate, in the form of 150 Section 8 certificates.[104] The program was initiated to address renters' concerns about relocating to suitable housing. As renter Frances Lewis, who lived in a two-story apartment with a full basement, remarked, "The first thought that came into my head when they told us last May that they were going to relocate us was 'to where?' I've looked, and I can't find anything comparable to what I'm living in now for anywhere near the same rent." Lewis noted she had "ruled out" living in other public housing projects because she and her 10-year-old son "just don't like them. We've always considered this our home." Therefore, the rental subsidy program had the potential to offer desired stability.[105]

Yet even beyond this, renters had started to move past the goal of rent subsidy to lobby for the federal government to purchase homes for them. As Sarah Herbert contended upon making this announcement, "We're every bit as good as the

[104] Mike Billington, "Rent Subsidy Aid Offered to Griffon Manor Residents," *Buffalo Courier-Express,* Aug. 19, 1980. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[105] Ibid.

homeowners."[106] This claim for reciprocal state investment in the interests of renters as in the interests of homeowners represents the expansiveness of the renter's visions of state redress to the Love Canal crisis–visions which were unmet in the compromised solution that followed. As the coverage of the Renter's Association indicates, the celebrated resolutions to the Love Canal crisis, whether announced by New York Governor Carey or President Jimmy Carter, were often discounted by renters, who doubted that these sweeping funding packages would be used to meet their needs. At numerous points, in the years leading up to 1980 and afterwards, the mobilization of renters forced state and federal officials to account for their concerns, if belatedly or incompletely.[107]

By July 1982, long after the apparent "resolution" of the Love Canal disaster, renters continued to experience neglect both in terms of housing and in terms of health. Following the publication of an EPA report regarding the habitability of homes in areas surrounding Love Canal, Sarah Herbert argued, once again, that these studies addressed homeowners concerns but excluded renters, leaving LaSalle residents to remain in "political and environmental limbo."[108] Years into the disaster, Herbert noted the volume of unanswered questions about LaSalle and the absence of reports determining the extent of contamination of the housing development. Following the purchase of homeowners' evacuated property, the mobility of the homeowners, compared to the immobility of the renters, struck a particularly ironic tone; as Herbert notes, "They always said ‘you're a

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[106] Ibid.
[107] Maria Valvo, "Renters Claim Relocation Plan Ignores Them," *Niagara Gazette,* Oct. 4, 1980; Jerauld E. Brydges, "Love Canal Unit OKs Renter's Relocation Aid," *Niagara Gazette,* Jan. 14, 1981. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[108] "Report 'Neglects' Renters," *Niagara Gazette,* July 15, 1982, LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives; "Love Canal: Timeline and Photos," University at Buffalo University Libraries, Jan. 8, 2024, https://research.lib.buffalo.edu/love-canal/timeline-and-photos.

renter, you can move if you want to.' That's not true." As always at Love Canal, the response of state and federal governments to housing needs was intimately connected to how seriously officials took residents' claims to vulnerability and entitlement. As Herbert concluded, "I've seen people die, I've seen miscarriages, I've seen these kids have seizures, nosebleeds, double teeth…I've seen all those things white people had. Blacks had it just the same. They're just addressing one group of people. That hurts."[109]

## IV. Conclusion

The historical narrative of Love Canal often concludes with the passage of Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, also known as Superfund, in 1980. Superfund became the first legislation to address hazardous waste on a national scale. Yet even at the time of its passage, the success of Superfund was disputed. Between early 1979 and late 1980, two distinct Superfund bills–one sponsored by New York Representative John LaFalce and Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, and the other sponsored by the Carter Administration–were in process.[110] Among the key differences between the two Superfund proposals were their positions on whether compensation should prioritize health or property.[111] The Moynihan-LaFalce bill included retroactive compensation for "illness or injury caused by releases from abandoned or inactive hazardous waste disposal signs" and explicitly excluded compensation for property damage, whereas the Administration bill, in contrast, included compensation for property damage but lacked compensation for personal injury from

[109] "Report 'Neglects' Renters," *Niagara Gazette,* July 15, 1982. LCND, SUNY Buffalo Archives.
[110] Collection Part 2: Legislative File, BOX II:1374 Folder 4. DPM Papers, LOC.
[111] Collection Part 2: Press, BOX II:2824, Folder 8. DPM Papers, LOC.

existing or future hazardous waste sites.[112] The Administration's proposal therefore limited state responsibility for redress of property damage, and, as a largely preventative measure, narrowed the provision of compensation for those affected by thousands of existing hazardous waste sites.

After much debate and compromise, the Superfund bill was passed on December 11, 1980. The bill was pushed through just before the end of the congressional session and on the eve of the Reagan inauguration, with its urgency attributed in part to the widespread publicity of the Love Canal crisis.[113] Grounded in the "polluter pays" principle, the legislation was framed as a preventative measure to safeguard public health, using taxes on polluting industries to finance the clean-up of the estimated 30,000 hazardous waste sites across the country.[114] The final bill included a measure for the federal-state partnered acquisition of all private property within the Love Canal Emergency Declaration Area.[115] It notably lacked earlier drafts' provision of a $4.2-billion fund to compensate people harmed by toxic waste for out-of-pocket medical expenses, which

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[112] Ibid.

[113] Michael R. Deland, "Superfund: The Debate Drags On," *American Chemical Society* 14, no. 10 (Oct. 1980), 1175; Philip Shabecoff, "Compromise on 'Superfund,'" *The New York Times* (Nov. 24, 1980), D9.

[114] Philip Shabecoff, "Congress Set to Debate 'Superfund' to Clean Up Hazardous Wastes," The *New York Times,* (Sept.18, 1980), A24. For a discussion of the neglect of communities of color in Superfund's implementation, see: Sandra George O'Neil, "Superfund: Evaluating the Impact of Executive Order 12898," *Environmental Health Perspectives* 115, no. 7 (July 2007), 1087-1983. For analysis of the disproportionate siting of hazardous waste facilities and hazardous waste sites in communities of color, see: United Church of Christ, Commission for Racial Justice, "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites," Public Data Access, Inc., 1987.

[115] Title 42 - The Public Health and Welfare, Chapter 103 - Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability, U.S. Code 2011, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/ USCODE-2010-title42/html/USCODE-2010-title42-chap103.htm.

was eliminated by a compromise in the Senate.[116] While earlier, more expansive iterations had included compensation for victims' health, Superfund's narrowed version focused on the restoration and compensation of property alone, prompting one lawmaker to conclude, "This Senate has made the judgment that property is more significant than human beings…and none of us should delude ourselves or the people of this country that we have done anything more honorable."[117]

At Love Canal, LCHA and Renter's Association activists alike pushed for the regulation of industry and state accountability, drawing attention to the effects of hazardous waste on communities in Niagara Falls and nationwide. Yet, in the process, homeowner activists also drew on racialized notions of familial vulnerability and "deservingness," sidelining the possibility of a broader coalition with renters which could claim state responsibility not just for the rights of property, but broader social well-being during a period of state disinvestment and austerity. The archive of Love Canal, including internal organization documents, media coverage, and government reports, demonstrates the dominance of homeowners' demands for property compensation as the primary vision of resolution to the crisis. Leveraging concern for the uncertain futures represented by the displaced normative family and its reproduction, the women of the Homeowner's Association distanced themselves from renters they deemed "undeserving" of government support while making their own claims to entitlement.

M.E. O'Brien has recently argued that under racial capitalism the white, nuclear

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[116] Earl Lane, "Senate OKs Waste Cleanup Bill," *Newsday,* Nov. 25, 1980, Collection Part 2: Press, BOX II:2824, Folder 8. DPM Papers, LOC.
[117] Joanne Omang, "Senate Approves Fund to Clean Up Hazardous Wastes," *The Washington Post,* Nov. 25, 1980; Earl Lane, "Senate OKs Waste Cleanup Bill," *Newsday,* Nov. 25, 1980, Collection Part 2: Press, BOX II:2824, Folder 8. DPM Papers, LOC.

family ideal is made possible and perpetuated through the "stabilizing foundations of property"; private property, then, enables the differential valuation of particular family forms at the expense of others.[118] Yet Love Canal's legacy does not inevitably define environmentalism. Pollyanna Rhee writes of a different iteration of environmentalism which, rather than entrenching existing inequalities, acts as an "imperative to transform the world."[119] The activism at Love Canal represents both the promise and foreclosed possibilities of women's environmental activism in the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating how toxic conceptions of deservingness compromised broader environmental political visions during this era.

[118] M. E. O'Brien, *Family Abolition: Capitalism and the Communizing of Care* (Pluto Press, 2023), 7-8, 50.
[119] Rhee, *Natural Attachments,* 5.

## Chapter 3: Willow Island and Coerced Responsibility

### I. Introduction

On January 1, 1979, *The Washington Post* devoted its front page to a story headlined, "Women Say They Had to Be Sterilized to Hold Jobs."[1] The article described a situation unfolding at the Willow Island, West Virginia plant of American Cyanamid, a chemical manufacturing company. After instituting an exclusionary employment policy which would bar women of "childbearing age" from jobs exposing them to reproductive hazards, namely lead, five women obtained tubal ligation procedures in order to retain their jobs. Describing the occurrence as a "corporate public relations man's nightmare," the article reported that "What began a year ago as a drive…to shift its female employees out of positions at the company's plant here where exposure to lead could harm their unborn children has backfired into charges by five of the women that they had to have themselves surgically sterilized to keep their jobs."

While the article begins its narration decidedly from the point of view of American Cyanamid, other voices within the article challenge this perspective. Anthony Mazzocchi, the vice president of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW), described American Cyanamid's policy as a "Draconian choice" emblematic of larger phenomena within industrial workplaces, asserting, "It's an outrageous situation and American Cyanamid is not the only company that is trying to force women out of the

[1] Bill Richards, "Women Say They Had to Be Sterilized to Hold Jobs," *The Washington Post* (Jan. 1, 1979), A1. Tony Mazzocchi Papers, Box 11, Folder L.U. 3-499, American Cyanamid Co. Willow Island, WV, 1978-Misc., from Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) Records, COU:1193, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, Special Collections and Archives Department. (Hereafter OCAW Records, CU Boulder.)

workplace rather than clean it up. Women who have been able to enter these jobs as a result of their own struggle are now being confronted with the dismal choice of relinquishing their right to have children or their jobs." The wider implications of such exclusionary policies–also referred to as "fetal protection policies"—would introduce new pressures for women workers in which their reproductive capacity would be used to deny them economic stability, all the while corporations claimed to be protecting the best interests of women and unborn children. Barbara Cantwell, one of the employees in question, emphasized that the policy left little room for choice, "When you're faced with something like this [from] a big company you feel powerless. But this is 1978. What do you have to do to hold a normal job and support your child?"[2]

OCAW, the union representing the affected American Cyanamid workers, contextualized the company's policy, and its coercive fallout, as part and parcel of a larger corporate abdication of responsibility for worker's health. On December 27, 1978, OCAW filed a complaint with the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) within the Department of Labor, citing imminent danger produced by the American Cyanamid Company of Willow Island, West Virginia, on behalf of the members of its Local 3-499.[3] The complaint challenged the levels of lead and chromium oxide overexposure at the plant, noting that the working environment lacked adequate engineering controls, work practices, and personal protective clothing. Despite these conditions, American Cyanamid's exclusionary policy, announced in February 1978 and

[2] Richards, "Women Say They Had to Be Sterilized to Hold Jobs."
[3] Steven Wodka (OCAW) to David H. Rhone (Regional Administrator, U.S. Department of Labor-OSHA), "Complaint and Freedom of Information Act Request, American Cyanamid Company, Willow Island, West Virginia" (Dec. 27, 1978), Tony Mazzocchi Papers, Box 11, Folder L.U. 3-499, OCAW Records, CU Boulder.

made effective on October 2, 1978, was restricted to "women of childbearing potential" from the two departments which handled lead and chromium oxides. OCAW worked to heighten the contradiction of American Cyanamid "protecting" female workers through exclusion while enabling hazardous and substandard working conditions to persist within the plant, arguing that these conditions threatened the health and safety of all workers.[4]

OCAW also recognized American Cyanamid's exclusionary policy as reflective of a broader trend of so-called "fetal protection policies" which, drawing on histories of protective policy within women's labor, problematized reproduction as incompatible with work and equated women with childbearing capacity. On January 12, 1979, Mazzocchi addressed a letter to members of an emergent coalition describing the stakes of the sterilization case at American Cyanamid. Enclosing the *Washington Post* article and referencing the "considerable publicity" generated by the case, Mazzocchi stressed the implications of the situation at American Cyanamid for all of OCAW's members. As he described, "The story behind and in conjunction with the sterilization episode must be viewed in its entire context, and the threat to <u>all</u> workers – men as well as women – must be fully understood…The American Cyanamid case is not aberrant behavior on the part of one company; it is merely a precursor action that this company was willing to confront."[5] The letter closed by inviting affiliated groups to a meeting on January 22, 1979, in which a broader response would be coordinated.[6]

In response to this instance of coerced sterilization at Willow Island, the Coalition

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Letter, Anthony Mazzocchi (Jan. 12, 1979), Tony Mazzocchi Papers, Box 11, Folder L.U. 3-499 American Cyanamid Co. Willow Island, WV, 1978-Misc., from OCAW Records, CU Boulder.
[6] Ibid.

for the Reproductive Rights of Workers (CRROW) assembled in early 1979 to "defend the employment rights and reproductive freedom of workers who are exposed to toxic chemicals and other hazards."[7] The coalition challenged corporations' framing of responsibility which underpinned their exclusionary policies, noting, "Corporations have responded to the reproductive hazards posed by chemicals in their plants by adopting a policy of altering the workforce rather than the workplace. They are eliminating workers they consider 'vulnerable', rather than eliminating the hazards." When assessing these hazards, the coalition did not differentiate between men and women workers, arguing that while women in non-traditional – chemical, nuclear, auto, rubber, and steel – industries were the "most conspicuous victims" of discriminatory policies, "men are victims of this corporate policy as much as their women co-workers. If they remain in plants where they are exposed to toxic substances, they face the possibility of impotency, sterility or genetic mutations which cause birth defects in their children."[8]

In its effort to expose and challenge the insufficiency of corporate approaches to chemical exposure and risk, the Coalition brought together labor unions, occupational health groups, women's groups, environmental groups, civil rights groups, and religious groups; early members included the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW), United Auto Workers (UAW), the Urban Environment Conference, the League of Women Voters, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Women's Legal Defense Fund,

[7] CRROW, "Statement of Purposes," Coalition for the Reproductive Rights of Workers (CRROW) Records (WAG.373), Box 3, Folder 5, New York University Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives. (Hereafter NYU.)
[8] Ibid.

and the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA).[9] CRROW summarized its purpose as the effort to "seek an end to the unacceptable choice between a job and the right to reproduce."[10]

The case study of the exclusionary policy and coerced sterilizations at American Cyanamid's Willow Island plant, alongside an account of the efforts of the Coalition for the Rights of Reproductive Workers, demonstrates another facet of the centrality of reproduction and understandings of future generations within environmental politics in the 1970s. Bringing together longstanding debates surrounding reproduction, environment, health, and work, the case study illuminates the stakes of claims to "responsibility" for the health of future generations, as well as the potentially coercive outcomes of assuming the role of protecting future generations. American Cyanamid, in assuming this responsibility, laid claim to the control of women's bodies. Importantly, however, this case study also shows how women workers and their advocates contested these claims and proposed an alternative vision of healthy futures.

Occurring in the same historical moment as the Love Canal disaster, which provided a national context for understanding the relationship between hazardous waste and reproductive health, the Willow Island story provides a point of comparison to examine how differences in the site of injury–the home versus the workplace– shaped the resulting public and state response. Whereas Love Canal was framed as a disaster involving housewives and mothers, as well as homeowners and renters, Willow Island was framed as a tragedy involving "women workers." The site of injury also, crucially,

[9] CRROW Letter, "Dear Friends" (July 9, 1979), CRROW Records, Box 3, Folder 5, NYU.
[10] CRROW, "Statement of Purposes," CRROW Records, Box 3, Folder 5, NYU.

shaped the state resources and regulatory bodies available to those affected to push for redress. Whereas Love Canal was "resolved" through the EPA, Willow Island was arbitrated through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Despite these differences, OCAW leader Tony Mazzocchi drew connections between the two sites, predicting that the 1980s would be a "decade of genetic struggle."[11] Characterizing the 1970s as a decade of struggle for OSHA and over the lives of workers at the point of production, he described the 1980s as "essentially a struggle over children."[12] At the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, labor confronted the intersection of its longtime concerns with new insights and tensions within environmental health and reproductive autonomy–insights inflected by emerging neoliberal norms of austerity and the privatization of personal responsibility. As Mazzocchi summarized this shift, "I remember innumerable picket lines where we sang, 'We're fighting for our children.' We meant the economic well-being of our children. Now, when we speak about fighting for our children we will be literally speaking about the right of our children to be conceived, to come into the world as we came into it."[13]

The experience of women workers subjected to involuntary sterilization at American Cyanamid's Willow Island plant was also indelibly shaped by contemporaneous organizing around coercive sterilization, an issue politicized by women

[11] This article is a transcript of a speech Mazzocchi gave in St. Louis, Missouri in June 1983 in his role as Health and Safety Director of OCAW. Tony Mazzocchi, "A Decade of Genetic Struggle," *International Journal of Health Services* 14, no. 3 (1984): 447.
[12] Mazzocchi, "A Decade of Genetic Struggle," 447.
[13] Mazzocchi, "A Decade of Genetic Struggle," 447.

of color in their efforts to seek redress and an end to sterilization abuse.[14] Perhaps because the five women who underwent sterilizations due to pressure from American Cyanamid were white, the deeply racialized nature of reproductive coercion was largely left out of the media coverage of the women's experiences and subsequent legal challenges. Nevertheless, throughout the 1970s, efforts of women of color, poor women, and people designated as disabled continued to bring the issue of coercion to light and push for accountability formed an essential context for the unfolding of the Willow Island sterilization abuse case.[15] (This context is further explored in the following chapter's analysis of environmentalist efforts to stop overpopulation through the means of reproduction.)

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[14] Especially widely reported cases of sterilization abuse in the 1970s affecting women of color, poor women, and those designated as disabled include the involuntary sterilization of Minnie Lee and Mary Alice Relf, two African American sisters designated as disabled, at a federally funded family planning clinic in 1973 and reports of the coercive sterilization of thousands of low income women of color within California public hospitals in the early 1970s, leading to the civil rights class action lawsuit filed by 10 Mexican American women against the Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center in 1978, which was ultimately decided in favor of the defendants. For more discussion of these cases, see: Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (Vintage Books, 1983); Robert Kistler, "Women 'Pushed' Into Sterilization, Doctor Charges," *Los Angeles Times,* Dec. 2, 1974, A1; Elena R. Gutiérrez, *Fertile Matters: The Politics of Mexican-Origin Women's Reproduction* (University of Texas Press, 2008).

[15] For further elaboration of this history and the framework of "reproductive justice," which women of color developed in the 1990s in order to encompass the right to have children, the right to not have children, and the right to raise children in safe and healthy environments, see: Davis, *Women, Race & Class*; Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control*, Revised ed. (Haymarket Books, 2016); Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980* (Rutgers University Press, 2011); Felicia Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life Is a Human Life: My Mother, Our Neighbor, and the Journey from Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Justice* (Grove Press, 2023); Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York University Press, 2003); Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Pantheon Books, 1997); Jael Silliman et al., *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*, Second edition (Haymarket Books, 2016).

In addition, this chapter complicates the terms of two popular and political debates surrounding two supposed oppositions: environment vs. jobs and women vs. organized labor. While government policy failed to reconcile these divisions, the work of the women at American Cyanamid and their advocates in CRROW provides a glimpse of alternatives. Contesting coercive corporate claims to "responsibility" for unborn generations, workers and their advocates pushed for a broader conception of protection based on corporations' responsibility for protecting the health and wellbeing of *all* workers and their surrounding communities. These arguments not only challenged the notion that a corporation could "protect" female workers and their future children by compromising their economic security, but also the idea that hazardous chemicals could be considered safe in the context of the workplace and hazardous within the home and community. In this way, Willow Island workers and their advocates promoted an affirmative conception of the responsibility of corporations to protect workers' right to work and make reproductive health decisions within safe and healthy environments, strengthening contemporaneous frameworks of "reproductive freedom" and bridging the divisions of environmental and occupational health.[16]

This chapter begins with an analysis of three overlapping contexts that shaped the American Cyanamid case and the work of CRROW– labor, feminism, and environmentalism. The chapter then moves to the American Cyanamid case itself, examining how the women affected by the company's exclusionary policy problematized

[16] For examinations of the concept of "reproductive freedom" within the context of the 1970s, see: Wendy Chavkin, "Occupational Hazards to Reproduction: A Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 2 (1979): 311; Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life.*

the policy's effort to separate physical and reproductive health from broader conceptions of wellbeing and justice. It closes by analyzing the work of CRROW to develop an alternative program, pointing both to the promise of this coalition for reconciling recurring fault lines as well as the challenges posed to the coalition by the changing conditions ushered in by the Reagan administration in the early 1980s.

## II. Fighting for Healthy Environments: Labor, Environmental, and Feminist Intersections

### *Women, Labor, and the Contested Politics of Protection*

Protective labor legislation for women has been a site of debate, contestation, and at times division since its inception in the 1870s.[17] By the 20th century, writes legal historian Nancy Woloch, protective legislation concentrated on two issues: 1. Whether the state can regulate conditions of employment, and 2. Whether women are different or equal under the law.[18] Debates centering whether protective laws function to defend women's health or discriminate against them originated among advocates of women's rights and women's labor reform in this period and resurged within women's history and feminist theory during the 1970s-1990s.[19] As feminist labor historian Alice Kessler-Harris has traced, such debates have often served to "pi[t] two potential allies–women

[17] Alice Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women: Trade Unions and Labor Laws," in *Double Exposure: Women's Health Hazards on the Job and at Home,* ed. Wendy Chavkin, M.D. (Monthly Review Press, 1984), 139.
[18] Nancy Woloch, *A Class by Herself: Protective Laws for Women Workers, 1890s–1990s* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 1.
[19] For more about the debate over protective labor legislation within the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s, see Woloch, *A Class by Herself,* 191-234; Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (Crown Publishing, 1991), 421-453.

and workers–against each other, [forcing] women who are workers to choose sides."[20]

The arguments of reformers eager to improve the conditions of women wage workers have long been premised on women's inherent roles as wives and mothers; as a result, protecting women from hazardous work has been consistently justified as a means to protect the nation's future children. Kessler-Harris describes, "For if a woman's special role in the end inhered in her qualities as wife and mother, then the state had a legitimate interest in protecting her capacity to function at home, and the health of women workers became open to regulation."[21] Departing from trade union models, reformers seeking to prevent women's poor treatment from undermining the conditions of all workers, looked to legislation as a means to protect wage-earning women. By the 1890s, several state supreme courts had determined that women, like children, constituted a "class of workers whose health and morals were of particular concern to the state," leading to decisions which shortened women's working hours, established rest periods, mandated access to toilets and washbowls, and provided for a minimum amount of ventilation, although these laws were often evaded or challenged.[22]

Soon these policies were formalized on a national level. The Supreme Court's 1908 ruling in *Muller v. Oregon* affirmed that women's "power of contract" could be restricted due to the public interest in their health and the protection of their "maternal

[20] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 141.
[21] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 140.
[22] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 143-145; As Kessler-Harris notes in *Out to Work,* mobilizations around protective legislation at the turn of the century benefited from the growing eugenics movement and efforts to tie the health of the mother to the future of "the race," resulting in greater support for protections. *Out to Work,* 185.

functions."[23] In their decision, the court also accepted as evidence, and in effect validated, data demonstrating the effect of work on women's health as a rationale for upholding limits on the number of hours women could work daily and weekly.[24] The woman worker was, consequently, recognized as being "in a class by herself" apart from the general (male) workforce.[25] Such double-edged protections excluded women from mines, iron mills, and places "where intoxicants are seen" and later restricted women from working a certain number of weeks before and after childbirth.[26] Trade unions, while supporting such protections for women, opposed similar regulations for male workers, believing legislative protections would ultimately limit workers' organizing power.

Women within the labor movement, between *Muller v. Oregon* and early debates over the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1923, debated whether they should strategize around organizing unions or pushing for legislative protections. Organizers ultimately landed on the latter in part due to the trade union movement's lack of enthusiasm toward organizing women workers.[27] Proponents viewed protective laws as serving a dual role: "to compensate for women's disadvantages in the labor market *and* to serve as the linchpin of a larger plan to achieve wage-and-hour standards for all

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[23] In contrast, just three years earlier in *Lochner v. New York* the Court had overturned a New York state law limiting the number of hours male bakers could work. Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement,* 95.
[24] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 144-145.
[25] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 4.
[26] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 145.
[27] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 146; Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation," in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein, Women's Studies, Political Science (Monthly Review Press, 1979), 219.

employees."[28] Yet these laws were never complete in their scope; as historian Allison L. Hepler assesses, both ERA efforts to shift from gendered to gender-neutral criteria to determine job placement and protectionist efforts to restrict women from unsafe conditions had the effect of individualizing workplace health–placing emphasis on a worker's personal behavior and characteristics as a site of regulation rather than the workplace environment itself; as Hepler writes, "Both approaches served to reduce attention to environmental causes of industrial disease."[29]

During the 1910s and 1920s, researcher Alice Hamilton pursued the issue of lead poisoning in ways that would resonate strongly with the 1970s' conversation. A member of the Women's Trade Union Labor League, Hamilton conducted medical studies analyzing the impacts of industrial chemicals on women, including findings that women in contact with lead tended to miscarry or give birth to "deformed" children and tracing higher rates of poisoning among women than men by benzene and phosphorous, substances common in women-employing industries.[30] Notably, reformers of the period came up against the lead industry's efforts to obfuscate research demonstrating the risks lead paint posed to children, instead promoting lead's use for future customers.[31] Hamilton's study "Women in the Lead Industries," compiled for the U.S. Department of Labor and submitted in February 1919, extensively documented the effects of industrial

[28] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 2.
[29] Allison L. Hepler, *Women in Labor: Mothers, Medicine, and Occupational Health in the United States, 1890-1980* (Ohio State University Press, 2000), 7.
[30] Hepler, *Women in Labor*,146-7.
[31] For extensive discussion of the lead industry's research into lead poisoning in the 1910s-40s and efforts to advertise lead paint to children, see: Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution* (University of California Press, 2002), 36-107.

lead poisoning.[32] Hamilton assessed that as women began "to enter the occupations in which exposure to lead is inevitable" it became a priority to "look carefully into the question of their employment in such occupations, and to determine whether it will be better to safeguard them by requiring employers to use every known means to reduce or eliminate the hazard of lead poisoning or by prohibiting the employment of women entirely in those occupations in which lead poisoning constitutes a considerable hazard."[33] Hamilton began her report by detailing the process of lead poisoning; lead accumulated within a worker's digestive tract and blood when workers were exposed to lead-laden dust or consumed food with lead-soiled hands.[34] While in the past, acute or severe forms of lead poisoning had been common in industry, by 1920 factory reforms had resulted in conditions in which lead poisoning was more likely to accumulate slowly, producing a broad array of effects including constipation, excessive fatigue, colic, immunodeficiency, paralysis, blindness, and, ultimately, damage to the nervous system; as Hamilton wrote, "…there is no known poisonous substance which can give rise to such a variety of symptoms as lead. The rule laid down by specialists is that the occupation must always be considered in making a diagnosis of lead poisoning; that is, that if a patient is known to be working in lead, symptoms of which would not be considered of great significance ordinarily must be taken seriously, because they point to the beginning of lead poisoning."[35]

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[32] Alice Hamilton, "Women in the Lead Industries," U.S. Department of Labor, *Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics: Industrial Accidents and Hygiene Series,* No. 253 (Government Printing Office, 1919).
[33] Hamilton, "Women in the Lead Industries," 5.
[34] Hamilton, "Women in the Lead Industries," 5-6.
[35] Hamilton, "Women in the Lead Industries," 6-11.

Hamilton's assessment of lead made clear the extensive health effects on male as well as female workers but argued that lead poisoning in women was especially of concern. Citing

studies demonstrating women's higher susceptibility to lead with the most severe effects on women's reproduction, including higher incidences of sterility, miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant mortality, Hamilton stressed the future implications of such exposures. She wrote, "this means that lead is a race poison, and that lead poisoning in women affects not only one generation, but two generations."[36] Hamilton also wrote with certainty that such implications would be heeded, contending, "Every one will admit that a poison which may destroy or cripple a woman's children is a far more dangerous poison than one which only injures the woman herself. This is why it is necessary to forbid the entrance of women into the more dangerous kinds of lead work and to surround their employment in the less dangerous ones with all possible precautions."[37] Writing for a government audience, Hamilton emphasized the stakes of lead exposures by instrumentalizing reproduction as a site of public intervention; by heightening concern for women on the basis of their reproductive roles, she sought greater protections for women as a class of workers. Yet women also actively resisted their exclusion, fighting to retain jobs that protective legislation barred them from and questioning why jobs could not be made safe not only for women but for all workers.[38]

While justified on behalf of women, the occupational health reforms Hamilton advocated would have improved the conditions for male as well as female workers.

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[36] Hamilton, "Women in the Lead Industries," 11-12.
[37] Hamilton, "Women in the Lead Industries," 12.
[38] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 147-8.

Hamilton proposed a set of regulations to be enforced in all lead industries in which women were employed, including scrupulous cleanliness of all surfaces where lead dust might collect, higher standards of ventilation, the provision of clothing to be worn during working hours and washed weekly, the restriction of working hours, and access to a physician to supervise women lead employees.[39] As Claudia Clark notes in her historical study of watch-dial painters poisoned by radium in the 1910s-1930s, while "early twentieth-century experts on industrial poisoning concluded that women were more susceptible than men to toxic chemicals," nevertheless "this has never been statistically established" and "many factors other than sex might lead women to suffer more from industrial poisoning than men."[40] Alice Hamilton argued that higher rates of lead poisoning might result from social factors, including women's relative exclusion from unions which prevented their redress of poor working conditions through collective mechanisms; the poor compensation of women's occupations, resulting in their experience of inadequate housing and nutrition; and the stress of supporting one's family on slight wages.[41] Clark adds that more recent scholarship has also reasoned that women's "double day" resulted in higher degrees of fatigue and stress, leading to greater vulnerability to disease.[42] Yet whereas early industrial hygiene studies of lead documented that the substance affected male as well as female reproductive systems, the

[39] Hamilton, "Women in the Lead Industries," 37-38.
[40] Claudia Clark, *Radium Girls, Women and Industrial Health Reform: 1910-1935* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 23-4.
[41] Here, Clark is citing Hamilton's reports including *Industrial Poisons in the United States* (1925), "Lead Poisoning in American Industry" (1919) and "Women in the Lead Industries" (1919). Clark, *Radium Girls,* 23-4, 222 n34.
[42] Clark, *Radium Girls,* 23-4.

most cited and publicized medical studies had focused on women's reproduction.[43]

In the 1910s, trade unions reconciled the issue of hazardous working environments for men through workmen's compensation legislation which acted as a retroactive rather than proactive form of worker protection and failed to recognize cumulative forms of injury.[44] By the early 1920s, when almost every state had laws to protect women's health and restrict their workplace and hours, the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor questioned the nature of gendered protections, warning, "It is very possible that under the guise of 'protection' women may be shut out from occupations which are really less harmful to…them than much of the tedious heavy work both in the home and in the factory which has long been considered their special province. Safe standards of work for women must come to be safe standards of work for men if women are to have an equal chance in the economy."[45]

Debates over equality versus protection continued to shape the policy discourse around women's work for much of the next twenty years. Campaigners for the first Equal Rights Amendment, introduced in 1923, challenged legal protections that defined women's legal status as distinct from that of men, prioritizing principles of individual rights rather than class-based regulations.[46] This advocacy, however, failed to adequately account for the role such protections played within the lives of women workers, doing away with the existing flawed protection frameworks without fundamentally changing or

[43] Hepler, *Women in Labor,* 115.
[44] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 148.
[45] Quoted in Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 148; Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement,* 95.
[46] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 148-9.

challenging the conditions of workers' exposure to unsafe environments.[47] Following the defeat of the ERA, the relation between male and female workers and workplace health protections was next transformed by the New Deal, wherein the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, "in extending the protection of the state to all workers,...laid to rest the need to separate men and women before the law" and offered, for the first time, "at least semi-official sanction" to labor unions as the representative of workers' collective interests.[48] As workers increasingly flooded into mass production industries rather than craft trades, the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) emerged from an internal battle within the AFL with the pledge to industry-wide organizing which would include all workers within a plant without restricting by gender or race.[49] During this period, as working conditions improved, unions and women's organization increasingly attended to occupational disease as a concern affecting male and female workers alike, fighting for proactive safety measures and challenging the use of poisonous substances including radium, dyes, lead, mercury, carbon monoxide-benzol, and dust, which particularly affected women yet posed risks to male workers as well.[50]

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[47] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 149.
[48] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 149; Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 1. Many scholars have challenged such framings of the New Deal as enacting broad changes for all workers and certainly for all female workers, noting how the New Deal perpetuated exclusion, such as the exclusion of domestic workers, by this point one of the few jobs accessible to Black women as white women sought higher paying factory work, from job protections and social security benefits. Domestic workers would not be included under protective labor legislation until 1974, when Congress passed an amendment to the Federal Labor Standards Act that brought wage and hours benefits for domestic workers. See: Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement* (Beacon Press, 2015); Vanessa May, *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York 1870-1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
[49] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 149-150.
[50] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 151-3.

While prior to World War II, women made up only 25% of the workforce, in the postwar period, economic conditions increasingly required two-earner households. Women increasingly came into conflict with job discrimination, facing exclusion from benefits provided to male workers by employers, unions, and the state and coming up against earlier protective legislation which restricted them from certain occupations and roles.[51] The 1964 Civil Rights Act ultimately forbade job discrimination on the basis of sex, as well as race, religion, and color, enabling women to pursue opportunities in previously explicitly or implicitly restricted fields.[52]

Between 1961 and 1971, single-sex protective laws were increasingly challenged, accelerated by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) established to enforce it.[53] While the EEOC in 1969 declared that such protective laws violated Title VII, the greatest challenge to the laws took place within federal courts through lawsuits brought by feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW). This legal shift coincided with feminist organizing around the Equal Rights Amendment in the early 1970s, which increasingly viewed protective legislation as barriers to women's full equality.[54] After initial disagreements, some labor feminist leaders increasingly shifted toward support of the ERA while union women and the labor movement broadly remained divided.[55] As

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[51] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 152-3.
[52] Kessler-Harris, "Protections for Women," 152-3.
[53] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 192.
[54] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 192.
[55] As Woloch describes, women in heavy industry, whose work was more likely to be covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act, who more directly competed with men for jobs, and who faced disadvantages from laws that limited their hours, were themselves split, with some opposing and others endorsing the repeal of maximum hours laws. Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 226-8.

Dorothy Sue Cobble has noted, many labor feminists saw protective legislation as the most tangible means to eliminate sex-based inequalities; while their tactics and visions of liberation diverged from the liberal feminists backing the ERA, they were nonetheless driven by this essentially feminist impulse.[56] At times, this division boiled down to a difference of priorities; as Cobble writes, many labor feminists "valued job security over job opportunity," viewing aspirations toward promotion to managerial positions, voiced as a rationale for the Equal Rights Amendment, as a tacit acceptance of the existing labor structure which validated the exploitation of most workers at the bottom.[57] As labor feminist Myra Wolfgang put it in a debate with Betty Friedan held at Wayne State University in October 1970, those working toward the repeal of protective laws (without simultaneously ensuring protections for all workers in their place) were "doing the bosses' work."[58] Or, as historian Allison L. Hepler contends, the rollback of protective policies resulted in a conundrum for women workers; "if sex discrimination stops but the environment does not change, both male and female workers assume equal risk, not equal protection."[59] In 1966, Congress extended the Federal Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to include a greater range of industries, including retail and service work and thereby including a majority of employed women; by 1970, FLSA covered between 80 and 90 percent of employed workers.[60] The ERA would ultimately fail to be ratified in June 1982.[61]

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[56] Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement,* 7-8.
[57] Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement,* 185-7, 193; Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 226-229.
[58] Quoted in Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 227.
[59] Hepler, *Women in Labor*, 113.
[60] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 230.
[61] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 231.

Debates between labor feminists and "rights" feminists in the early 1970s presaged the contestation over the relationship between women's and fetal rights later in the 1970s.[62] During the period in which American Cyanamid published its so-called "fetal protection policies," such frameworks were proliferating across different sectors, reverberating from the increasingly organized anti-abortion movement which developed new conceptions of fetal liability.[63] Those who sought to challenge the false binary of such policies–between the health and wellbeing of women workers and future children–were, in turn, influenced by conceptions of "reproductive freedom" developed by feminist activists.[64] As historian Felicia Kornbluh describes, the movement for "reproductive freedom" in the 1970s, a predecessor to reproductive justice, espoused a framework which "encompassed everything from fighting for abortion rights to opposing sterilization abuse, advocating universal childcare, battling police violence, and trying to ensure that parents had enough income to raise their children in safety and dignity."[65] As

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[62] Cobble defines "labor feminists" as a category including all "those who were committed to the elimination of sex-based inequalities regardless of the tactics they pursued," including protective forms of legislation; as she writes, "The continuing inequality of women should not be laid at the doorstep of either 'difference' or 'equality' feminists. Indeed, most labor feminists in this book never resolved the tension between equality and difference strategies, nor did they see the necessity of doing so. They wanted equality *and* special treatment, and they did not think of the two as incompatible…Theirs was a vision of equality that claimed justice on the basis of their humanity, not on the basis of their sameness with men." *The Other Women's Movement,* 7-8.

[63] For example, beginning in 1977, women's capacity for pregnancy became a rationale for their exclusion from participation in clinical trials under FDA provisions. See: Sara Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived: Family Making and the Limits of Choice after Roe v. Wade*, (University of California Press, 2021),145-6.

[64] Wendy Chavkin, "Occupational Hazards to Reproduction: A Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 2 (1979): 311; Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life.*

[65] The framework of "reproductive freedom" was developed in explicit contrast to the agenda for "reproductive rights" represented by groups such as Planned Parenthood, NOW, and the Association for Voluntary Sterilization (AVS). The overlaps between

CRROW member and experienced reproductive freedom organizer Chavkin wrote in 1979,

> Employment policies which define women solely in terms of their reproductive potential; abortion funding cutbacks; sterilization abuse; welfare and other social service cutbacks; inadequate and discriminatory maternity insurance coverage; the Supreme Court decisions against pregnancy "disability" compensation; the lack of a policy providing job transfers or compensation for working women when jobs are incompatible with healthy pregnancies (as exists in most of Europe) are different pieces of the same puzzle. All effectively foreclose women's options concerning the working and childbearing aspects of their lives.[66]

Feminists active in both the labor and feminist movements thus assimilated workplace health into emergent conceptions of reproductive freedom.

### *Situating Women within the Jobs vs. Environment Dichotomy*

The industry-sponsored narrative of an intractable division between environmental and labor politics, though overdetermined, holds sway in historical scholarship as much as in contemporary political discourses and policy. Environmental historian Robert Gottlieb, for example, examined "how toxics issues so often become more compelling as community issues than as workplace issues, despite the fact that production hazards precede and frame the hazards experienced at the community level."[67] As Gottlieb contended, the "split identity between movements" has at times resulted from workers' reluctance to link industrial work to hazardous environments due to material

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CRROW and other reproductive freedom movement were more than ideological; the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization (CARASA) was an endorsing member of CRROW, and CARASA member Wendy Chavkin, a physician working in reproductive and environmental health, was a member of CRROW's board. Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life,* 6, 262-5.

[66] Chavkin, "Occupational Hazards to Reproduction," 311-2.

[67] Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, Revised edition (Island Press, 2005), 351-2, 364-5, 368-372.

concerns over job security and the prioritization of bread-and-butter "winnable" demands in contract negotiations.[68] This division is replicated in scholarship; as historian Josiah Rector put it in his study of the United Auto Workers (UAW)'s environmental justice activism in the 1970s, "Despite the amplitude of the literature, occupational health historians have devoted surprisingly little attention to the relationship between health and safety activism and the post-World War II civil rights and feminist movements, or the role of health and safety activism in the rise of the environmental justice movement." [69] Mainstream environmental organizations, for their part, largely neglected occupational health, as well as potentials for coalition building with labor, in the 1970s and onward.[70] Historians of environmental justice, meanwhile, have with notable exceptions "tended to ignore labors contributions," rooting environmental justice organizing in the 1980s and thereby "neglect[ing] the fact that as early as 1970 occupational health and safety activists used the term environmental justice to refer to the right to protection from toxic hazards codified by the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)."[71]

Subsequent historians of labor and environmentalism have made progress in addressing these disciplinary elisions. The case study of American Cyanamid's fetal protection policy represents a point of intersection both historically and historiographically. Historian April Merleaux, for example, has argued that "a significant,

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[68] Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring,* 351-2, 364-5, 368-372.
[69] Josiah Rector, "Environmental Justice at Work: The UAW, the War on Cancer, and the Right to Equal Protection from Toxic Hazards in Postwar America," *The Journal of American History* 101, no. 2 (2014): 481-2.
[70] Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring,* 371-2.
[71] Rector, "Environmental Justice at Work," 481-2.

if under-recognized, catalyst for environmentalists' feminist advocacy in the 1970s and 1980s was the politicization of workplace exclusion policies, sometimes called fetal exclusions."[72]

The relationship between labor and environmental health, moreover, was grasped contemporaneously by members of the labor movement. In his biography of Tony Mazzocchi, the legislative director and vice president of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW) union who was active in environmental health organizing and in CRROW, Les Leopold describes how Mazzocchi carved out a labor-focused perspective within the environmental politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Barry Commoner's *Science and Survival* (1963) had conceptualized the relationship between chemicals, health, and the environment largely in terms of *consumption*, rather than *production.*[73] Such a view carried the assumption that workers in chemical factories, or whose work required chemical exposure, had chosen their jobs and therefore did not merit public responsibility or concern for their wellbeing.[74]

Growing awareness of pediatric lead poisoning, where children between the ages of one and three were found to be most at risk for contracting poisoning from paint on toys and cribs, also contributed to broader recognition of postwar industries' proliferation of household poisons, though such awareness prompted only gestures of industry self-

[72] April Merleaux, "Equal Risks: Workplace Discrimination, Toxic Exposure, and the Environmental Politics of Reproduction, 1976–91," *Environmental History* 26, no. 3 (2021): 486.
[73] Les Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work and Loved Labor: The Life and Times of Tony Mazzocchi* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007), 225-9.
[74] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work*, 225-9.

regulation in part due to the association of lead with poverty and, later, race.[75] In the 1960s and early 1970s, community activists, including the Young Lords, conducted neighborhood level studies of lead poisoning and politicized the racial distribution of risk which concentrated exposure in "so-called lead belts" of poor Black and Brown neighborhoods with substandard housing, ultimately earning federal funds for research and eradication programs.[76] Mazzocchi's intervention, then, was to apply these environmental health considerations to the communities within rather than solely outside of the factory. Regarding the role of chemical manufacturing in environmental degradation, Mazzocchi later reflected, "It was the workers in these industries who taught me that there was a systematic conflict between profits and health. They said, 'You know, it's production that's causing all these problems.' When you start thinking that, when you start to interfere with the forces of production, you're going to the heart of the beast, right?"[77] To stop environmental degradation, then, would require strict workplace controls on pollutants and toxic substances which, if harmful to workers, would inevitably harm communities in turn.[78]

OCAW adopted health and safety as an organizing priority during its 1967 convention–an effort spearheaded by Mazzocchi.[79] With his partner Steve Wodka, OCAW's international representative, Mazzocchi initiated a road show that introduced

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[75] For extensive discussion of childhood lead poisoning, the deflection of the lead industry, and the conflation of lead with poverty and, later, racialization, see: Christian Warren, *Brush with Death: A Social History of Lead Poisoning* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 134-151; Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 36-107.
[76] Warren, *Brush with Death,* 178-80.
[77] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work*, 229.
[78] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work*, 246.
[79] Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring,* 365-6; Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work,* 236-8.

workers to scientists from groups including the Scientist's Committee for Occupational Health, emphasizing the phenomenon of latency so that workers could better understand their health risks and address them in bargaining and grievance procedures.[80] This "linkage" strategy recognized the interests of labor and environmentalism as fundamentally aligned rather than in tension.[81] Even during the late 1980s, as occupational health and its advocates faced deregulation and sustained political opposition from the Reagan administration, Mazzocchi and organizers with the National Toxics Campaign developed the concept of a "Superfund for Workers" which would specifically address job loss as a pivotal issue for both labor and environmental groups and establish public assistance and training for workers whose industries were affected by environmental and occupational health policy.[82] In this sense, OCAW provided a model that would come under greater strain in subsequent decades yet nevertheless offers a vision of possibility in the present.[83]

The passage of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) in

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[80] Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring,* 365-6; Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work,* 244-7.
[81] Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring,* 367-8.
[82] Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring,* 376-385; Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work,* 417-8, 468.
[83] As Robert Gottlieb notes, Mazzocchi and other union officials most active in forging links between environmental and occupational health were increasingly isolated as the 1970s turned to the 1980s, Ronald Reagan succeeded Jimmy Carter to the presidency, and organized labor shifted to a defensive rather than offensive position. Historically, occupational health standards and regulatory procedures proved more vulnerable than environmental protections, with Reagan pledging to abolish OSHA and initiate "regulatory reform" in his presidential campaign. Thorne Auchter, Reagan's OSHA appointee, "immediately sought to reorient the agency toward a cooperative relationship with industry," reducing or eliminating fines as well as enforcement procedures. Thus, "By the end of the 1980s, the divisions between groups were more entrenched than ever, even as the issues they confronted, built into the very fabric of the urban and industrial order, indicated that the question of production would remain central to the workplace/ environment debate." *Forcing the Spring,* 371-6.

December 1970 also provided new forms of leverage for labor and women's groups to improve workplace health conditions. OSHA's successful passage relied on the active involvement of Mazzocchi and OCAW, alongside UAW, the Steelworkers, United Mine Workers, the Meatcutters, and the Textile Workers.[84] More radical-leaning environmental groups including Environmental Action and Friends of the Earth also mobilized around the legislation, and public interest groups within the Nader network increasingly focused on occupational health research and lobbying following its passage; nevertheless, mainstream environmentalists tended to avoid alliances with labor due both to underlying class divisions and perceptions that unions' interest in economic growth and development made it fundamentally opposed to environmental goals.[85] OSHA enabled the secretary of labor to set and regulate health and safety standards, made enforceable through workplace inspections, and established the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to conduct workplace health research and the Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission (OSHRC) to determine contested citations or penalties resulting from OSHA inspections.[86] Among other advances, the legislation established a "general duty clause" requiring that each employer "shall furnish…a place of employment which is free from recognized hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees."[87] Departing from earlier industrial hygiene research conducted privately from within corporations in the lead, oil, and chemical industries, which notably obscured internal research on asbestos-induced lung

[84] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work*, 280; Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring,* 352-360.
[85] Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring,* 361-2, 367-8.
[86] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work*, 280-1.
[87] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work*, 281.

cancer clusters, black lung, and silicosis, OSHA provided a new set of public regulatory tools to workers concerned with environmental health.[88]

The legislation, however, also represented a compromise; OSHA failed to establish the Precautionary Principle which would have required that chemicals undergo review prior to their manufacture and consumption, failed to enact "right to know" laws for workers, and established only minor fines for offending corporations.[89] OCAW, nevertheless, instantly made use of these new regulatory frameworks; Mazzocchi himself filed the first complaint, against Allied Chemical Corporation in Moundsville, West Virginia.[90] Determining that the company had knowingly refused to regulate workers' chronic exposure to mercury, the complaint resulted in the first OSHA citation and fine.[91]

Even as labor standards were increasingly regulated by the federal government in the 1960s and early 1970s, pregnancy remained a site of contestation for women workers. As Nancy Woloch writes, "Protective laws had never offered special benefits to pregnant workers, but some laws noticed childbirth," restricting the employment of women before and after childbirth. Moreover, no laws existed to *prevent* employers from firing pregnant workers or requiring that they take unpaid leaves of absence; the EEOC guidelines did not address pregnancy until 1972, and Title VII did not yet cover pregnancy discrimination.[92] In many states, the exclusion of pregnant women from unemployment

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[88] Rector, "Environmental Justice at Work," 482-4; Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring,* 352-360.
See also: Christopher C. Sellers, *Hazards of the Job: From Industrial Disease to Environmental Health Science* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
[89] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work*, 282-3.
[90] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work*, 282-9.
[91] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work*, 282-9.
[92] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 237-8.

or disability insurance made pregnancy especially precarious.[93] A series of Supreme Court cases arbitrated issues of compulsory maternity leave and the exclusion of disabilities relating to pregnancy and childbirth from health and disability insurance, all of which failed to categorize pregnancy policies which in effect penalized female workers as sex discrimination, based on the reasoning that pregnancy essentially differentiated women from men as an "additional risk."[94]

As legal scholar Ann C. Hill assessed, these cases diverged from most protective policies in that they framed protection in terms of economic commitments to women workers–for protection against job loss, loss of income, and other economic hardship during pregnancy and following childbirth–recognizing that "most real protection does cost money."[95] In 1978, a group of over two hundred feminist, labor, civil rights, and reproductive rights organizations came together in a coalition called the Campaign to End Discrimination against Women Workers.[96] The coalition pressed for Congress to take up the issue, culminating in the passage of the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 (PDA), an amendment to Title VII which prohibited discrimination on the basis of "pregnancy, childbirth, or related conditions" in addition to sex.[97] According to this

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[93] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 237.
[94] These cases included *Cleveland Board of Education v. LaFleur* (1974), *Geduldig v. Aiello* (1974), and *General Electric Co. v. Gilbert* (1976) Ann C. Hill, "Protection of Women Workers and the Courts: A Legal Case History," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 266-269; Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 236-42.
[95] Hill, "Protection of Women Workers and the Courts," 265.
[96] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 242.
[97] Of the PDA, Woloch assesses that the legislation, like later legislative reforms, represented "contested conclusions, full of liabilities" which never "definitively solved the problems they tackled." The PDA itself, she describes as "a law far more demanding than it first seemed" which "opened the door to continual litigation" yet often failed to reach women within the most precarious forms of employment. Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 242-3, 259

principle, to treat pregnant workers differently from other workers would newly qualify as a form of sex discrimination.[98]

Yet as laws enabling the differentiation of women workers were rolled back in the courts, a new protective framework quickly replaced it. Fetal protection laws took the place of single sex protection laws, making explicit the earlier framework's implicit assumption that the protection of the health of a woman's future children was of greater importance than the health of the woman herself.[99] Fetal protection policies, introduced beginning in 1952 at General Motors within its foundries and later manufacturing and battery plants, differed from earlier single-sex protection laws in important ways; whereas protective labor laws were authorized by legislation, fetal protection policies were self-imposed employment policies.[100] Such internal policies resulted in part from changes in legal frameworks surrounding fetal liability. Whereas workers compensation laws would ostensibly cover a worker disabled by lead poisoning, they did not account for injuries to a developing fetus. In 1946, a District of Columbia federal court permitted a suit on behalf of a child who had been injured by a physician during an emergency delivery after a car accident. In his decision, the judge distinguished between viable and nonviable fetuses, writing that a viable fetus was not a part of the mother. Following this ruling, several other cases in the late 1940s and early 1950s further validated fetal rights, making industry increasingly subject to lawsuits filed by workers' children.[101] Unlike policies established in the 1970s and 1980s, earlier fetal protection policies, such as that

[98] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 242-3.
[99] Woloch, *A Class By Herself,* 250.
[100] Hepler, *Women in Labor,* 114.
[101] Hepler, *Women in Labor,* 116. Among others, cases include *Bonbrest v. Kotz*, 65 F. Supp. 138 (D.D.C. 1946).

of General Motors, seemed to attract little attention from workers, unions, occupational health reformers, or women's rights advocates.[102] By the mid- to late 1970s, at least fifteen Fortune 500 companies, including DuPont and General Motors, and numerous hospitals had established policies excluding fertile or pregnant women from particular roles on the basis of fetal health.[103]

Whereas some of these policies were based on epidemiological and toxicological research findings analyzing particular substances, others were, according to a 1985 Congressional study, "relatively speculative about suspected reproductive hazards."[104] Likewise, while some policies were written and formally documented, others were unwritten, resulting in guidelines that were "more flexible but also more ambiguous."[105] Women's health movement activists of the 1970s presaged these critiques of official guidelines.[106] Following awareness of numerous cases of fetal disablement caused by women taking the approved drug thalidomide in the early 1960s, activists questioned the health and safety assumptions of industry, as well as its contradictions.[107] Why, for example, could women hold hospital jobs requiring the use of ionizing radiation equipment, while at the same time being restricted from higher paying jobs on the basis of health?[108] Such legislation also produced a double-bind for women workers navigating both gender discrimination and hazardous work environments. As Barbara Ehrenreich

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[102] Hepler, *Women in Labor,* 117-8.
[103] Hepler, *Women in Labor,* 124; Warren, *Brush with Death,* 250-1; U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, OTA-BA-266, Dec. 1985), 17.
[104] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 17.
[105] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace."
[106] Hepler, *Women in Labor,* 120-1.
[107] Hepler, *Women in Labor,* 120-1.
[108] Hepler, *Women in Labor,* 120-1.

and Deirdre English later put it,

> The trouble is that whatever we say can be, and is, used against us. Say that menstruation is painful and distressing, and women will be arbitrarily barred from occupations that involve concentration and responsibility. Say that it is unnoticeable and that we are as consistently healthy as males are supposed to be, and all women will be required to lift the same weights and work the same long hours required of men regardless of the degree of discomfort experienced. Say that the last months of pregnancy are difficult, and we will be fired at the first sign of swelling. Say that there is "nothing unhealthy about being pregnant," and we will be held to eight hours a day, five days a week.[109]

Neither expressions of sexual difference from men nor assertions of sameness, then, represented paths to true protection for women in the workplace.

The neoliberal transformation of the 1970s coincided with the decline of industrial work within the U.S., the weakening of union power, and the emergence of the service economy, in which women increasingly predominated, as the engine of American capitalism. In this respect, the women working in union industrial jobs at American Cyanamid's Willow Island plant in the late 1970s were outside of the norm of sectors with high concentrations of women workers, ranging from agricultural work, garment work, nursing, cosmetology, secretarial, domestic, and service work, all of which carried attendant environmental and physical risks. Several of these jobs predominately represented women of color and immigrant women, demonstrating the ways in which even these deeply compromised and limited forms of protection were racially and economically stratified.[110]

Feminists invested in women's labor rights sought to emphasize the

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[109] Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness*, [1st ed, Glass Mountain Pamphlet, no. 2] (Feminist Press, 1973), 88.
[110] See, for example: Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite;* Laura Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest* (University of Arizona Press, 1996).

inconsistencies of protective policies, which they argued were used to exclude women from higher-paying, male-dominated jobs. As CRROW member, physician Wendy Chavkin wrote in 1979, “When we look beyond these “nontraditional” jobs, however, concern for real reproductive hazards affecting women workers is markedly absent. This discrepancy, in terms of where women work, has a long history. Belying the 'protective' rationale behind early twentieth-century laws restricting the working conditions for women only, was the fact that those lower-paying jobs traditionally held by women were excluded from coverage.”[111] This contradiction would persist in the late 1970s, resulting in a situation in which, as Sonia Jasso and Maria Mazzora stressed, a woman could be banned from a job manufacturing pesticides but be hired for farm work exposing her to the very same chemicals.[112]

As we will see, “protective” exclusionary policies also failed to account for forms of risk beyond a narrow definition of reproductive risk, including risks to economic stability within increasingly austere conditions. As scholar Rachel Roth later wrote, “It is ironic that corporate fetal protection policies equate all women workers with reproduction and family even as they undermine women's power to meet their family's needs.”[113] Socialist feminists of the 1970s were attuned to capitalist patriarchy’s role in structuring the gendered division of labor, such that women's reproductive labor in the home was unwaged and/or devalued, whereas women's “productive” labor outside of the home was

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[111] Wendy Chavkin, “Occupational Hazards to Reproduction: A Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography,” *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 2 (1979): 314-5.
[112] Sonia Jasso and Maria Mazorra, “Following the Harvest: The Health Hazards of Migrant and Seasonal Farmworking Women,” in *Double Exposure*, 86–99; Rachel Roth, *Making Women Pay: The Hidden Costs of Fetal Rights* (Cornell University Press, 2000), 47-8.
[113] Roth, *Making Women Pay*, 39.

categorized as "unskilled" and, therefore, "cheapened."[114] As M Murphy notes in their study of "sick building syndrome," a health condition among female office workers in the 1970s and 1980s, historical scholarship concerning chemical exposures, by focusing primarily on industrial pollution, has replicated this gendered division. The history of nonindustrial pollution, as a result, has the potential to illuminate the ways in which chemical and environmental hazards are gendered.[115] While drawing on these insights, I examine how the promise of relative economic security industrial work for a corporation like American Cyanamid offered was undercut by environmental and reproductive insecurity. By attending to women industrial workers at the crossroads of environmental and occupational health and amid the onset of deindustrialization, we can better understand how reproduction became a critical site of both compromise and coalition in this period.

### *The Lead Standard and Conceptions of Environmental Health*

Exposure to lead increasingly became a site of concern for the regulatory state in the early 1970s. Beginning in the late 1960s, historian Christian Warren notes, lead underwent an "epidemiologic transition" in which emphasis shifted from acute diseases from high level exposure to chronic health problems resulting from "low-level" lead poisoning.[116] By 1970, the Lead-Based Paint Poisoning Prevention Act of 1970 provided safeguards for children exposed to lead in household products which paralleled the

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[114] See, for example, Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation," in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein, Women's Studies, Political Science (Monthly Review Press, 1979), 206–47.
[115] M. Murphy, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty: Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers* (Duke University Press, 2006), 5.
[116] Warren, *Brush with Death,* 244-5.

Occupational Safety and Health Act's provision of standards for workers exposed to lead in industrial settings.[117] In both cases however, the regulatory power of this legislation fell short of their potential. Industrial hygienists monitor lead exposure within workplaces through two measures: the amount of lead in the air (environmental monitoring) and the amount of lead in a worker's blood (biological monitoring).[118] In 1972, NIOSH published its findings and recommendations for a lead standard of environmental exposure of 150 $\mu g/m^3$ over the course of an 8 hour workday and 40-hour week and designated 80 µg/dL as the limit for acceptable absorption of lead in biological monitoring via blood tests.[119] Complying with the view of the lead industry–that there was a "Threshold Limit Value" for safe levels of exposure–the regulations kept intact the notion of an acceptable degree of risk for workers.[120] NIOSH nevertheless provided measures for monitoring workers' lead exposure by both air monitoring and blood monitoring against industry opposition.[121] In 1974, OSHA began the process of developing its own standards based on the NIOSH recommendations, and in October 1975 proposed a preliminary standard of 60 µg/dL blood level and 100 $\mu g/m^3$ environmental level, significantly narrowing both measures.[122]

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[117] Warren, *Brush with Death,* 248.
[118] Sally Jane Kenney, *For Whose Protection?: Reproductive Hazards and Exclusionary Policies in the United States and Britain* (University of Michigan Press, 1992), 285.
[119] The notation $\mu g/m^3$ indicates the measurement of micrograms per cubic meter. The notation µg/dL indicates the measurement of micrograms per deciliter. "Criteria for a Recommended Standard: Occupational Exposure to Inorganic Lead." (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, Health Services and Mental Health Administration, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, January 1, 1972), 1-3; Warren, *Brush with Death,* 248-249.
[120] Warren, *Brush with Death,* 248-249.
[121] Warren, *Brush with Death,* 248-249; Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial*, 118.
[122] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 118-9; Merleaux, "Equal Risks," 489.

In June 1976, the Society for Occupational and Environmental Health held a conference on Women and the Workplace, sponsored by NIOSH, HEW, and the March of Dimes and chaired by Dr. Eula Bingham, who would be named the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health in April 1977 through January 1981.[123] The conference devoted a full session to lead exposure, entitled "Lead and Women, A Unique Problem?," which included a panel addressing biological manifestations of lead toxicity and reproductive health effects and a panel on the placement of women in the lead trades from three different perspectives–that of the industry, the worker, and the department of labor.[124] The industry view held that given the insufficiency of medical information proving the safety of lead to fetal exposure, "fertile, gravid [pregnant], or nursing females" should be restricted from employment in areas with increased lead exposure.[125] To put this policy in effect, the industry representative recommended that corporations implement individual medical assessments for all male and female applicants.[126]

Claudia Prieve, an industrial hygienist with the United Steelworkers of America,

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[123] The Society for Occupational and Environmental Health was founded in 1972 with the mission of bringing together physicians, laboratory scientists, epidemiologists, industrial hygienists, government officials, management, the labor movement, and public interest groups to analyze environmental health research and regulation. The group identified women in the workplace as an area of critical concern. Society for Occupational and Environmental Health (SOEH), "Proceedings: Conference on Women and the Workplace, June 17-19, 1976, ed. Eula Bingham, Ph.D. (Washington, D.C., 1977), CRROW Box 3, Folder 6, NYU. The Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health is the director of OSHA.

[124] SOEH, "Proceedings: Conference on Women and the Workplace, June 17-19, 1976, ed. Eula Bingham, Ph.D. (Washington, D.C., 1977), 3, CRROW Box 3, Folder 6, NYU.

[125] The industry view was presented by Dr. Sidney Lerner, an affiliate of the Kettering Laboratory in the Department of Environmental Health at the University of Cincinnati and a practicing occupational medicine consultant. SOEH, "Proceedings: Conference on Women and the Workplace," 247.

[126] Ibid, 249.

presented the workers' position on the job placement of women in the lead trades. She began by commenting on the session's title, noting that although lead carried unique health effects, it was "by no means unique in terms of its consequences for women workers," noting the prevalence of health effects extending from other substance exposures.[127] Prieve used her comments to contextualize contemporaneous discussions of the lead standard and reproductive health within the larger trajectory of exclusionary policies; as she noted, "Many companies that handle lead have a more or less formal policy of simply not hiring women into the lead areas of their operations. Sometimes that means the whole plant! This practice has gone on for years and continues today."[128] Prieve argued that new OSHA standards should take into account individual differences between workers. Shifting from earlier, and outmoded, legal procedures which understood women as a class, Prieve argued that new OSHA standards should take into account the individual circumstances of male and female workers alike. For example, Prieve presented a hypothetical of a woman breadwinner who supported her family through her work in a smelter, the only employer in town; "She has already had all the children she wishes to have. She has an intrauterine device (or takes the pill), but she is still barred from her job. Should this woman be driven to the extreme of having a tubal ligation or hysterectomy so that she can present the company with a piece of paper certifying she can have children, just to get her job back?" As she then emphasized, "How can OSHA or any other agency mandate that workers be removed from their jobs for health reasons and yet close its eyes to the personal and dire consequences of such a

[127] SOEH, "Proceedings: Conference on Women and the Workplace," 251-2.
[128] SOEH, "Proceedings: Conference on Women and the Workplace," 251-2.

mandate?"[129] While arguing for fairness in standards determining male and female job placement in hazardous industries, both the industry and the labor perspectives nevertheless argued that health risks should be treated on an individual basis.

In 1977, OSHA held hearings on the standards, leading to extensive comments from environmental, feminist, labor, public interest, and scientific groups.[130] OSHA, under its Carter-appointed assistant secretary Dr. Eula Bingham, increasingly demonstrated its receptiveness to diverse constituency groups rather than relying, as in the past, on industry technicians.[131] Bingham in particular expressed a willingness to prioritize health over potential costs, undaunted by industry's perennial threat that efforts to improve conditions would result in plant closures.[132]

Environmental health scientists Andrea Hricko, Jeanne Stellman, and Vilma Hunt, who consulted for labor unions including OCAW, UAW, and the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), placed reproduction at the center of their testimony.[133] Their comments emphasized the teratogenic effects of lead–its possibility of causing miscarriage, non-heritable birth defects, or fetal abnormalities through exposure– in terms of the potential implications for future generations.[134] While framing future

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[129] SOEH, "Proceedings: Conference on Women and the Workplace," 252-3.
[130] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 119.
[131] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 118-9.
[132] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 118-9.
[133] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 123-5; Merleaux, "Equal Risks," 489.
[134] A 1985 Congressional report defined teratogens as "an agent that interferes with embryonic or fetal development" or "A chemical or physical agent that causes physical defects in off-spring."The thalidomide tragedy of the late 1950s initiated greater public awareness of the potential effects of drugs and other substances on fetal development. U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, OTA-BA-266, Dec. 1985); Kenney, *For Whose Protection,* 16-7; Sara Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn: A History of the Fetus in Modern America* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 64-5.

disability as a threat, Hricko made the case for a broader social responsibility for the health of current workers and future generations, refusing the assumption that hazardous exposures could be defined as "solely a 'women's problem.'"[135] Hricko, Hunt, and Stellman all challenged the use of discriminatory employment practices as a solution to such a problem, arguing that male workers, as much as female workers, were put at risk for reproductive *and* non-reproductive health effects by such exposures.[136] Stellman additionally challenged such practices by arguing that standards such as OSHA's were themselves shaped by assumptions that "are based on judging female biological parameters with male norms," drawing of decades of assumptions of women's higher "susceptibility" to lead which were based on cultural norms rather than empirical findings[137] As Hricko assessed, "Enough is now known to constitute a clear call to preventative action."[138]

While some labor groups, such as the Steelworkers, fought for OSHA to lower its standard to 50 µg/dL blood level, Hricko called for the standard to be set at 30 µg/dL –a level assumed to be safe for men, women, and developing fetuses, with opportunities for any worker considering becoming a parent or any pregnant or breastfeeding woman to have access to a temporary, voluntary transfer to a job without exposure to lead, while retaining seniority, wages, and benefits.[139] As historians Markowitz and Rosner argue, "A consensus was slowly emerging among women's groups and labor that largely reflected women's call for equal opportunity in employment…the new feminist and labor position

[135] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 123-5.
[136] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 123-5.
[137] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 123-7.
[138] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 125.
[139] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 125-8.

was to say that all men and women in their childbearing years were equally at risk. Neither men nor women should be exposed."[140] The Lead Industry Association, meanwhile, argued that such a standard would disregard the "basic facts" of the industry, with a senior executive contending, "...if OSHA decides that it must set a standard so low that it is known to be fully protective of the fetus, then we all must bear in mind that there will be very few jobs, indeed, in the lead industry for either men or women."[141]

The debates surrounding the lead standard were thus shaped by contemporary politics surrounding fetal and maternal health, reproductive choice, and the gendered division of labor, as much as scientific research. As Miranda Waggoner catalogues, "The rise of maternal-fetal medicine, fetal surgery techniques, and technoscientific practices in the second half of the twentieth century shifted obstetrical gaze toward the fetus as a separate patient, one that is distinct from the mother's body. Fetal risks are often now weighed against the risks to the mother, heightening the supposed maternal-fetal conflict, in which women's interests are putatively pitted against the interests of the fetus."[142] Discussions around lead, work, and risk were inflected by the emergent concept of what Waggoner calls the "zero trimester"–a pre-pregnancy care model which urges women of reproductive age, regardless of their desire or capacity to get pregnant, to responsibly prepare their bodies for healthy pregnancies in the months or years prior to conception–and debates surrounding epigenetics and the "developmental origins of health and disease"–which trace linkages between fetal and maternal health and a future child's

[140] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 125-8.
[141] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 132.
[142] Miranda R. Waggoner, *The Zero Trimester: Pre-Pregnancy Care and the Politics of Reproductive Risk* (University of California Press, 2017), 26.

health outcomes.[143] As feminist science studies scholars have argued, such discourses often rely on individualizing risk, such that women's behaviors prior to and during pregnancy can be stigmatized or, as scholars of reproductive justice including Dorothy Roberts have warned, criminalized.[144] They also replicate historic trends of surveilling and regulating maternal health–what Sarah Richardson and her colleagues refer to as the "past excesses of 'mother-blame'"–while devoting comparatively minimal attention to paternal health and the impact of diet, stress, and environmental contaminants on endocrine and sperm health.[145]

The final standard adopted by OSHA in November 1978 reflected a compromise but created new structures of standards and enforcement. Monitoring by air rather than blood, the standard lowered the exposure limit to 50 μg/m³ and required that biological monitoring be instituted when exposure exceeded 30 μg/m³. Moreover, it required that if workers' blood tests exceed a 50 μg/dL blood level, their workplaces were required to place them in jobs without lead exposure, at their current wages and seniority, until their blood lead fell below 40 μg/dL, a particularly novel intervention.[146] Most notably, after much pressure from Olga Madar and other feminist leaders within the UAW, the standard did not differentiate between female and male workers, instead setting the same standard

[143] The term "developmental origins of health and disease" is abbreviated to DOHaD by medical professionals. Waggoner, *The Zero Trimester,* 3-4, 20-1, 29; Sarah S. Richardson et al., "Don't Blame the Mothers," *Nature* 512 (2014): 131–32.
[144] Sarah S. Richardson et al., "Don't Blame the Mothers," *Nature* 512 (2014): 131–32; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.
[145] Richardson et al., "Don't Blame the Mothers"; See also: Cynthia R. Daniels, *Exposing Men: The Science and Politics of Male Reproduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008).
[146] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 132-3.

to apply to all workers.[147] In support of this initiative, UAW members demanded that OSHA require companies to "fix the workplace, not the worker."[148] OSHA's lead standard would not take effect until February 1, 1979, and therefore did not bear on American Cyanamid's 1978 policies, but nevertheless provides a sense of the distance between American Cyanamid, and ultimately the courts', approach to lead exposure in contrast to those most active in occupational health.[149]

## III. Challenging Coerced Responsibility at American Cyanamid

*American Cyanamid, Protective Exclusions, and Coerced Choice*

American Cyanamid's Willow Island plant was established in Pleasants County, West Virginia, along the Ohio River in 1946 as part of a larger wave of post-World War II growth in industrial production.[150] The company began hiring women within its production departments in 1973, after being informed by federal investigators that the company would face sanctions if it did not change its hiring policy to comply with equal opportunity labor standards.[151] Glenn Mercer, the plant's director of industrial relations, later recounted, "After we interviewed a couple [women], we had no need to recruit. We

[147] Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 288; Rector, "Environmental Justice at Work," 483-4.
[148] Rector, "Environmental Justice at Work," 483-4.
[149] OSHA, "Occupational Exposure to Lead," *Federal Register,* 43, no. 220 (1978); Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 285.
[150] Matthew Scott Bailey, "Pleasants County," *e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia Online* (Mar. 18, 2024), web, accessed: April 24, 2025.
[151] Sally J. Kenney, "Who Is Protected?: What's Wrong With Exclusionary Policies," *Women & Politics* 13, no. 3–4 (April 26, 1994): 155.

had an ample supply of applications."[152]

The women affected by American Cyanamid's subsequent "fetal protection policy" were hired during this push for equal employment opportunity. Betty Moler Riggs had applied for a job at American Cyanamid in 1974, after overhearing men from the plant discussing a new policy of hiring women while working as a clerk at a Farm Fresh Market grocery store.[153] Prior to working at the Willow Island plant, Riggs supported her family–her son, husband, and parents, through a series of feminized jobs; she earned 75 cents an hour as a waitress at the Parkette truck stop, $1 an hour as a cashier at Hammet's Dairy Bar, and $2 at Farm Fresh.[154] Riggs pursued a job at the plant for more than a year; after turning down an initial offer for a cafeteria work position, in December 1975 she was offered a janitorial job.[155] A few months later, she finally transferred to a production line job in the lead pigments department, where she earned six times her pay at the grocery store. After losing her prior job due to a plant closure, Donna Lee Martin learned American Cyanamid was hiring after a period of unemployment. During her job interview, the personnel supervisor "asked me about my family and having to work shift work and having responsible babysitters and how I would handle it if my kids were sick." Negotiating this minefield of questions, Martin was initially hired as a "helper" in the catalyst department in October 1974, before transferring to a job in

[152] Quoted in Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (Crown, 1991), 441.
[153] These narratives are drawn from Susan Faludi's *Backlash,* which itself draws on a personal interview with Betty Riggs and depositions from Donna Lee Martin, Barbara Cantwell Christman, Lola Rymer, Dr. Robert M. Clyne, and Glenn E. Mercer conducted for the *Christman v. American Cyanamid Co.* suit in 1982. Faludi, *Backlash,* 441-2.
[154] Faludi, *Backlash,* 441-2.
[155] Faludi, *Backlash,* 441-2.

the pigments department which she thought would offer better opportunities for advancement.[156] Barbara Cantwell Christman applied to work at the plant in April 1974; at the time, Christman was recently divorced and supporting her two sons through whatever arrangement of jobs she could cobble together, including hostessing at a restaurant, clerking at a garment factory, and working as a doctor's office receptionist.[157] She, too, spent her interview attempting to convince personnel officers that she was capable of performing a production job. For these women, union production jobs at American Cyanamid offered a rate of pay uncommon in typically feminized professions, allowing them to support their families and, in some cases, obtain greater autonomy and freedom from domestic abuse.[158]

The production jobs remained a struggle for the women workers, not due to their capacity, but rather due to the harassment they experienced on the job. Betty Moler Riggs, for example, remembered graffiti on plant walls exclaiming, “Shoot a woman, save a job.”[159] The jobs were nevertheless desirable due to the higher rate of pay and benefits offered within these unionized positions, as opposed to more traditional women's occupations. As political scientist Rachel Roth argues, “Fetal politics in the workplace vividly demonstrates the ways that fetal rights translate into costs for women.”[160] Rather than avoid liability by “mak[ing] the workplace safe for everybody, including a fetus,” corporations “passed the costs of ensuring fetal safety onto women, saying that a woman could not earn a living in a way that might expose her fetus to harm, should she ever

[156] Faludi, *Backlash,* 442.
[157] Faludi, *Backlash,* 442-3.
[158] Faludi, *Backlash,* 442-3.
[159] Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn,* 126.
[160] Roth, *Making Women Pay,* 38.

actually be pregnant." These displaced costs, she argues, are "literal and substantial"—within the context of American Cyanamid, reproductive autonomy would come at the cost of higher wages, opportunities for advancement, health and retirement benefits, and union representation.[161] Between 1974 and 1976, American Cyanamid hired a total of thirty-six women for production work; the plant stopped hiring women in 1976.[162] At the time of the institution of American Cyanamid's "fetal protection policy" in 1978, women represented fewer than 30 of the 560 employees at the Willow Island plant.[163]

In 1975, American Cyanamid's corporate medical director, Dr. Robert Clyne became concerned that higher numbers of women applying for jobs in heavy chemical areas could pose a risk to "the embryos and fetuses of employees."[164] In a panel on Occupational Health a year prior, Clyne had attested that critics of industry's occupational health practices failed to recognize the progress industry had made to alleviate its excesses while maintaining production; as he assessed, "I and my fellow professionals in occupational health are dedicated to helping all working people. But if we follow all the recommendations of our critics, we are going to emasculate the industrial vitality of the United States."[165] Thus, Clyne's assumed site of intervention was the body of the worker

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[161] Roth, *Making Women Pay,* 38.
[162] Faludi, *Backlash,* 443-5.
[163] Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn,* 127.
[164] This chronology was published in a Congressional report with the following description: "This description of events leading to the implementation of the fetal protection policy is based on portions of sworn deposition testimony taken by counsel for the plaintiffs of a physician who served as Cyanamid's Corporate Medical Director during the relevant period. Cyanamid has reviewed a draft of this chapter and has presented some of its comments in the critique that follows this case study." OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 251-2; Kenney, "Who Is Protected?," 155.
[165] "Panel," *Occupational Hazards* (Sept.1974), 99.

rather than the environment of the plant. Specifically, Clyne believed that the severity of reproductive health hazards–defined as "embryofetotoxicity"–exceeded the risk of exposure to carcinogens in these departments.[166] His primary concern revolved around direct toxicity to the fetus, mutagenicity, teratogenicity, and transplacental carcinogenicity; while Clyne claimed to be initially concerned with "all embryofetotoxic effects," based on his "professional judgement," he decided to focus exclusively on the risks to fetal health transmitted through the mother, rather than attending to risks mediated through the father.[167] Clyne also determined that the policy should apply to all women rather than solely to women who were pregnant or planning to become pregnant because women were often unaware of their pregnancies within the first three months. After consultation with others in American Cyanamid's medical department, the medical officer introduced a memo to senior management proposing a "fetal protection policy" which would prohibit "female employees in the childbearing age (considered in industry to be 16 to 55 years)" from working in production roles which required exposure to an accompanying list of 29 chemicals. The policy would blanketly apply to any level of exposure, due to Clyne's uncertainty that he could determine a safe level exposure for an embryo or fetus.[168]

As a subsequent Congressional inquiry would assess, based on sworn testimony from relevant officials, the fetal protection policy was instituted in the absence of research and investigation. Among other failures of inquiry and procedure, the medical director "had never instructed plant physicians to inquire about fertility or reproduction

[166] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 251-2.
[167] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 252.
[168] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 253.

problems among production workers"; the company "had never conducted or commissioned an epidemiological or other study designed to determine whether any employees had suffered from any form of reproductive toxicity"; "No organized collection of sperm samples of male employees was ever proposed or conducted"; the plant never conducted studies "to determine whether Cyanamid employees or their children had chromosomal abnormalities"; and the medical director "was not aware of any cases in which an employee was reproductively harmed or a child, fetus, or embryo was affected as a result of workplace exposures at a Cyanamid plant." The list of 29 substances was, moreover, "compiled as a result of a quick review of computer sheets."[169] While the medical director was aware of epidemiological studies of the effects of lead on an embryo or fetus resulting from maternal exposure, he composed the list without conducting animal studies and in the absence of specific information linking the other 28 chemicals to embryofetotoxicity. The medical director proposed the policy of exclusion as a sole point of intervention, neglecting alternatives including engineering controls, substitution of chemicals, the use of personal protective equipment, or job rotation which might have reduced harmful exposures to all workers. Finally, the policy applied only to female production workers, exempting female research personnel on the assumption that laboratory hazards were under greater control than those on the production line.[170]

The policy went under subsequent minor revisions. In December 1976 the policy was revised to narrow the age range of "childbearing potential" to 16 to 50, rather than 55, and to establish a six-month transition period for female employees pursing voluntary

[169] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 253.
[170] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 253-4.

reassignment. In September 1977, the Executive Committee approved the modified policy, which remained "limited to female production workers, prohibited any exposure whatsoever to the 29 substances, and was intended to be effective immediately." [171] The policy, however, was not immediately implemented. Shortly thereafter, American Cyanamid's industrial hygienists and medical office recommended that the policy be adjusted to set maximum permissible exposures–set at a fraction of those standards recommended by the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists and by OSHA–rather than total exclusion, although the level of thresholds would, in practice, result in total exclusion.[172]

In early November 1977, American Cyanamid representatives met with OSHA and NIOSH officials following an OSHA complaint filed by the United Steelworkers of America regarding American Cyanamid's exclusionary policy.[173] OSHA and NIOSH questioned the lack of research and evaluation behind the list of 29 substances, the potential implications of eliminating female workers from the chemical industry, and American Cyanamid's effort to set its own permissible exposure levels rather than defer to the OSHA standards. American Cyanamid would later argue that OSHA "commended" the company for "its efforts to provide a safer workplace than required by OSHA standards."[174] The investigation, however, produced little substantive effect. In November 1977, the medical department minorly adjusted Permissible Exposure Limits (PELs) to include not only total limits but also time-weighted averages to account for an

[171] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 254.
[172] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 254-5.
[173] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 255.
[174] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 260.

8-hour day, which were substantially lower than the total limit values.[175] With these alterations, the fetal protection policy began to be announced to workers at some American Cyanamid plants in late 1977 and early 1978.[176] Representatives from American Cyanamid contributed to a *Wall Street Journal* article in November 7, 1977 titled "Chemical Firms Move to Protect Women From Substances That May Harm Fetuses," where they described the initiative as "an idea whose time has come, because this isn't handled under federal regulation,...the fetus isn't recognized as an entity."[177]

According to the affected workers at American Cyanamid's Willow Island plant, women were first informed of the policy in a meeting between Glen Mercer, the plant's Industrial Relations Superintendent, a company physician, and all of the female workers of child-bearing potential under the age of 50, held on January 30, 1978.[178] Earlier that day, the company communicated the policy to OCAW Local 3-499, noting it would go in effect by May 1, 1978, at which time all applicable workers would be transferred to other departments or the utility pool, or laid off in the absence of sufficient job openings. Workers would be required to initiate the transfers themselves by April 24, 1978.[179]

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[175] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 255.
[176] OTA, "Reproductive Health Hazards in the Workplace," 255, 259.
[177] Gail Bronson, "Chemical Firms Move to Protect Women from Substances That May Harm Fetuses," *The Wall Street Journal* (Nov. 7, 1977). "CRROW" Folder, Steve Wodka, personal files.
[178] This chronology was composed by OCAW union representatives Steven Wodka and Anthony Mazzocchi. According to the chronology, Donna Martin and Iris Braden were absent from the initial meeting and met with Mercer and a company nurse the following day. Intra-Organization Communication, Mazzocchi to Wodka, "Subject: Confidential Chronology," (Jan. 18, 1979), Tony Mazzocchi Papers, Box 11, Folder L.U. 3-499 American Cyanamid Co. Willow Island, WV, 1978-Misc., from OCAW Records, CU Boulder.
[179] "Confidential Chronology," Mazzocchi Papers, Box 11, Folder L.U. 3-499, OCAW Records, CU Boulder.

Mercer, the women recalled, presented the policy as emblematic of a wider shift in industrial work; while the company was "getting the jump on OSHA," soon the entire chemical industry would impose similar exclusionary policies.[180]

During these initial meetings, women challenged the policy. They pressed Mercer for clarification on the policy–asking, for example, if they could be exempted by taking birth control pills or pregnancy tests. Mercer argued that these methods were insufficient; for example, a woman might "forget" to take the pill.[181] The policy was thus premised on presuming women's reproductive irresponsibility. Betty Moler Riggs, one of the workers, questioned whether her prior husband's vasectomy would excuse her from the policy, which the company rejected.[182] Their questions pointed to the elasticity of the category of exclusion–the assumptions behind the framing of "women of childbearing years" left little room for women's bodily autonomy or self-determination. As Judy Scott, general counsel of the United Mine Workers of America who had formerly worked with the UAW, later argued, "The underlying assumption of the exclusionary approach is that all women capable of having babies will get pregnant, and that once pregnant will carry the fetus to term. The policy ignores the fact that most women choose to control their reproductive lives, using abortion and birth control where necessary."[183]

Even when the women offered to release the company from liability for potential damages to their future children, the company refused.[184] In response, the women

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[180] Faludi, *Backlash,* 446; Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 292.
[181] Faludi, *Backlash,* 446.
[182] "Confidential Chronology."
[183] Judith A. Scott, "Keeping Women in their Place: Exclusionary Policies and Reproduction" from *Double Exposure*, 181.
[184] "Confidential Chronology."

questioned whether the company was really intending that the women seek sterilizations.[185] A company doctor and nurse present at the meetings noted that women could obtain sterilization procedures– described as a mere "band-aid" operations– from local physicians with coverage from company health insurance and leave time for recovery.[186] Donna Martin recalled, "I remember it so plain. Mercer told us the only thing that would be acceptable was a hysterectomy or having our tubes tied. He even told us how safe the surgery was, that we would be covered by company insurance and would get paid sick leave while we were out."[187] Barbara Cantwell said, of Mercer, "He even said he felt sure our health insurance would cover the operation," a claim Mercer later agreed to.[188] According to the women, Mercer indicated that if job openings in unaffected departments were unavailable, the women would "go out the gate."[189] Later, Mercer would deny that he had encouraged the women to pursue sterilization, instead arguing, "We tried to talk them out of getting sterilized…I can't imagine why they would have done such a thing."[190] Failing to recognize the coercive aspects of this policy, Mercer claimed a narrowed form of responsibility for fetal health rather than a broader vision of reproductive health, assuming that women could freely choose between reproductive

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[185] "Confidential Chronology."
[186] "Confidential Chronology"; Kenney, *For Whose Protection,* 292.
[187] Jon Steinberg, "Another Willow Island Tragedy," *Seven Days* (n.d.), CRROW Box 1, Folder 12, NYU. The title of Steinberg's article refers to an industrial accident that occured on April 27, 1978, in which the collapse of a cooling tower at the Pleasants Power (now Allegheny Energy) plant at Willow Island killed 51 workers. See: Bailey, "Pleasants County."
[188] Strat Douthat, "Plant Official Discussed Operation with Group, Sterilized Women Report," *Charleston Daily Mail* (Jan. 4, 1979), 3A.
[189] "Confidential Chronology."
[190] Associated Press, "4 Women Assert Jobs Were Linked to Sterilization," *The New York Times*, Jan. 5, 1979, sec. A21.

autonomy and economic stability.

In early February 1978, both OCAW and the women began to take action; union officials drafted a letter to be served on management, and women workers filed complaints with the West Virginia Human Rights Commission.[191] As Cantwell described, "I smelled harassment when the problem was suddenly narrowed to the area where women worked."[192] The affected women made clear that the options available to them amounted to exclusion from economic security. According to Betty Moler, a job in the pigments department paid about $225 per week, with substantial overtime pay accrued through night shifts and weekend work.[193] American Cyanamid offered to maintain the women's current pay rate for 90 days before transferring to janitorial work which would pay $175 per week without opportunities for bonuses or overtime pay.[194] The women worked to politicize this discrepancy. Later in the summer, the women would meet with an ACLU attorney and file a complaint with the Federal EEOC.[195]

Yet in the intervening time between the announcement of the policy and its implementation, workers also began to feel the pressure of the impending policy. Betty Moler Riggs and Lola Rymer obtained sterilization procedures on February 23, 1978, followed by Donna Martin in April, Iris Braden in May, and Barbara Cantwell at the end of June.[196] Of her decision, Riggs later recalled, "I did what I did because I was more or less the sole supporter for a lot of people who were depending on me. I couldn't let them

[191] "Confidential Chronology."
[192] Gail Bronson, "Bitter Reaction: Issue of Fetal Damage Stirs Women Workers At Chemical Plants," *The Wall Street Journal* (Feb. 9, 1979), 1, 33.
[193] Bronson, "Bitter Reaction."
[194] Bronson, "Bitter Reaction."
[195] "Confidential Chronology."
[196] "Confidential Chronology."

down. I was up against a brick wall and there was no place else to go but forward."[197] In mid-July 1978, however, the company postponed the policy's effective date to September 1, 1978; Glenn Mercer later met with the women individually, along with the president of OCAW's local, in which he announced the policy would be limited to two lead pigment departments and would be made effective October 2, 1978.[198] Ultimately, five of the seven women in the lead pigments department obtained sterilizations, while two women were transferred to the janitorial department at reduced pay and fewer opportunities for overtime.[199] Donna Martin would later describe the women's decision to pursue tubal ligations by insisting "It was not a joint decision on our part. We made the decisions individually and we did it because we were afraid."[200]

On September 25, 1978 the local's president notified Steve Wodka of OCAW that five women had obtained sterilizations in response to the policy's announcement, and that two women who did not would be demoted on October 2nd in compliance with the policy.[201] Shortly after the company's policy went into effect, the local filed a grievance on behalf of the demoted women and refiled a representational letter with the company. On December 27, 1978, Wodka filed an extensive health complaint against American Cyanamid, including concern for lead hazard, with OSHA, asking for "imminent danger action" and an inspection of the plant with no advance notice.[202] On January 1, 1979, *The*

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[197] Faludi, *Backlash,* 447.
[198] "Confidential Chronology."
[199] Kenney, *For Whose Protection,* 292; Faludi, *Backlash,* 446-7; Richards, "Women Say They Had to Be Sterilized."
[200] Strat Douthat, "Plant Official Discussed Operation with Group, Sterilized Women Report," *Charleston Daily Mail* (Jan. 4, 1979), 3A.
[201] "Confidential Chronology."
[202] "Confidential Chronology."

*Washington Post* published its front page article about the women's sterilizations.[203] The following day, the five women were interviewed on the *ABC Evening News.*[204] Two days later, on January 3, 1979, the OSHA inspection began.[205]

From the start, the women workers affected by American Cyanamid's exclusionary policy insisted that they obtained sterilizations by coercion rather than by choice. This framing challenged American Cyanamid's claims to the moral high ground; as a company spokesman described, "from a moral point of view the com-pany feels it is on the side of the an-gels in this thing."[206] The testimony of the women directly countered this impression. Within the *Washington Post* cover story, Lola Rymer attested, "I wasn't going to have any more kids at my age. But I don't think it's right that a company can tell you to do a thing like this to keep your job. I did it because I was scared and I had to have the income."[207] In a later interview with the *The Wall Street Journal* in February, Betty Riggs Moler and Barbara Cantwell both expressed their regret for having obtained the tubal ligation procedure. In addition to expressing a sense of loss relating to their identities and imagined futures, they made clear that the decision was made due to an absence rather than presence of choices; as Cantwell described, "In January I said I'd never do it. But by May I felt they really meant business…I felt backed up against a wall."[208]

In response to the national attention on the women affected by its exclusionary

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[203] Richards, "Women Say They Had to Be Sterilized to Hold Jobs."
[204] "Cyanamid Lawsuit/Sterilization Cases," *NBC Evening News* (Jan. 2, 1979), https://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/broadcasts/501092.
[205] "Confidential Chronology."
[206] Richards, "Women Say They Had to Be Sterilized."
[207] Richards, "Women Say They Had to Be Sterilized."
[208] Bronson, "Bitter Reaction."

policy, American Cyanamid attempted to promote a counter story which represented the corporation as acting responsibly in service of the best interest not just of its employees, but of future children. As Clyne protested, "The idea is that the workplace has to be safe for everyone–the man, the woman, and the child. In the real world, that's totally unachievable without emasculating the chemical industry. The fetus is far more susceptible to certain risks. There is no way, even with the best engineering controls, to always protect it. In those instances where we cannot protect the fetus, we are required to move it away from the hazard, and that has to mean moving the mother as well."[209] In statements like these, Clyne collapsed the variations between the various categories invoked– "potentially pregnant," "women of childbearing years," "fertile women," and women of "reproductive capacity"–to promote the idea of women as always potentially pregnant and of the fetus as ever-present within the woman worker. The plant's manager, Jack White, commented during a press conference shortly after the publication of the *Washington Post* article that it was "something of a mystery to us why they would choose such drastic measures to avoid a transfer," thus attempting to distance the company from the outcomes of a policy which required women to show proof of sterilization before continuing to perform their roles at their existing rate of pay and benefits.[210]

While the American Cyanamid case generated notable publicity, its exclusionary policy and subsequent fallout were representative of a broader problem. In 1977, news outlets like the *Wall Street Journal* noted that corporations were facing "perhaps the most

[209] Rebecca L. Rawls, "Reproductive Hazards in the Workplace, Part 1," *Chemical & Energy News* (Feb. 11, 1980), 30.
[210] Ann Hughey, "Lead Also Affects Men, Official Says," *The Charleston Gazette* (Jan. 3, 1979), 7B.

complex, certainly the most emotional, occupational-health question yet to emerge: Must they make their workplaces safe for unborn babies?"[211] As workers at American Cyanamid challenged the company's policy, parallel situations were emerging across the country in the late 1970s. At St. Joe's Minerals plant in Pennsylvania and the Bunker Hill Smelter in Idaho, all fertile women were transferred out of roles requiring lead exposure to "less hazardous" jobs with reduced wages and seniority; the Delco-Remy Division of General Motors in Indiana established a pre-emptive policy of rejecting all female applicants within their childbearing years from jobs with lead exposure; and, at Johnson Controls, women taking jobs in battery manufacturing were required to sign waivers stating the company had informed them of the risks of lead exposure.[212]

The issues at the heart of the American Cyanamid case also resonated with emergent areas of concern within feminist and Leftist organizations. In their February 1978 reproductive rights newsletter, the New American Movement (NAM) published a "Bill of Reproductive Rights."[213] Envisioned as a tool of coalition building between feminist, labor, and environmental groups, the Bill of Reproductive Rights affirmed "the Right to a Safe Workplace" alongside rights to sexual freedom, abortion, and contraception and freedom from involuntary sterilization. As they outlined, "We cannot be assure[d] of reproductive freedom unless our workplaces are free from the chemical and other hazards that threaten our ability to have healthy children or to have children at

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[211] James C. Hyatt, "Early Warning: Protection for Unborn? Work-Safety Issue Isn't As Simple as It Sounds," *Wall Street Journal* (Aug. 2, 1977), 1.
[212] Wendy Chavkin, "Occupational Hazards to Reproduction: A Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 2 (1979): 310; Kenney, *For Whose Protection,* 250.
[213] New American Movement (NAM), *Reproductive Rights Newsletter* no. 1 (Feb. 1978), 2-3. CRROW Box 1, Folder 16, NYU.

all."[214] At a conference on April 21, 1979, groups like NYC NAM, CARASA, and CESA aligned their existing critique of racialized sterilization abuse to this new context of workplace coercion. As a CESA member described, "This is an example of sterilization abuse [that] groups like ours have not dealt with before. Up until now we have been mainly concerned with women on welfare and minority women who have been coerced into sterilization. We now have a chance to focus on women who are being sterilized because they don't want to lose their jobs or take jobs with less pay."[215]

Other leftist groups assimilated the case into their existing analysis of capitalist exploitation.[216] As the *Workers of the World, Unite!* journal argued, "The women at American Cyanamid worked because they had to survive and support their families. American Cyanamid gave them a choice between survival and sterilization. This is forced sterilization and no weak kneed pleas to the contrary will convince us otherwise…We demand damages be paid to the women. We demand that American Cyanamid clean up its plant. We demand an end to forced sterilization."[217] Citing an ongoing strike at an American Cyanamid plant in Bound Brook, New Jersey over a charge that the company had refused to move on the demand for improved health and safety con-ditions, the magazine argued that the exclusionary policy was consistent with American Cyanamid's larger structure: "Exploiting the labor-power of 44,000 workers nationally, American Cyanamid is ruled by the ravenous hunger of monopoly capitalism. Not only does

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[214] NAM, *Reproductive Rights Newsletter* no. 1 (Feb. 1978), 2-3.
[215] NAM, "Sterilization Abuse," *Reproductive Rights Newsletter* no. 4 (Summer 1979), 20. CRROW Box 1, Folder 16, NYU.
[216] "Capitalists Demand Women Choose: Children or Your Job," *Workers of the World, Unite!* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Feb. 15, 1979), 9; Jesse Lee, "Women forced to be sterilized to keep jobs," *Workers World* Vol. 21, No. 1 (Jan. 5, 1979), 2.
[217] "Capitalists Demand Women Choose."

American Cyanamid take the wealth created by its workers, but it also demands that they sacrifice their health on the almighty altar of profit in order to earn a wage."[218] In 1979, Hans Haacke, a German political artist, produced a piece titled "American Cyanamid: Where Women Have a Choice" in which he skewered the company's effort to give its women workers a choice–a demotion, a layoff, or a sterilization procedure.[219] In each of these contexts, American Cyanamid stood in as a symbol of a larger problem.

As a result of the American Cyanamid sterilization controversy, OCAW initiated a survey of its membership to determine the scope of the problem of exclusionary policies within the union and chemical industry more broadly. Recognizing that "American Cyanamid is not an isolated incident," Mazzocchi wrote, "All companies have an obligation under Federal regulations to provide a workplace free from hazards. Their responsibility is to alter the workplace to make it safe, not to alter the worker to fit the needs of excess toxic exposures."[220]

*Regulating Responsibility for Health*

Within the case of American Cyanamid, OCAW acted quickly to push for regulatory intervention through OSHA. As mentioned previously, shortly after the company's policy went into effect, the local filed a grievance on behalf of the demoted women and refiled a representational letter with the company. On December 27, 1978,

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[218] "American Cyanamid Workers Strike in New Jersey," *Workers of the World, Unite!* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Feb. 15, 1979), 9.
[219] "Works by Hans Haacke," *Seven Days* (June 29, 1979), 32. CRROW Box 3, Folder 5, NYU.
[220] OCAW, Tony Mazzocchi to All Local Union Presidents, And Secretaries, International Representatives (Feb. 20, 1979), CRROW Folder, Steve Wodka Personal File.

Wodka filed an extensive health complaint against American Cyanamid, including concern for lead hazard, with OSHA, asking for "imminent danger action" and an inspection of the plant with no advance notice.[221] The complaint emphasized that American Cyanamid had acted irresponsibly and, outside of the bounds of existing regulatory standards; as OCAW phrased it, "These factors combined with the company's knowledge of elevated blood lead levels and exposure levels (some of which exceed the cur-rent standard by more than five times), demand that American Cyanamid be cited for a willful violation of the lead exposure standard."[222] OSHA issued a citation and notification of penalty to American Cyanamid's Willow Island plant on April 27, 1979, following an inspection by OSHA officials, listing violations including the absence of feasible administrative controls to reduce employee exposure, the failure to provide appropriate protective materials, allowing employees to consume food in areas exposed to toxic materials, and willful overexposure of employees to substances including lead.[223] Subsequently, on October 9, 1979, OSHA issued another citation pertaining particularly to American Cyanamid's exclusionary policy, arguing that the company had violated Section 5(a)(1) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970–its "general duty clause"– by failing to "furnish employment and a place of employment which were free from recognized hazards that were causing or were likely to cause death or serious

[221] "Confidential Chronology."
[222] Steve Wodka and OCAW to David H. Rhone, Regional Administrator U.S. Dept. of Labor (OSHA), "Re: Complaint and Freedom of Information Act Request, American Cyanamid Company, Willow Island, West Virginia" (Dec. 27, 1978), Mazzocchi Papers, Box 11, Folder L.U. 3-499, OCAW Records, CU Boulder.
[223] U.S. Department of Labor (OSHA) to Mr. Jack E. White, Plant Manager, "Citation and Notification of Penalty," Apr. 27, 1979. Mazzocchi Papers, Box 11, Folder L.U. 3-499, OCAW Records, CU Boulder.

physical harm to employees."[224] This filing represented OSHA's first citation under the general duty provision, and would therefore play a role in determining how expansively the provision would be defined in the future.[225] Assistant Secretary Bigham, in OSHA's press release addressing its citations, affirmed, "The reproductive health of workers, both men and women, is a valid part of OSHA's regulatory concern. No worker must be forced to sacrifice his or her right to conceive children in order to hold a job."[226]

American Cyanamid, however, did not accept this framing of responsibility. Most alarmingly, in 1980 the company evaded OSHA's order to comply with health and safety standards by closing its pigments department, thus dismissing the five women who had been sterilized to keep their jobs. Within the legal proceedings, American Cyanamid responded by contesting the $10,000 fine in an appeal to the Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission.[227] OSHA, in turn, pushed the Review Commission to accept an interpretation of the general duty clause which would encompass hazards that occurred outside the workplace but were within the power of the employer to control. As legal scholar Sally J. Kenney summarized, "In urging the Review Commission to continue to interpret the Occupational Safety and Health Act broadly to protect employees from work-related hazards, OSHA argued that the employee could not 'shift its responsibility for maintaining a safe and healthful workplace to its employees.'"[228] Moreover, OSHA challenged that the sterilizations in question had been obtained by women workers by

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[224] U.S. DOL (OSHA) to Mr. Jack E. White, "Citation and Notification of Penalty."
[225] Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 294.
[226] U.S. Department of Labor News, "OSHA Proposes $10,000 Penalty Against American Cyanamid for Worker Sterilization Policy" (Oct. 11, 1979), CRROW Box 2, Folder 2, NYU.
[227] Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn,* 128.
[228] Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 294-5.

company policy rather than by voluntary choice; as they argued, '"Complainant [OSHA] disputes the 'voluntariness' of a choice made under duress, as in this case, were women had to choose between their jobs and their fertility.'"[229] Through these arguments, OSHA diverged from American Cyanamid's definition of responsibility; whereas American Cyanamid claimed to protect workers and the unborn through coercion of workers as individuals, OSHA argued for a broader framework of corporate responsibility for ensuring all workers health and wellbeing.

OCAW's mobilization around a broad definition of OSHA's "general duty clause," however, would ultimately be challenged by a legal apparatus hesitant to strengthen regulatory power. On July 15, 1980 the Review Commission granted American Cyanamid's motion for summary judgement and vacated the citation and accompanying penalty. When OSHA then filed a petition with the Review Commission for discretionary review, the Review Commission determined that the policy of sterilizations fell outside of the scope of the general duty clause and that the women had undertaken sterilizations voluntarily on the basis of economic and social factors beyond the workplace that exceeded the control and responsibility of the employer.[230] From there, OCAW appealed the Review Commission's decision to the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. The *OCAW v. American Cyanamid* decision, decided August 24, 1984 and authored by future Supreme Court nominee Judge Robert H. Bork, determined that the "general duty clause applies only to physical conditions at the workplace (i.e., dust, fumes etc.) and not to a 'policy,'" thus narrowing the bounds of its

[229] Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 294-5.
[230] Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 296-7; "Pigment Plant Wins Fertility-Risk Case," *The New York Times* (Sept. 8, 1980).

reach.[231]

The decision narrowed the scope of the "general duty clause" to define workplace hazards specifically within the scope of the workplace, defining economic need as external. Bork, in his decision, emphasized that the exclusionary policy, and its effect of compelling sterilization, represented a moral question outside of the scope of the Court; as he wrote, "As we understand the law, we are not free to make a legislative judgment. We may not, on the one hand, decide that the company is innocent because it chose to let the women decide for themselves which course was less harmful to them. Nor may we decide that the company is guilty because it offered an option of sterilization that the women might ultimately regret choosing. These are moral issues of no small complexity, but they are not for us. Congress has enacted a statute and our only task is the mundane one of interpreting its language and applying its policy."[232] This decision would prove to be indicative of a larger shift toward the narrowing of state responsibility in occupational health politics in the 1980s.

When this decision came up in 1987 during his Supreme Court confirmation hearings, Bork defended his decision by asserting, "This was not a forced sterilization opinion." While given a "distressing choice," he reasoned, "I suppose the five women who chose sterilization were glad to have the choice the company gave them."[233] Upon hearing this statement on the news, Betty Riggs sent a telegram to the Senate Judiciary

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[231] Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union, and local 3-499, Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, Petitioners, v. American Cyanamid Company, Respondent, 741 F.2d 444 (D.C. Cir. 1984); Memo, George Cohen to All Interested Persons, "OCAW v. American Cyanamid (D.C. Cir.)" (Aug. 28, 1984), Mazzocchi Papers, Box 11, Folder L.U. 3-499, OCAW Records, CU Boulder.
[232] OCAW and Local 3-499, OCAW v. American Cyanamid.
[233] Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 302-3.

Committee in which she maintained her challenge to Bork's conception of choice, writing, "Only a judge who knows nothing about women who need to work could say that. I was only twenty-six years old, but I had to work, so I had no choice…This was the most awful thing that ever happened to me. I still believe that it was against the law, whatever Bork says."[234] Despite the failure of this regulatory challenge, Eula Bingham would nevertheless call the citation the most important issued during her term with OSHA; while the citation was not upheld, she contended, "nevertheless, we won" due to the publicity surrounding the charges and the case's influence on occupational medicine.[235]

In addition to OCAW's regulatory challenge, women workers of American Cyanamid challenged the corporation's exclusionary policy on the grounds of sex discrimination. In *Christman v. American Cyanamid Co.,* thirteen women, including Barbara Cantwell Christman, Betty Moler Riggs, Lola Rymer, and Donna Martin, with the ACLU's support, sued American Cyanamid for violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.[236] The case, led by ACLU Women's Rights Project attorney Joan Bertin, emphasized the argument that pregnant workers held rights to Equal Protection under Title VII, reasoning made possible by the Pregnancy Discrimination Act.[237] In *Christman,* Bertin thus argued that men and women were legally entitled to equal job and safety protections. In their suit, the women sought both monetary relief and "injunctive

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[234] Quoted in Faludi, *Backlash,* 449-50.
[235] "Attention to Hazards Faced by Women in Low-Paying Jobs Urged by Bingham," *Occupational Safety & Health Reporter* (Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., May 10, 1984), 1310.
[236] *Christman v. American Cyanamid Co*., 578 F. Supp. 63 (N.D.W. Va. 1983).
[237] Merleaux, "Equal Risks," 494.

relief" which would prevent the implementation of similar exclusionary policies.[238] Ultimately, American Cyanamid settled the case out of court for $200,000 in 1983.[239] With this settlement, Sara Dubow writes, the company "acknowledg[ed] the sex discrimination charge while rejecting the charge that they had implemented exclusionary policies as a way to circumvent their obligation to provide a safe and healthy workplace," in effect narrowing the scope of reform to the protection of opportunities for women to work in hazardous environments.[240]

While insufficient, the settlement provided some peace of mind for its plaintiffs. As one plaintiff, Debbie Nicely noted, "We feel like we've won. We feel they admitted they were guilty by settling it, and we got what we went after - a promise of fairer treatment in the future."[241] This promise was in part agreed to by American Cyanamid in the settlement, which held that the company would hire women the same proportion to the number of female applicants.[242] This affirmation was especially significant given the economic significance of the plant within the Willow Island community. As the Nicely mentioned, "In the beginning, some people were really horrible. It was like you were doing it to them personally. Cyanamid is a big chunk of the economy around here. People said we were nothing but a damn bunch of troublemakers."[243] Despite these challenges, she noted she would do it all again, explaining, 'It's really made me stronger. I've learned you can't let other people sway you. Even if you only have your say, that means

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[238] *Christman v. American Cyanamid Co*.
[239] Merleaux, "Equal Risks," 494; Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn,* 129.
[240] Dubow, *Ourselves Unborn,* 129; Kenney, *For Whose Protection?*, 211.
[241] Deborah Baker, "Women's suit against Cyanamid was to establish a principle," *UPI* (USA), (Nov. 1, 1983).
[242] "American Cyanamid Co. will hire women," *UPI* (USA) (Sept. 20, 1983).
[243] Baker, "Women's suit against Cyanamid."

something," and, noting the resonance of her experience for her daughter, remarking, "'I hope I can teach her to stand up for herself–because that's the most important thing."[244]

While legal and regulatory challenges to American Cyanamid's exclusionary policy failed to comprehensively challenge the narrow logics of workplace health and safety within exclusionary policies, the collective efforts of OCAW and the women of American Cyanamid put into practice aspirations toward workers' right to healthy and safe environments which put reproductive autonomy and freedom at their center.

*The Coalition for the Reproductive Rights of Workers & Coalitional Potential*

The women workers of American Cyanamid were joined in their efforts by advocates in the Coalition for the Reproductive Rights of Workers. Initiated by the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers union in January 1979, CRROW consistently situated the coalition's origins in the American Cyanamid sterilization controversy, but emphasized that this case was not an anomaly and instead represented a wider trend of discrimination, hazardous exposure, and reproductive coercion. Beyond lead, at least twelve other agents had been identified as the rationale for exclusionary policies, including vinyl chloride, cadmium, coal tar, acrylamide, toluene, and carbon disulfide.[245] CRROW tracked cases relating to layoffs,  sterilizations, and negative health outcomes for workers exposed to hazardous substances at Allied Chemical Corp. in Danville, Illinois, American Cyanamid's Lederle Labs in Pearl River, New York, B.F. Goodrich in Avon Lake, Ohio, Avtex Fibers, Inc. in Nito, West Virginia, Environmental Protection & Aeration Systems in Memphis, Tennessee, GM in Indiana, Eli Lilly in Rensselaer, New York, and St. Joe's

[244] Baker, "Women's suit against Cyanamid."
[245] Wendy Chavkin, "Introduction," from *Double Exposure*, 180.

Minerals in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.[246] From CRROW's formation, it was clear that reproduction, in its intersections with environmental health and labor politics, would be a consequential political problem during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

During its early stages, CRROW negotiated how it would define the bounds of its coalition, particularly when it came to reproduction. Within his first testimony on Willow Island, Mazzocchi stressed the eagerness of the labor movement to "mobilize as broad a coalition…as we possibly can," soliciting support from both women's rights groups and the anti-abortion movement.[247] In similar circumstances, as historian April Merleaux assesses, "Environmentalists could have used—and sometimes did use—fetal vulnerability as leverage to advocate for industrial and agricultural chemical restrictions…But through their shared efforts, environmentalists learned that focusing on fetuses could undermine their goals by narrowing attention to a subset of the population—women and their potential offspring. This approach limited how many people benefited from safety measures, thus reducing, rather than expanding, workplace protections."[248] Merleaux calls the political framework developed through this negotiation an "equal protection approach to toxics regulation."[249] A key facet of this approach was the effort to shed light on parallel reproductive effects affecting male workers. On January 3, 1979, just two days after the story of women workers' sterilizations broke in *The Washington Post,* OCAW leadership including Tony Mazzocchi and Steve Wodka spoke to the press about health studies demonstrating links

[246] "Documentation of Reproductive Health Hazard Cases," CRROW, Box 1 Folder 1, NYU.
[247] Richards, "Women Say They Had to Be Sterilized to Hold Jobs."
[248] Merleaux, "Equal Risks," 487.
[249] Merleaux, "Equal Risks," 487.

between lead exposure and male sterility.[250] These studies, they argued, should therefore demonstrate the futility of exclusionary policies as a course of action; as Wodka affirmed, "The answer is to clean up the workplace."[251] Wodka insisted engineering controls would make the improvement of standards for all workers possible; American Cyanamid.[252] Thus, while American Cyanamid remained a crucial site of activation, the coalition emphasized male reproductive vulnerability in order to defend the right of workers to a safe environment regardless of gender.

As the coalition stated early on, "The work of CRROW has been primarily educational. We are attempting to inform the general public as well as policy makers about the issues which affect both men and women. For example, there is no evidence to suggest that a substance which adversely affects the female reproductive system does not also affect that of the male. In addition, many substances also cause damage to other parts of the body."[253] Their mission thus was defined as bridging labor and reproductive health, addressing "the right of [everyone to a safe workplace] that threatens neither his or her general health nor his or her reproductive capacity" and "the right of every worker to make his or her own reproductive decisions."[254]

In 1979, the group initiated a broad range of activities. Members reviewed and commented on proposed EEOC regulations and NIOSH studies, contributed amicus briefs to relevant cases, and the New York Region of Education and Organizing

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[250] Hughey, "Lead Also Affects Men"
[251] Hughey, "Lead Also Affects Men."
[252] Hughey, "Lead Also Affects Men."
[253] "Draft Proposal for general support for CRROW for one year," (n.d.), CRROW Box 3, Folder 3, NYU.
[254] "Draft Proposal for general support for CRROW for one year."

Committee of CRROW held a full-day forum and speak out on reproductive hazards for about 300 workers and sponsored a six-week course on reproductive health and the rights of workers aimed at union stewards and other collaborators.[255] The coalition also joined a shareholder campaign launched by the International Chemical Workers Union, the Interfaith Center Corporate Responsibility, and the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration targeting the national American Cyanamid Company. The shareholder campaign successfully pressured American Cyanamid to establish a "Public Responsibility Committee" on its board of directors which would oversee corporate policies related to health and safety, equal opportunity, and the environment, with an agreement to present a progress report to stockholders in October 1980.[256] While successful in pushing its proposals, the Interfaith Center assessed that "it was, in some ways, too rapid a victory," preventing organizers from developing a closer relationship with shareholders and preempting a broader educational campaign geared toward shareholders and the public.[257] While initial activity clustered around support for the American Cyanamid at Willow Island cases, in an early meeting the group determined to direct its focus toward the "substantive work" in the workplace, instead of solely focusing on the legal arena, particularly through planning a conference and developing a worker education training on reproductive health problems, with the resulting materials based on

[255] "Draft Proposal," (n.d.), CRROW Box 3, Folder 3, NYU.
[256] "Minutes–Meeting of CRROW" (Oct. 25, 1979); "Report of Minutes: Steering Committee CRROW" (Nov. 28, 1979), CRROW Box 3, Folder 4, NYU; Letter, Dara Demmings of ICCR to Odessa Komer, Nancy Stearns, and Mimi Baron of CRROW (May 22, 1980), CRROW Box 2, Folder 2, NYU; Robert Howard, "Reproductive Rights in the Workplace," *In These Times,* (Sept. 1980), CRROW Box 1, Folder 12, NYU.
[257] Letter, Dara Demmings of ICCR to Odessa Komer, Nancy Stearns, and Mimi Baron of CRROW (May 22, 1980), CRROW Box 2, Folder 2 NYU.

the template of the New York CRROW's six-week program and distributed to local unions, labor educators, grassroots organizations, and the general public.[258]

CRROW hosted its Conference on Reproductive Hazards in the Workplace in Washington, D.C. on August 22, 1980 with the intention of training workers and their advocates to recognize and remedy the problem in their own workplaces.[259] As *Chemical & Energy News* assessed, the event signaled a new alliance: "For the first time ever, workers from different industries gathered in Washington, D.C. to share and discuss their experiences in confronting reproductive hazards in the workplace."[260] The conference involved 250 participants, including union members from USWA, ICWU, OCAW, UAW, CWA, AFSCME, AIW, ILA, and IAM.[261] During her keynote address, Barbara Mikulski called reproductive hazards in the workplace "one of the most important moral questions of our time.[262] Lola Rymer, of American Cyanamid, participated in a panel in which she shared the circumstances of her plant's exclusionary policy.[263] Other panelists included Nick Crudo, a worker at a chemical factory in Rensselaer, New York which manufactured an herbicide for Ely Lilly called Oryzalin linked to premature deaths and heart defects in workers' children and Fernando Cuevas, a migrant worker and organizer in Ohio for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee whose exposure to agricultural

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[258] "Report of Minutes: Steering Committee CRROW" (Nov. 28, 1979), CRROW Box 3, Folder 4, NYU; Letter, Nancy Sterns to Steering Committee (Nov. 8, 1979), CRROW Box 3, Folder 3; "1 Year/2 Year Plan Outline," (n.d.), CRROW Box 1, Folder 12, NYU.
[259] "CRROW August 22 Conference Agenda," CRROW Box 3, Folder 3, NYU.
[260] "Corporate Politics on Reproductive Hazards Hit," *Chemical & Energy News* (Sept.1, 1980), 8. CRROW Box 1, Folder 12, NYU.
[261] Robert Howard, "Reproductive Rights in the Workplace," *In These Times,* (Sept. 1980), CRROW Box 1, Folder 12, NYU; "Summary-Conference Participant Survey Results (Rough Draft," CRROW Box 3, Folder 3, NYU.
[262] Howard, "Reproductive Rights in the Workplace."
[263] "Corporate Politics on Reproductive Hazards Hit."

chemicals was linked to birth defects in workers' children.[264] Following these discussions, the conference included workshops for members to address issues including recognizing, documenting, and eliminating workplace hazards and fighting discriminatory employer policies.[265] CRROW also circulated a survey for participants to cite actual or possible reproductive hazards and/or exclusionary policies in their workplace; while some were aware of hazards in advance, others who were uncertain planned to investigate the situation at their workplace as a result of what they had learned at the conference.[266]

CRROW soon developed a worker-education campaign. The broader coalition's effort was inspired by a series of workshops developed by the New York Region of the Education and Organizing Committee of the Coalition for the Reproductive Rights of Workers focused on the effort "to put the reproductive rights of workers in a political context."[267] Sessions held in the fall of 1979 encompassed education on workplace hazards, the relationship between abortion rights and sterilization abuse, understanding legal implications of OSHA, the EEOC, and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, instruction on reproductive anatomy and physiology, analysis of the connection between reproductive hazards in the home and hazards in the office, industry, and hospital, and training on organizing around reproductive hazards in the workplace.[268] Flyers for the training series prominently featured a photo of Donna Martin, Lola Rymer, and Barbara Cantwell which had circulated in coverage of the American Cyanamid sterilization

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[264] Howard, "Reproductive Rights in the Workplace."
[265] "Corporate Politics on Reproductive Hazards Hit."
[266] CRROW, "August 22 Conference Report," (n.d.), "CRROW Folder," Steve Wodka Personal File.
[267] "New York Region of the Education and Organizing Committee of the Coalition for the Reproductive Rights of Workers," CRROW Box 3, Folder 5, NYU.
[268] "New York Region of the Education and Organizing Committee."

controversy, rooting the training in this particular instantiation of the training's stakes.[269] CRROW worked to scale the training series to a national campaign in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including by producing a Resource Guide.[270] The guide seemed to resonate and fill a need for workers; CRROW received letters from a leader of a Committee on Occupational Health in Rochester, New York, a worker learning about reproductive hazards in her workplace in Syracuse, New York, and a worker in the midst of a five month strike in Ontario, Canada.[271] In support of this educational initiative, the coalition also began publishing a quarterly newsletter in the spring of 1981, as it began to take on a more concerted role as a clearinghouse and information service.[272] The newsletter covered updates on American Cyanamid and related cases in the agricultural and chemical industries, developments in policies relating to OSHA and the EEOC, and distributed fact sheets on lead, reproductive health resources, and workplace hazards to reproduction.[273]

In the context of the new political climate inaugurated by the Reagan administration, CRROW members questioned the narrowing of CRROW's purview. Coalition members Maria Mazorra of the National Association of Farmworker Unions, Steve Wodka of OCAW, Peg Seminario of the AFL-CIO, and Bob Marlow of the ICWU,

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[269] "Reproductive Hazards in the Workplace," Karen Stamm Papers, Box 3, Folder 25, NYU.
[270] "CRROW Blueprint & Timeline," Steve Wodka, "CRROW Folder," Personal Files.
[271] Letters, Robert McLellan (Dec. 16, 1980), C.M. Bergen (Nov. 14, 1980), and J.P.A. Smith (Sept. 15, 1980), Wodka, "CRROW," Personal Files.
[272] "Minutes, Steering Committee Meeting" (Aug. 24, 1981); *Coalition for the Reproductive Rights of Workers* Newsletter 1, no. 1 (Spring 1981). Wodka, "CRROW," Personal Files.
[273] *CRROW* Newsletter 1, no. 1 (Spring 1981); *CRROW* Newsletter 1, no. 2 (Summer 1981); *CRROW* Newsletter 1, no. 3 (Winter 1982). Wodka, "CRROW," Personal Files.

emphasized their concern with CRROW's ability to meet its moment.[274] In a letter to Steering Committee members, they wrote, "We are deeply troubled over the prospects of CRROW to meet the new realities of the strictly conservative, pro-business Republican era that we are now entering. We are questioning the ability of CRROW to offer working people a strategy to counter the coming assault from unbridled corporate power. The days are over when one could believe that a Washington oriented regulatory initiative could go far in resolving the reproductive rights issue."[275] In this new context, they argued, "CRROW must develop a program of substance and relevance for workers who must deal with the confrontation that occurs in the workplace."[276] Following this assessment, CRROW moved forward in producing a rank-and-file training and educational program which could be distributed to groups through slides and tapes.[277]

CRROW envisioned that the educational program would draw on actual workers' experiences with reproductive hazards and, beyond "merely introduc[ing] and dramatiz[ing] the problem," it would offer "strategies used by workers to combat the problem."[278] In keeping with CRROW's political emphases, the program would emphasize five themes: 1. Reproductive hazards affect both men and women; 2. The corporate solution to reproductive hazards, e.g. excluding fertile women and/or requiring women workers to be sterilized, is unacceptable; 3. Workers in all types of occupations are affected, including women in traditionally female jobs and farmworkers; 4. The only

[274] Letter, Maria Mazorra, Steve Wodka, Peg Seminario, and Bob Marlow to CRROW Steering Committee Members (Feb. 23, 1981). Wodka, "CRROW," Personal Files.
[275] Letter, Maria Mazorra, et al.
[276] Letter, Maria Mazorra, et al.
[277] Letter, Maria Mazorra, et al.
[278] "CRROW Proposal" (Mar. 30, 1981). Wodka, "CRROW," Personal Files.

acceptable solution to workplace hazards is to clean up the workplace, not the worker; and 5. Exclusionary policies and workplace hazards can be fought [through] local workplace organizing, contract language, and strong health and safety committees.[279]

While CRROW continued to operate in name, the organization struggled during 1981 and 1982 as fundraising declined and the Coalition reckoned with the new political landscape.[280] Their archival traces decline after the first years of the 1980s, and several members of its founding Steering Committee left the Coalition in 1981 after completing their terms.[281] In its 1982 newsletter, the Coalition offered an update on "What's Happening at CRROW," addressing that, "Like most public interest groups, CRROW is suffering from the present administration and the very difficult funding situation. Because of the difficulties of the present time, CRROW is forced to operate without a staff."[282] Yet even in this context, the Coalition remained committed to bringing together reproductive, labor, and environmental politics under its umbrella. The newsletter reported, "All is not bleak, however. The Coalition has a strong network of organizations and individuals. For the next period of time, the work of the Coalition will be handled by the volunteer efforts of CRROW's committed Steering Committee," which would focus on distributing the Resource Guide, consulting on requests for information and technical assistance, and developing positions on pertinent issues as they arose.[283] CRROW is

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[279] "CRROW Proposal."
[280] "Memo, Maria A. Mazorra to Steering Committee" (June 15, 1981), "CRROW Membership Meeting," (July 23, 1981). Wodka, "CRROW," Personal Files.
[281] "Memo, Maria A. Mazorra to Steering Committee" (June 15, 1981), "CRROW Membership Meeting," (July 23, 1981), "CRROW Meeting, 'Dear Friends,'" (Aug. 26, 1981). Wodka, "CRROW," Personal Files.
[282] *CRROW* Newsletter 1, no. 3 (Winter 1982). Wodka, "CRROW," Personal Files.
[283] *CRROW* Newsletter 1, no. 3 (Winter 1982).

significant not just in terms of what it accomplished in its years of activity, but also because of its lasting impact in offering a template for bridging the previously divided domains of feminist, labor, and environmental activism through a centralizing focus on reproduction.

The political shift ushered in by the Reagan administration and accompanying Republican Congress foreclosed opportunities for securing reproductive health and labor protections through the regulatory state. OSHA's new Secretary, Thorne Auchter, embraced a program of "Regulatory Relief" which negated much of the prior administration's policies, weakened the strength of citations and penalties, and shifted from oversight to "voluntarism."[284] Under its Reagan appointed administrator, OSHA joined a suit with industry to abandon the heightened protections of the 1978 lead standard, withdrew its own publications on cotton dust, acrylonitrile, health and safety rights, and vinyl chloride on the basis of anti-industry bias, and "recalled or weakened" eight standards. As Markowitz and Rosner assessed, the Department of Labor returned to its earlier stance as a "watchdog of labor rather than an advocate" and OSHA, consequently, shifted its priorities in standard setting from "ascertaining the lowest feasible level that would protect workers from toxic substances" to "industry's concern about the costs of regulations."[285] Signaled by Reagan's demolition of the air traffic controllers union within his early days in office, Tony Mazzocchi of OCAW assessed the stakes of the labor movement in 1981, attesting, "I think the labor movement is in crisis.

[284] U.S. Department of Labor, "Thorne Auchter Administration, 1981-1984: "Oh, what a (regulatory) relief," *About Us: History,* https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/osha13auchter.
[285] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial*, 133.

For the first time I think it is a crisis of institutional survival. Whereas in the past the corporations were prepared to live with the union, that accommodation has come to an end. Labor leadership in general has failed to understand this new development."[286] In October 1982, a report by the Urban Environment Conference, Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Sierra Club contended that the Reagan Administration had "slammed the door on American workers," failing to enforce or expand existing protections.[287] The EEOC guidelines concerning reproductive hazards in the workplace, on which CRROW had consulted, were withdrawn as Reagan took office.[288] After Clarence Thomas replaced Eleanor Holmes Norton as he chair of the EEOC, the agency stopped challenging exclusionary policies; by 1983 the agency had a backlog of forty cases on discrimination resulting from exclusionary policies.[289] The landscape was not, however, all hopeless; in 1981, the Supreme Court rejected OSHA and industry's suit and upheld the 1978 lead standard, affirming that "'OSHA had a duty to protect workers from proven dangers, regardless of cost-effectiveness.'"[290] Even still, OSHA ignored the ruling by neglecting enforcement of the standard, claiming to lack the funds to monitor the industry.[291]

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[286] Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work and Loved Labor,* 382.
[287] Associated Press, "Environmental Group Assails Reagan on Worker Protection," *The New York Times*, October 31, 1982, sec. 1.
[288] As Sally J. Kenney catalogs, the 1980 EEOC guidelines on reproductive hazards were encouraged yet ultimately criticized by members of CRROW and labor and feminist groups more broadly due to the door they left open for paternalistic "protection" of women workers through exclusion. Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 308-10; Judith A. Scott, "Keeping Women in their Place: Exclusionary Policies and Reproduction" from *Double Exposure*,188.
[289] Kenney, *For Whose Protection?,* 310.
[290] Quoted in Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 133.
[291] Markowitz and Rosner, *Deceit and Denial,* 133.

CRROW's Wendy Chavkin, however, persisted in viewing the 1980s as a potentially "golden moment for a collaboration between feminists and labor."[292] In the early 1980s, The Reagan administration's efforts to rollback women's rights under the pretense of protecting the "traditional family" collided with a faltering economy which decimated organized labor strongholds in the industrial sector and pushed greater numbers of women into the workforce of the emergent, unorganized service sector. As she assessed, "organized labor and women workers need each other badly. As the industrial sector dwindles, unions are losing members and power. They need to recruit the women workers of the service sector in order to maintain their strength."[293] Pushing for an alliance based on mutual vulnerability, she argued, "The Right has made its joint interests clear by targeting both women's rights *and* worker's rights. Feminists can expand their own vision and their base of support if they address the needs of women workers while forging a cooperative alliance with labor; labor can maintain itself as a force in the changing economy if it seriously defends the interests of all women workers."[294]

## IV. Conclusion

The so-called fetal protection policies instituted in the late 1970s would continue to play a role in national politics into the 1990s, with the 1991 Supreme Court ruling in *United Automobile Workers v. Johnson Controls*. The case determined that the company's 1982 fetal protection policy, which restricted women from jobs producing batteries (and thus coming into contact with lead) unless they could show medical documentation of

[292] Chavkin, "Introduction," 10-1.
[293] Chavkin, "Introduction," 10-1.
[294] Chavkin, "Introduction," 10-1.

sterility, was illegal.[295] Justice Harry Blackman wrote for the majority, "Decisions about the welfare of future children must be left to the parents who conceive, bear, support and raise them rather than to the employers who hire those parents. The bias in the Johnson Controls' policy is obvious. Fertile men, but not fertile women are given a choice as to whether they wish to risk their reproductive health for a particular job."[296] As historian Laura Briggs assessed, "So, as the New York Times headline had it, 'Court Backs Right of Women to Jobs with Health Risks.' The case was anything but a mandate to clean up the workplace. It just gave women (and men) a 'free market' right to enter into a terrible bargain with employers, to work in an environment dangerous to them and any future generations of their children."[297] Historian April Merleaux summarized, although "the legal victory in Johnson Controls thus proved hollow since it preserved equal risks in toxic jobs," "we should not," however, "dismiss the coalitional work leading to it."[298] The coalitional history Merleaux traces, involving members UAW, Environmental Defense Fund, and ACLU Women's Rights Project, she argues, "demonstrates that important environmental advocacy has happened outside the confines of narrowly defined environmental organizations. It developed a strategy for overcoming the limitations of a compartmentalized regulatory state."[299] The same could be said for the case of American Cyanamid and CRROW.

At the crossroads of the 1970s and 1980s, American Cyanamid sterilization policy

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[295] *United Automobile Workers v. Johnson Controls,* 499 U.S. 187 (1991).
[296] Quoted in Laura Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump* (University of California Press, 2017), 43.
[297] Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics,* 43-4.
[298] Merleaux, "Equal Risks," 500.
[299] Merleaux, "Equal Risks," 497-500.

demonstrated the vulnerability of reproductive and occupational health to arguments by corporations claiming to act on behalf of the interests of unborn future generations. In the midst of the controversy, women workers at American Cyanamid developed an analysis of exclusionary policies which held that they had as much a right to reproductive autonomy as to economic security and a healthy working environment. Their advocates in OCAW and, ultimately, in CRROW promoted an alternate politics of responsibility which shifted from the coercion of individuals to the recognition of collective responsibility, pushing corporations to take responsibility for the health of all workers and highlighting the innate connections between the health of the workplace and the health of surrounding communities.

## Chapter 4: Overpopulation & the Intimate Politics of Regulation

### I. Introduction: The Population Bomb

Displayed prominently on the cover of Paul Ehrlich's 1968 bestselling book, *The Population Bomb*, is the following admonition: "While you are reading these words, four people will have died from starvation. Most of them children."[1] This framing sets up the urgency of Ehrlich's central argument of impending catastrophe while making his prescription for change appear imperative: "We must have population control at home, hopefully through a system of incentives and penalties, but by compulsion if voluntary methods fail…And while this is done we must take action to reverse the deterioration of our environment before population pressure permanently ruins our planet."[2] Ehrlich framed the impending crisis of famine he predicted in terms of its threat to children's futures; population control, within his explanation, was necessary to meet the needs of a society that had outspent its resources. As he explained, "Nothing could be more misleading to our children than our present affluent society. They will inherit a totally different world, a world in which the standards, politics, and economics of the 1960's are dead."[3] Here, Ehrlich predicted a different kind of end to the postwar liberal welfare state than that imagined by neoliberals, yet nevertheless assumed its decline in the 1970s and onwards.

Ehrlich's vision resonated with other contemporaneous understandings of social, economic, and environmental decline at the tail end of the 1960s. Natasha Zaretsky has

[1] Paul R. Erhlich, *The Population Bomb* (Ballantine Books, 1968).
[2] Ibid., xi.
[3] Ibid.

argued that the sense of national decline that permeated American culture between 1968 and 1980 was intrinsically connected to a simultaneous narrative of family decline, wherein the family was positioned as both "perpetrator and victim...as the site where the origins of national decline could be discovered and where the damages wrought by it could be assessed, the family served as a symbol for the nation itself."[4] This positioning of the family and of children in particular is prominent within environmental populationism's discourses of overpopulation, wherein children are both the essential cause of the "problem" and the beneficiaries of its proposed solutions.

Most often, however, these two iterations are set up as diametrically opposed and differentiated in terms of race and class: Ehrlich's invocation of "our children," as well as those children who he predicts will die from impending starvation, are set in opposition to the future children who will simply add to the problem of "too many people" if not voluntarily or coercively preempted. While Ehrlich implicates American consumption in the making of the population crisis he predicts from the start of *The Population Bomb,*, he roots his understanding of "the problem" of "too many people" in a visit to Delhi where, he notes, he came to know the "*feel* of overpopulation."[5] In an infamous passage, Ehrlich distinguishes his prior intellectual understanding of the population explosion from his emotional experience of it through an anecdote of his family's cab ride through a slum, in which Ehrlich witnessed the streets "alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing, and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to

[4] Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 3-4.
[5] Erhlich, *The Population Bomb*, 16 (emphasis mine).

buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people."[6] As Emily Klancher Merchant has argued, this passage asserts a causal relationship between overpopulation and poverty without any evidence, instead offering a "biological explanation with a technological solution."[7] This technological, rather than structural, solution took reproduction as its primary site of regulation. Ehrlich's framing is a prime example of what Dorothy Roberts's has identified as the core logic of eugenics, where "social problems can be cured by keeping certain people from having babies and that certain groups therefore do not deserve to procreate."[8]

Erlich's *The Population Bomb* drew together earlier antecedents to place the problem of overpopulation within two contemporaneous frames of ecology and reproductive rights. The deterioration of the environment, identified by Ehrlich as an outcome of overpopulation, was "almost universally ignored by those most concerned with closing the food gap."[9] He argued that his focus on the relationship between ecology and overpopulation was distinct from "the pleas of conservationists" because it stressed that overpopulation was already immediately affecting its readers and would only continue to worsen in the future. As Ehrlich explained:

> I've shed no tears here for the passenger pigeons, now extinct, or the California condors, soon to join them…I haven't written about them, or of the pleasantness, beauty, indeed glory of many natural areas. Instead I have concentrated on things

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[6] Ibid., 15.
[7] Emily Klancher Merchant, *Building the Population Bomb* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 167; Emily Klancher Merchant, "Environmental Malthusianism and Demography," *Social Studies of Science* 52, no. 4 (2022), 547.
[8] Dorothy Roberts, Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty (Pantheon Books, 1997), 200.
[9] Erhlich, *The Population Bomb,* 46. For analysis of how concerns surrounding food shortages and soil fertility shaped Malthusianism of the early twentieth century, see: Alison Bashford, *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

> that seem to bear most directly on man. The reason is simple. In spite of all the efforts of conservationists, all the propaganda, all the beautiful pictures, the conservation battle is presently being lost.[10]

Ehrlich attributed conservationists' failure to two reasons: "The first, of course, is that nothing 'undeveloped' can long stand in the face of the population explosion. The second is that most Americans clearly don't give a damn."[11] To make Americans care, Erhlich argued that the extent of ecological effects caused by overpopulation must be made to be *felt* by readers through vivid predictions of disaster in the near future.

*The Population Bomb*, published by the Sierra Club through Ballantine Books, went on to sell more than one million copies in less than two years. Ehrlich was not content to merely diagnose the problem. His book also proposed a series of actions. The final section of the book, "What Can You Do?," delegated practices for readers to take up, including: writing letters to politicians, the business community, and the Catholic church; organizing action groups, providing positive reinforcement to politicians and corporations; and proselytizing friends and associates.[12] The book also launched the creation of Zero Population Growth (ZPG) in 1968, of which Ehrlich was a co-founder, turning the concept of zero population growth "into a social movement and even a political identity that was expressed through reproductive conduct."[13] Together, *The*

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[10] Erhlich, *The Population Bomb,* 65-6.
[11] Ibid., 66-7.
[12] Ibid., 175.
[13] In this chapter, I have used ZPG to describe the specific movement and organization formed around the concept of Zero Population Growth in the 1970s. I occasionally use the term z.p.g. to refer directly to the concept of zero population growth as it was used within but also outside of and not necessarily in reference to the organization ZPG. ZPG, the organization, took its name from the field of demography and was inspired by demographer Kingsley Davis's usage of the phrase in 1967. Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Island Press, 2005), 29-331; Bashford, *Global Population,* 352-53.

*Population Bomb* and Zero Population Growth brought environmental populationism into the mainstream of American environmental politics.

Historians have addressed population politics' multiple points of origin in the twentieth century, ranging from geopolitical concerns surrounding postwar movements for decolonization, the political alignments of the Third World amid the Cold War, and the management of transnational agricultural production, to American domestic anxieties surrounding changing demographic composition of the nation, the role and function of the welfare state, and the pollution of the environment.[14] These agendas were taken up by a range of historical actors—international bodies, national governments, the foundations and nongovernmental organizations which made up the "population establishment," demographers, grassroots movements, and individuals.[15] Thus, population politics operated at multiple levels—transnationally, nationally, and intimately. As historian Alison Bashford writes, "The polyvalence of fertility control arose in part from the scales on which reproductive politics worked; simultaneously the intimate business of personal

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[14] See: Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Belknap, 2008); Derek S. Hoff, *The State and the Stork: The Population Debate and Policy Making in US History* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Merchant, *Building the Population Bomb*; M. Murphy, *The Economization of Life* (Duke University Press, 2017); Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (Rutgers University Press, 2012).

[15] Matthew Connelly describes the "population establishment" as a global network of philanthropists, researchers, voluntary associations, and government programs which sought to manage population in the postwar period in alignment with American political and economic prerogatives. Emily Merchant uses the term to encompass such groups as the Population Council, the Ford Foundation, Planned Parenthood, and most American demographers—a group defined in opposition to "population bombers" such as biologist Paul Ehrlich, businessman Hugh Moore, and demographer Kingsley Davis. Merchant notes that the "population establishment" tended to characterize the population bombers as more inclined toward coercion. Connelly, *Fatal Misconception,* 12-14, 155; Merchant, *Building the Population Bomb*, 159, 176.

conduct, the business of states, and the business of a planetary future."[16] At this intimate level, the twentieth century family planning movement, as Nicole Bourbonnais writes in her account of family planning's global history, "brought liberation, devastation, and everything in between."[17]

Part of the challenge, then, of historicizing population politics is its multiple and overlapping streams of influence and interaction which can (or should) not be easily separated. Feminist scholars have recently emphasized the utility of the term "populationism" to clarify contemporary manifestations of population control and their multiple historical lineages.[18] As Rajani Bhatia, Jade S. Sasser, Diana Ojeda, Anne Hendrixson, Sarojini Nadimpally, and Ellen E. Foley write, "Our use of populationism draws attention to myriad ways of understanding and addressing social and environmental problems that are dis/similar to Malthusianism and prone to mechanisms that produce, reinforce, and naturalize inequalities along lines of race, class, gender and place."[19] Populationism, as political ecologist Jade Sasser has noted, has been frequently presented as a politically neutral common sense within environmentalism. As she writes, "It seems to be a natural and obvious connection: the more people there are consuming natural resources, the more those resources will inevitably be depleted and become

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[16] Bashford, *Global Population,* 354.
[17] Nicole C. Bourbonnais, *The Gospel of Family Planning: An Intimate Global History* (University of Chicago Press, 2025), Introduction, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[18] "Populationism" is also strategically useful in the aftermath of the "discursive shift" following the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, Egypt which sought to distance family planning programs from the coercive implications of "population control" while retaining populationist foundations. Rajani Bhatia et al., "A Feminist Exploration of 'Populationism': Engaging Contemporary Forms of Population Control," *Gender, Place & Culture* 27, no. 3 (2020): 334-35.
[19] Bhatia et al., "A Feminist Exploration of 'Populationism,'" 335-36.

scarce."[20] Yet, as Sasser argues, "Population has not always been thought of as a problem, and certainly not an environmental one. Rather, it has been socially constructed over time through the efforts of people who were deeply concerned with managing a range of issues."[21] The pervasiveness of this social construction has persisted despite the paucity of evidence; Sasser notes, "There is not, and never has been, a single, evidence-based model that has successfully calculated or predicted the global environmental impact of human numbers *alone.* Local context, resource consumption, polluting technologies, state- and corporate-based resource extraction and pollution, and the environmental impacts of military operations all make it impossible to produce such a number on a global scale."[22] While, as historian Alison Bashford has described, *The Population Bomb* was "so phenomenally successful that in one well-timed publishing move it at once incorporated and obliterated the generations of work that preceded it," the specifically *environmental* populationism Ehrlich and ZPG developed inevitably draws on and reinforces this longer trajectory of population control.[23] This enduring national preoccupation with populationism, and particularly its naturalization within environmentalism in the 1970s, therefore, requires political and cultural analysis of this broader context.

I use the term environmental populationism in order to attend to the ways in which groups such as ZPG and its antecedents came to incorporate the restriction of population growth as a commonsense environmental objective during the late 1960s

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[20] Sasser, *On Infertile Ground: Population Control and Women's Rights in the Era of Climate Change* (New York University Press, 2018), 49-50.
[21] Ibid., 49-50.
[22] Ibid., 50.
[23] Bashford, *Global Population*, 364.

through the mid-1970s. Such a premise, I argue, was fundamentally shaped by the contemporaneous concerns surrounding reproductive autonomy and control, changing gender relations, and perceptions of political and economic scarcity in the 1970s.

Environmental populationism deflects from structural regulation and towards intimate regulation of women's bodies, instrumentalized as sites of the reproduction of future generations and national futures.[24] As Ehrlich framed "overpopulation" as an explicitly environmental issue, his imagined solutions hinged on reproductive rights and access. It is in this sense that I argue 1970s-era environmental populationism mobilized a politics of intimate regulation which justified state interventions at the levels of individual and population reproduction while neglecting parallel state interventions into the environmental exploitation and degradation at the basis of neoliberal capitalism. This conception of intimate regulation displaces responsibility for environmental problems onto women, children, and the structure of the unregulated family, aligning the protection of future generations to the effective management of current populations and their reproductive decisions. Children are thus simultaneously positioned as the origins of the "problem" of overpopulation and the beneficiaries of its proposed solutions.

This chapter analyzes the place of reproduction within environmental populationism of the 1970s. The following section, section two, outlines the historical factors that gave rise to a definition of "overpopulation" as an environmental issue in the 1970s. Section three analyzes the emergence and evolution of Zero Population Growth

[24] My thinking on "intimate regulation" is influenced by Jade Sasser's "sexual stewardship," in which young women in the Global South are made responsible for "solv[ing] problems for the entire world" through their family planning decisions. Sasser, *On Infertile Ground*, 1-31.

(ZPG) as a movement and an organization beginning in 1968 and into the 1970s. Focusing especially on the shifting relationships between the environmental and feminist movements, this section examines the scope and limits of the framework of reproductive rights and access developed by ZPG, and the organization's approach to the politics of choice and coercion. It draws extensively from over a decade of issues of *The National Reporter*, ZPG's newsletter. Ultimately, this section explores a foundational tension within Zero Population Growth and its commitment to reproductive rights and access.

On the one hand, ZPG outlined a genuinely radical platform of abortion (and contraception) on demand, placing as significant an emphasis on rights as access and framing this position as integral to emerging environmental politics. On the other hand, the politics of ZPG were never straightforward, as the organization pursued notions of women's rights, bodily autonomy, and non-normative family making not necessarily because they were valuable aims in their own right but because of their perceived utility in reducing population growth. This tension recalls ongoing feminist discussion surrounding the line between choice and coercion, which during the 1970s took shape as a division between movements for reproductive rights, which affirmed a woman's right to abortion and contraception, and reproductive freedom, which affirmed a broader right to bodily autonomy, whether that meant fighting for abortion rights or mobilizing against sterilization abuse.[25] Historian Felicia Kornbluh describes the relationship between the abortion rights movement and the reproductive freedom movement, which encompassed

[25] Felicia Kornbluh traces the connection between this 1970s conception of "Reproductive Freedom" and the later framework of "Reproductive Justice." Felicia Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life Is a Human Life: My Mother, Our Neighbor, and the Journey from Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Justice* (Grove Press, 2023), 6.

the movement against sterilization abuse, as one of "missed connections and at times open conflict."[26] In this chapter, I consider how ZPG, through its role in politicizing reproduction, children, and familial futures in environmentalism, navigated this division. Tracking how ZPG and its predecessors mobilized a politics of intimate regulation which called for individual and state-level reproductive interventions in order to solve the population crisis, I argue that environmental populationists promoted the regulation of procreating bodies rather than polluting industries most responsible for environmental degradation, ultimately blurring the lines between choice and coercion.

## II. Population Bomb Inheritances from the 1940s-1960s

*A Microhistory: From Malthusianism to ZPG*

While *The Population Bomb* neatly ties together concurrent concerns of reproduction and ecology, its heightened concern for the problems of overpopulation, unregulated reproduction, and resource scarcity drew on numerous antecedents as well as longer currents in American culture. Theories of the environmental effects of "population explosions" had lineages not just to the late 18th century theories of British political economist Thomas Robert Malthus, who argued that human population growth in excess of earth's fixed natural limits would lead to famine and advocated for the restriction of state-supported food aid in order to stabilize the population, but also to processes long underway in the United States' colonial project. Feminist historian Rickie Solinger traces mid-twentieth century domestic population policy to a set of "first principles" established during the colonization of the United States, "when colonial leaders, animated by

[26] Ibid.

concerns about labor needs and about preserving white racial purity and white supremacy,...[created] laws and policies for addressing those concerns, thereby shaping a new racialized nation-state."[27] Reproduction, in this context, was defined as "key to solving social problems—labor needs, immigration, the so-called population bomb of the mid-twentieth century, poverty, racial discrimination, crime. Solutions flowed from the conviction that social, economic, political, and moral problems besetting the United States could be solved best if laws and policies and public opinion pressed women to reproduce or not in ways that were consistent with a particular version of the country's real needs."[28]

These first principles informed the early twentieth-century conservation movement, many of whose adherents were eugenicists who connected immigration restriction, compulsory sterilization of the "unfit," and Indigenous land dispossession to the preservation and purity of natural resources.[29] During the Progressive Era, conservationists like Madison Grant and Henry Fairfield Osborn framed new immigrants as threats to wilderness, arguing that plant and animal species, as well as the "white race" were threatened by southern European migration. Theodore Roosevelt, likewise a proponent of eugenics and conservation, fostered notions of white women's responsibility in reproducing the white race.[30] In the Cold War era, American and international

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[27] Rickie Solinger, "Bleeding across Time: First Principles of US Population Policy," in *Reproductive States: Global Perspectives on the Invention and Implementation of Population Policy*, ed. Rickie Solinger and Mie Nakachi (Oxford University Press, 2016), 63.
[28] Ibid., 67.
[29] Sasser, *On Infertile Ground*, 69-74.
[30] Merchant, "Environmental Malthusianism and Demography," 542, 548; Connelly, *Fatal Misconception,* 162; Sasser, *On Infertile Ground,* 54-9.

institutions like the United Nations increasingly adopted population as a metric of international governance, linking theories of "population explosions" to nuclear bombs in their potential to generate crises of resource scarcity, "displaced persons," and political instability.[31] As Jade Sasser argues, "demographic transition theory," a model linking population control to modernization, was less a theory than a policy blueprint; taken up by government, corporate, and philanthropic institutions, demographic analyses were used as justifications for interventions in the "Third World," a geopolitical framework established in this same period.[32]

While many of these institutions focused on population control as a tool of international governance, throughout the twentieth century in the U.S., Indigenous, Black, and Latina women as well as people categorized as "feebleminded" were subjected to sterilization abuses practiced by American governmental and medical institutions. These reproductive injustices form a constitutive backdrop for overpopulation theories of the 1960s and 1970s. Population policy of the late 1960s was particularly shaped, as Rickie Solinger notes, by the domestic context of the civil rights movement and mobilizations around racial justice, wherein domestic population control appealed to social scientists and policymakers as a convenient tool of racial backlash.[33] Conflating inner-city poverty with irresponsible sexuality and overpopulation, populationists placed the blame for social problems on reproductive behaviors. The state's interest in bringing domestic populations, particularly poor Black, Puerto Rican, and Mexican American communities, under control justified the reproductive coercion,

[31] Connolly, *Fatal Misconception,*116-18, 128-131; Sasser, *On Infertile Ground,* 75.
[32] Sasser, *Infertile Ground,* 76-9; Connelly, *Fatal Misconception,* 152-4.
[33] Solinger, "Bleeding across Time," 70-2.

including through tying eligibility for public assistance to participation in family planning programs, and the broader contraction of the welfare state.[34]

What distinguishes the populationism of this period from earlier iterations is its incorporation of contemporaneous concerns regarding ecology with those of contraception, abortion, and women's changing roles in public life. From the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, Zero Population Growth was just one part of a larger constellation of organizations that viewed reproductive rights and services as a solution to their concerns about rapid population growth and environmental degradation. Three prominent proponents of environmental populationism shaped the context for Zero Population Growth during its early years. In what follows, I first, I examine the Population Crisis Committee, an organization founded by businessman Hugh Moore which waged a media campaign that drew on the rhetoric of crisis to position overpopulation as a problem demanding extreme solutions. Then, I turn to the work of Garrett Hardin, whose defense of coercion importantly shaped ZPG and whose opposition to immigration influenced later forms of environmental nativism. The section closes with analysis of the Commission on Population and the American Future, a government project headed by John D. Rockefeller III of the Population Council which presented its own moderate vision of population stabilization which relied on the liberalization of reproductive laws and services.

Ehrlich and ZPG, like Garrett Hardin and Hugh Moore's Population Crisis Committee, represented a break from the comparatively more established population groups, such as the Rockefeller-founded Population Council. Whereas the former sought

[34] Ibid., 74-80.

to galvanize action on population by stressing the urgency of crisis, the Population Council framed itself as a more temperate member of the population field. For example, in an internal Population Council memorandum, its president, Bernard Berelson, described ZPG as "a cult paying lip service to ecology but rather lightly based in science and deeply rooted in emotion."[35] Ehrlich, in his own right, recognized how the population establishment distanced itself from upstarts which framed the population in terms of urgent crisis: "The Population Council (or at least its biggest wheels) hates my guts, those of Kingsley Davis, Garrett Hardin, and indeed anyone else who has taken an approach to population control except their 'go slow and use family planning' one."[36]

Perhaps emblematic of this dismissal is a handmade comic within the Population Council archive likening Ehrlich to Chicken Little.[37] While the establishment had greater professional legitimacy, newcomers to the population field coupled the establishment's emphasis on lobbying with discrete efforts to shape public perception of a specifically *environmental* populationism through public relations and media. Whereas Rockefeller's Commission would earn newspaper headlines in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Paul Ehrlich made several appearances on *The Tonight Show* and had an interview featured in *Playboy*, while ZPG was promoted in the folk songs of Pete Seeger and Malvina Reynolds.[38] The ZPG, therefore, drew on these earlier antecedents

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[35] Memo, Bernard Berelson to Frank W. Notestein (Nov. 11, 1970), cited in Merchant, *Building the Population Bomb,* 176-7.
[36] Letter, Paul R. Ehrlich to Richard Bowers (Mar. 14, 1969), cited in Merchant, *Building the Population Bomb,* 176-7.
[37] "Paul Ehrlich is Right," Population Council, Central Files, Box 297, Folder 2737, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY (Hereafter RAC).
[38] "Playboy Interview: Dr. Paul Ehrlich," *Playboy Magazine* (Aug. 1970), Population Council, Administrative File, Record Group 2, Box 364, Folder 3542, RAC; *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 2 (Feb. 1970); *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 10 (Nov. 1970). (Hereafter ZPG NR).

while developing a new form of environmental populationism which resonated beyond self-defined populationists and environmentalists through its engagement in contemporaneous developments surrounding feminism and reproductive autonomy in the 1970s. By emphasizing the proximity of personal- and population-level reproductive choices and environmental sustainability, ZPG, for a time, made it possible to feel the population explosion within the United States in the present, rather than the distant future.

### *The Population Crisis Committee*

Ehrlich's bestseller was inspired by "The Population Bomb," a self-published pamphlet written by Hugh Everett Moore in 1954, which was in turn inspired by 1948 bestsellers *Road to Survival* by William Vogt and *Our Plundered Planet* by Fairfield Osborn, which linked populationism, eugenics, and the conservation movement.[39] Indeed, Ehrlich credits the terms "population bomb" and "population explosion" to Moore in the opening pages of his 1968 book. Moore, who made his fortune through the Dixie Cup company, began incorporating overpopulation into the activities of the Hugh Moore Fund in 1944.[40] Moore's approach to the "problem" focused on targeting businessmen, rather than scientists and demographers; Moore apparently told one demographer, "You've been raised in academic halls. I've been raised in the market place. I'm used to presenting facts dramatically. Students of demography have talked for years and nobody listened."[41] In

[39] Merchant, "Environmental Malthusianism and Demography," 542, 548; Connelly, *Fatal Misconception,* 162; Sasser, *On Infertile Ground,* 54-59.
[40] Phyllis Tilson Piotrow, *World Population Crisis: The United States Response* (Praeger, 1973)*,* 18.
[41] Quoted in Piotrow, *World Population Crisis,* 18.

addition to publishing this pamphlet, Moore was active in population and, later, environmental circles in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1967, Moore co-founded the Population Crisis Committee (PCC) along with General William Henry Draper Jr., the leader of an Eisenhower-administration commission which recommended the U.S. add population control measures to its military aid programs. The PCC was founded with the explicit purpose of increasing public pressure to expand the population control budget of USAID.[42] In the late 1960s, the PCC lobbied Congress to require that population restriction programs be instituted as a condition for American economic aid.[43] Draper insisted to *The New York Times* that economic development within poor countries "will certainly fail unless the population problem becomes manageable."[44]

A primary initiative of the Population Crisis Committee was an advertising campaign—the Campaign to Check the Population Explosion—which, like *The Population Bomb,* sought to generate concern for the global problem of overpopulation by, as Merchant describes, "bringing the population problem home."[45] The campaign began in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* on December 29, 1967, and continued through 1969. Moore proposed two tests for every ad: "1) Will this ad help persuade the Government in Washington to set up a massive birth control program?" and "2) Will this ad persuade the American people that such a program is in their vital interest

[42] Merchant, "Environmental Malthusianism and Demography," 545, 548; Felix Belair, Jr., "Congress Urged to Double Aid for Population Control Abroad," *The New York Times,* July 31, 1969, 10.
[43] Belair, "Congress Urged to Double Aid."
[44] Ibid.
[45] Merchant, "Environmental Malthusianism and Demography," 548.

and one about which they will bestir themselves?"[46] Drawing on multiple strands of populationism, the PCC thus sought to bring together foreign policy, environmental concerns, and the state regulation of reproduction.

Using language which was later mirrored on the cover of *The Population Bomb,* the first ad in the series opened with the headline, "By the time 1968 is over, more than 3,500,000 people will die from starvation. Most of them children. Happy New Year."[47] The advertisement emphasized that federal funding for food aid would be essentially negated in the absence of efforts to curb population growth. Aiming to raise the significance and urgency of this perceived problem, the advertisement drew on the prospects of "our" future children, writing, "There's a lot at stake. Not only the lives of the starving of the world. But our lives. And the lives of our children. A hungry world can never be a peaceful world." The ad closed with its signature image of a lit bomb, captioned, "The Population Bomb Keeps Ticking."[48]

Yet populationists stressed that feeling the problem of overpopulation globally, as Ehrlich had described, must be connected to feeling the problem locally. Letters from population control advocates who reviewed the campaign attested as much. H.M. Warren appraised the series positively, noting, "Your series of ads has been good–'Famine Stalks the Earth' is the best of them, I think. That caption has some shock effect."[49] However, he

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[46] Memo from Hugh Moore to Emerson Foote, Harry Hicks, and J. Drew Catlin" (Jan. 5, 1968), Box 17, Folder 15, Hugh Moore Fund (HMF) Collection, Princeton Mudd Library.
[47] Campaign to Check the Population Explosion (CCPE), Advertisement, *The New York Times* (Dec. 29, 1967), L54.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Letter, H.M. Warren to Hugh Moore (n.d.), Box 17, Folder 15, HMF Collection, Princeton.

noted, “If you plan to run others I would suggest bringing the shock much closer to home–caption and lead copy express the threat, not to India (that's far away), but to Your son or grandson, Your daughter or granddaughter; e.g. ‘Will This Hand Reach Your Son's Throat, Your Daughter's Breast?’” Striving for a “shock effect that strikes home,” he encouraged the series to adopt “a great deal more of ‘scare’” in order to heighten public alarm and, ultimately, government intervention.[50]

The series ultimately incorporated a range of tactics. Some iterations drew on existing racialized discourses in the United States surrounding families reliant on public assistance and anxieties around perceived spikes in urban crime and disorder, calling on the government to shift from funding welfare to funding birth control and positioning population control as a means of crime control.[51] Others emphasized a brutal “us versus them” dynamic between the United States and developing countries, advocating for a shift in federal spending from food aid to population control.[52] Several advertisements focused more concretely on population as an environmental issue, framing unregulated population growth as an “underlying cause” of environmental pollution.[53] Still others in the series focused on presenting population increase as an issue in and of itself, which would only exacerbate other concerns of the time. One edition from May 25, 1969 featured a bar graph charting U.S. population growth under the bold text, “How many

[50] Ibid.
[51] Letter from Elmo Roper to General William Draper (Oct. 1, 1969), Box 16, Folder 24, HMF Collection, Princeton Mudd Library; CCPE, Advertisement, *The New York Times* (Mar. 29, 1968), 42; CCPE, Advertisement, *The New York Times* (Mar. 10, 1968), E5; CCPE, Advertisement, *The New York Times* (Dec. 8, 1968), 5E.
[52] CCPE, Advertisement, *The New York Times* (Feb. 23, 1969), E5; CCPE, Advertisement, *The New York Times* (July 19, 1968), 36.
[53] CCPE, Advertisement, *The New York Times* (June 12, 1968), 48.

people do you want in your country?" and another from August 17, 1969 stated simply, "Whatever your cause, it's a lost cause unless we control population."[54] Such statements sought to construct a commonsense around population expansion as a problem in and of itself. They also insisted that population control be taken up as "*your*" issue, asking readers to take action by framing population control as central to their own most intimate interests. As the May 25, 1969 ad concluded, "It is up to you–and citizens like you–to decide how many people you want in the United States. The well-being of your children and your children's children depends on you."

The Campaign to Check the Population Explosion frequently drew on conceptions of endangered futures for future generations to problematize population and promote its control in the present. An edition from June 30, 1968 featured a nearly full-page image of a white baby under the seemingly incongruous headline, "Threat to Peace." The text of the ad responded to the question, "How can one helpless child possibly affect the peace of the world?" by contending, "When you multiply him by 2 million–the number of children born every week in the world–the problem begins to come into focus" and later adding, "It is only being realistic to say that skyrocketing population growth may doom the world we live in." Accompanied by a recurring chart overviewing federal spending on government programs, the ad framed the population explosion as emerging from the global imbalance between births and deaths resulting from worldwide health measures. This ad and the series more broadly thus suggested at once that *children's futures* were a primary rationale for restricting population growth and thus preventing environmental

[54] CCPE, Advertisement, *The New York Times* (May 25, 1969), E5; CCPE, Advertisement, *The New York Times* (Aug. 17, 1969), E5.

crises while, at the same time, *future children* were problematized as a potential cause of environmental catastrophe.

In August 1970, Stewart Ogilvy, a *Fortune* magazine editor and environmental activist who in the year prior helped to found Friends of the Earth, assessed that the PCC advertising campaign had been effective in its goal "to stimulate others," especially government officials, based on letters received from President Nixon and U.S. senators, not to mention recent headlines. As he explained, "In no small part because of the work of HMF [Hugh Moore Fund] advertising, every U.S. Congressman is well aware of population control and today most of them accept, passively, the need for it. But few politicians will undertake an active crusade for a cause, no matter how good, unless they have considerable backing from their constituents–unless they feel the timing is right." To that end, he encouraged the campaign to shift targets from governing officials and towards "stimulating individuals into action."[55] Among other possibilities, he proposed distributing free copies of Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb.*

Beyond the Population Crisis Committee's media campaign, Moore was active in coordinating power across the population movement. Moore generated fundraising support for Planned Parenthood, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and the Population Reference Bureau, and he contributed to the reestablishment of a former eugenics lobbying group, the Association for Voluntary Sterilization (AVS) in the 1960s, later becoming its president.[56] Under his leadership, Moore coordinated the participation of AVS in the National Conference on "Conservation and Voluntary Sterilization: A New

[55] Letter from Stewart Ogilvy to Hugh Moore, "Re: HMF Advertising," (Aug. 11, 1970), Box 17, Folder 15, HMD, Princeton Mudd Library.
[56] Piotrow, *World Population* Crisis, 18, 49; Connelly, *Fatal Misconception,* 207.

Alliance for Progress" in October 1969.[57]

The conference was depicted in *The New York Times* as the "first to bring together conservation and birth control groups," with the article concluding that "yesterday's meeting was regarded as evidence that most conservation groups now accept the population explosion as close to the roots of their problems."[58] At the same conference, Ehrlich, who then served as a member of the AVS Board of Directors, was featured as a speaker.[59] At the event, Ehrlich opened his remarks with the argument, "The first thing that anyone who wishes to consider himself a conservationist should do is stop having children," and then went on to endorse voluntary sterilization as "one of the best means of conservation available to us."[60] In his speech Ehrlich criticized the "frantic push to increase the Gross National Product" and "the runaway polluting and resource consumption of growth-oriented industrialized countries" which instead should direct their resources toward the "agricultural development of the poor nations," with all efforts directed toward the target of "giv[ing] every citizen of the world adequate food, shelter, and clothing." The means to this end, however, was through the constraint of reproduction. Ehrlich concluded, "But there is no hope whatsoever of success without population control, and a major portion of our effort must be directed toward that goal."[61]

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[57] Piotrow, *World Population Crisis,* 189; Population Council Records, Organization File, Association for Voluntary Sterilization (AVS), 1969-1974, Series 1, Record Group 2, Box 3, Folder 25. RAC.
[58] Bayard Webster, "Overpopulation Unites 2 Groups," *The New York Times,* Oct. 2, 1969, 49.
[59] Piotrow, *World Population Crisis,* 189; Population Council Records, AVS, Series 1, Record Group 2, Box 3, Folder 25, RAC.
[60] "Summary of Remarks by Paul R. Ehrlich, Oct. 1, 1969," Population Council Records, AVS, Series 1, Record Group 2, Box 3, Folder 25, RAC.
[61] Ibid.

Thus even Ehrlich's critique of unequal resource distribution, often absent from such contemporaneous conversations among populationists, was nevertheless inherently tied to his perception of population and, specifically, reproductive control as a necessary means to the end of his vision of transformation.

In 1972, the Population Crisis Committee also collaborated with Planned Parenthood/World Population on an educational campaign within a *New York Times* Sunday supplement. The project was intended to "educate the American people on the facts of world population and on the need to move toward populations stabilization by voluntary means as soon as possible."[62] The PCC distributed free copies to teachers, administrators, and students under a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, and an abbreviated version was published in a May 1972 issue of *Senior Scholastic,* with a survey indicating use of the supplement for population education purposes by over two million high school social studies students.[63]

Within the population field, the Population Crisis Committee was notable for its efforts to shape public opinion through controversial means. Consciously radical groups like the Population Crisis Committee and, later, ZPG, notably amplified the efforts of the self-described moderates under the umbrella of the population establishment. [64] Another

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[62] This educational campaign was developed by representatives from PCC, PPWP, the Ford Foundation, the Population Reference Bureau, the Office of Population within USAID, and the CPGAF. Rockefeller Family and Associates (RFA), General Files, Series 20, Record Group 3, Box 1055, Folder 4. RAC.
[63] Memo, Lawrence R. Kegan to John D. Rockefeller III, "Report on the *New York Times* Supplement" (Apr. 12, 1973), RFA, General Files, Series 20, Record Group 3, Box 1056, Folder 1, RAC.
[64] Letter, John D. Rockefeller III to Gen. William H. Draper, Jr. (Jan. 9, 1969); Letter, David K. Lelewer to John D. Rockefeller III, "Population Crisis Committee" (Nov. 2, 1972), RFA, General Files, Series 20, Record Group 3, Box 1056, Folder 1, RAC.

such figure at the fringes was Garrett Hardin, whose widely read essays on the urgency of reproductive regulation influenced emergent conceptions of environmental populationism.

### *Garrett Hardin & "Mutual Coercion Mutually Agreed Upon"*[65]

Microbiologist Garrett Hardin's contribution to environmental populationism was grounded in his willingness to blur the lines between choice and coercion when it came to solving the population problem. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Hardin plainly stated his perception of the forthcoming competition for resources which would, he argued, necessitate strict forms of reproductive regulation at the levels of the individual and the population.

Hardin's most widely read essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons," was published in *Science* in December 1968, while Hardin was a professor of biology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The essay was based on the premise that "a finite world can only support a finite population; therefore, population growth must eventually equal zero."[66] In service of this aim, Hardin challenged the notion he believed to be common among Americans that the population problem could be solved "without relinquishing any of the privileges they now enjoy."[67] Hardin's intervention was to call for a shift from "technical" to "moral" solutions to overpopulation; whereas technocratic visions might espouse the values of Adam Smith, assuming that "decisions reached individually will, in fact, be the best decisions for entire society," he argued that "we" must abandon the

[65] Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162, no. 3859 (Dec. 13, 1968): 1244, 1246-47.
[66] Ibid., 1244, 1244.
[67] Ibid.

"present policy of laissez-faire reproduction" in favor of a system which would not rely on individual conscience, but rather on what he termed "mutual coercion mutually agreed upon."[68] Hardin thus stated plainly his advocacy for efforts to compel particular reproductive outcomes. Centering reproduction as his primary site of intervention, Hardin assessed, "the freedom to breed is intolerable" and "will bring ruin to all."[69]

Hardin was not interested in schemes of redistribution so much as in schemes of mutually enforced social control resulting from what he understood as the essential scarcity of resources. A redistributive society, accordingly, was the major site of his critique, as it purportedly rewarded behavior–and specifically reproductive behavior–that conflicted with the public interest. As Hardin explained,

> If each human family were dependent only on its own resources; if the children of improvident parents starved to death; if, thus, overbreeding broad its own 'punishment' to the germ line—then there would be no public interest in controlling the breeding of families. But our society is deeply committed to the welfare state and hence is confronted with another aspect of the tragedy of the commons....To couple the concept of freedom to breed with the belief that everyone born has an equal right to the commons is to lock the world into a tragic course of action.[70]

Despite targeting "irresponsible parenting" and "overbreeding" in allegedly race neutral terms, Hardin's rhetoric resonated with anti-welfare discourses of the era which positioned women of color and Black women specifically as drains on public resources and, ultimately, in opposition to the "public interest." Hardin thus argued that *both* state and natural resources were threatened by the absence of controls. Whereas in this essay his proposed controls were largely social–as he described, "The social arrangements that

[68] Ibid., 1244, 1246-7.
[69] Ibid., 1244, 1248.
[70] Ibid., 1246.

produce responsibility are arrangements that create coercion of some sort"–later his writing would turn to more specifically state administered controls.[71] The essay's publication in the academic journal *Science* lent an imprimatur of credibility to his arguments.

Hardin's subsequent essays "Everybody's Guilty: The Ecological Dilemma" (1970), "The Right to Breed" (1971), and "Lifeboat Ethics" (1974) extended his public advocacy of population control. In these publications, Hardin made the abstract terms of "The Tragedy of the Commons" more concrete. The essays drew on concepts popularized by the environmental movement and the first Earth Day in April 1970, including "ecological systems" as explored in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, notions of universalism and ecological guilt, and metaphors of "spaceship earth," but brought these concepts into the context of overpopulation as the most urgent of environmental problems.[72] "Everyone's Guilty" developed the term "popollution" to argue that "pollution will not be controlled unless population is controlled."[73] To bring population under control, he argued, would require a shift from advocacy for a "purely voluntary system of birth control": "if we try to control population by an appeal to individual consciences, we set up a selective system that favors the conscienceless…In the long run, some form of coercion–gentle or severe, explicit or cryptic–will have to be employed."[74] The short term thus required the cultivation of "voluntarism and persuasion to help create

[71] Ibid., 1247.
[72] Garrett Hardin, "Everybody's Guilty: The Ecological Dilemma," *California Medicine: The Western Journal of Medicine* 113, no. 5 (Nov. 1970): 41; Garrett Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor," *Psychology Today*, Sept. 1974.
[73] Hardin, "Everybody's Guilty," 44.
[74] Ibid., 45.

a climate of opinion that can some day support stronger measures."[75] More specifically, he called for four stages: 1) voluntary control over reproduction, including the "complete availability" of abortion and sterilization in the "fullest cultural, psychological, and economic senses," 2) the relief of pronatalist pressures toward motherhood, 3) tax incentives to diminish reproduction, and 4) "positive community control of the number of children produced."[76] On this final tenet, he concluded his argument by intoning that the full social control of births would function "for the good of all society; of posterity especially."[77] Population control, therefore, was in the interest of future children. Despite the title of the essay, the emphasis of Hardin's argument throughout was on women's reproductive accountability for the perceived crisis of overpopulation.

Hardin's "The Right to Breed," published in *The New York Times* on May 16, 1971, set forth the argument that the violence associated with reproductive coercion was more rightly placed on reproductive choice, as summed up in the argument, "freedom to procreate equals freedom to starve children."[78] While acknowledging the origins of public concern around the right of families to determine their own family size, including Nazi eugenics and the specter of *1984*-style totalitarianism, he warned that, because of the overpopulation of "the space ship we call Earth," the "right to breed" was, in fact, suicidal. Here, Hardin made his case for z.p.g. as a concept and policy, arguing that population control in the present would obviate the need for bleaker means of control in the future. As he concluded, "It is not a question of freedom vs. nonfreedom. If we

[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 46.
[77] Ibid., 47.
[78] Garrett Hardin, "The Right to Breed," *The New York Times,* May 6, 1971, L 43.

defend the freedom to breed, we shall ultimately lose all other freedoms as a result of unbearable overcrowding. By denying the right of individuals to breed without limit we can at least make it possible to preserve other freedoms that may, on examination, be deemed more precious than the freedom to breed."[79] The article's appearance in the *Times*, which introduced Hardin as a professor of human ecology at the University of California, legitimized Hardin's strident argument in favor of coercion.

Whereas "Everyone's Guilty" and "The Right to Breed" focused on birth control, in "Lifeboat Ethics" Hardin shifted his attention to immigration and foreign aid.[80] From the start of the essay, Hardin distinguished himself from the consensus within environmentalist thought, arguing that the "spaceship" metaphor, used in environmentalism to signal collective responsibility for a shared commons, was foundationally flawed in its assumption that all people on earth possessed "an equal right to an equal share of its resources." With his ongoing distrust of "voluntary restraint" and individual conscience, the thrust of the piece is that resource redistribution would lead to universal demise. Rather than a spaceship of contained yet shared resources, Hardin presented his ruthless interpretation through the metaphor of the lifeboat, which, were it to take on all those needing assistance, would inevitably sink. Like his advocacy of the social control of births, checks on immigration and foreign aid were proposed as tough but necessary in a world heading toward environmental ruin, in which only some nations could be saved. The survival of *some* future generations would, for Hardin, vindicate such undesirable tactics: "For the foreseeable future, our survival demands that we

[79] Ibid.
[80] Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics."

govern our actions by the ethics of a lifeboat, harsh though they may be. Posterity will be satisfied with nothing less."[81]

Hardin and Ehrlich, writing in the same period and no doubt amplifying each others' prominence, shared certain goals relating to overpopulation but distinguished their means. Hardin described himself as an original founder of ZPG who withdrew from the organization over concern that ZPG's focus on university audiences would prevent the spread of its message to the "class" who most needed to hear it. Hardin later recounted saying, "'look, we are appealing, only to university audiences. If we persuade all these university women to have fewer children than normal, what we're doing is extinguishing a certain class of people, the ones, in other words, that get the message about sterilizing.' I said, 'We have to do better than that.' but they wouldn't buy that at all."[82] More so than Ehrlich, Hardin endorsed targeted forms of population control aimed at poor people of color, with a particularly nationalist, nativist approach.[83] Hardin would pursue the

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[81] Ibid.

[82] FAIR Oral History Project, "Garrett Hardin Interview with Otis Graham," interview from Mar. 9, 1997 (updated June 9, 2003), *The Garrett Hardin Society,* https://www.garretthardinsociety.org/gh/gh_graham_interview.html.

[83] A future chapter will focus on the efforts of figures like Hardin and John Tanton (a former ZPG president and Sierra Club member who founded FAIR), and organizations like ZPG, Sierra Club, and FAIR to align racialized politics of immigration control to environmentalism during the 1970s-1990s. For now though, it is worth noting this faultline between Hardin and Ehrlich as well as its fundamental blurriness as both figures progressed in their leadership of environmental populationism. Feminist scholars and historians of immigration have catalogued anti-immigrant populationism in this as well as earlier periods. See for example: Elena R. Gutiérrez, *Fertile Matters: The Politics of Mexican-Origin Women's Reproduction* (University of Texas Press, 2008); Daniel Denvir, *All-American Nativism: How the Bipartisan War on Immigrants Explains Politics as We Know It* (Verso, 2020); Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Stanford University Press, 2008); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (University of California Press, 2005); Lina-Maria Murillo, *Fighting for*

alignment of racialized immigration politics to environmentalism more concertedly through his leadership of Population/Environment Balance in the early 1980s and the Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR) in the late 1970s through the mid-1990s.[84] Operating self-consciously outside of the population establishment, Hardin popularly introduced a current of hard-lined coercion into environmental populationism which would be difficult for self-proclaimed moderates and grassroots activists to shake.

### *The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future*

The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future (CPGAF) was proposed and signed into law by President Richard Nixon on March 16, 1970. Building on his call for a national growth policy in his State of the Union address earlier that year, Nixon's endorsement of the Commission represented a significant federal investment in population as a problem.[85] In his message to Congress in support of the bill, Nixon attested, "When future generations evaluate the record of our time, one of the most important factors in their judgement will be the way in which we responded to population growth. Let us act in such a way that those who come after us—even as they lift their eyes beyond earth's bounds–can do so with pride in the planet on which they live, with gratitude to those who lived on it in the past, and with continuing confidence in its

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*Control: Power, Reproductive Care, and Race in the US-Mexico Borderlands* (University of North Carolina Press Books, 2024).

[84] FAIR Oral History Project, "Garrett Hardin Interview with Otis Graham."

[85] Richard Nixon, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union" (Jan. 22, 1970) *The American Presidency Project,* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/annual-message-the-congress-the-state-the-union-2.

future."[86] The Commission's mandate was to analyze population growth and distribution within the United States between 1970 and 2000 and to propose recommendations for how the government should respond to problems of rapid growth, population density, and the effects of population on the environment and resource consumption. Led by John D. Rockefeller III, a population establishment leader who founded the Population Council in 1962 and, at the time of his appointment, chaired the Population Council and Rockefeller Foundation, the commission included figures from the population establishment, such as Bernard Berelson of the Population Council, academics, demographers, philanthropists, businessmen, and union leaders.[87]

The Commission took place amid a changing landscape for abortion law and politics. In April 1970, New York passed a law legalizing abortion until the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy, a compromise between activists seeking the total repeal of laws restricting abortion and those working to reform such laws to legalize abortion under certain conditions. The New York law nevertheless significantly expanded access to reproductive autonomy and set a path for further legal changes.[88] In December 1970, Nixon approved the Family Planning Services and Population Act of 1970, colloquially known as the Tydings Bill named for Senator Joseph Tydings who was active in its

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[86] Nixon, "Presidential Message to Congress on Population" (July 18, 1969) in Population Crisis Committee, "Text of Message by Richard M. Nixon, President of the United States, July 18, 1969," Population Council, Central Files, Box 296, Folder 2732, RAC.

[87] Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Statement by the President" (June 4, 1970); "Members of the National Commission on Population Growth and the American Future"; "Remarks of the President Upon Signing the Bill on Population Growth and the American Future," Population Council, Central Files, Box 296, Folder 2732, RAC.

[88] For extensive discussion of the New York abortion law and the organizing behind it, see Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life.*

passage. The bill was framed as a national commitment to expand contraceptive research and access to family planning education and services.[89] At a meeting shortly following the passage of the Tydings Bill, Commissioners debated whether they were ready to speak to the question of abortion and whether it should be addressed within the Interim Report.[90] While some members saw abortion's relevance to the question of population growth and unwanted fertility, others questioned whether, by addressing abortion, they might end up directing outsized public attention to that issue, overshadowing all other aspects of the report. One of the Commission's few female members, Grace Olivarez, argued that she would refuse to endorse an abortion recommendation that did not include a provision for vasectomies, reasoning that the commission had continuously focused on women's role in pregnancy and birth while neglecting men's role. Debates within the group centered on whether or not to make explicit reference to abortion or absorb it into a larger discussion of family planning services.[91] This would remain contentious over the two-year tenure of the Commission.

As it carried out its work, the Commission provided opportunities for the public and relevant groups to weigh in and respond to questions of population, reproduction, women's rights, and environmentalism. In November 1970, invited speakers Paul Ehrlich and Barry Commoner addressed the relationship between population and ecology.[92]

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[89] Nixon, "Statement on Signing the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act of 1970," (Dec. 26, 1970), *The American Presidency Project,* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ documents/statement-signing-the-family-planning-services-and-population-research-act-1970.
[90] CPGAF, "Summary of the Commission Meetings" (Dec. 21-22, 1970), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2750, RAC.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid. For more extensive discussion of the competing views of Ehrlich and Commoner, see: Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment,* 181-84, 187-88.

Whereas Ehrlich linked increasing population to a disproportionate impact on environmental deterioration, Commoner attributed deterioration to certain types of technology, rather than people. Within his statement, Ehrlich predicted the massive famines that would impact underdeveloped countries before the end of the twentieth century in the absence of major action. Ehrlich called for a strong presidential statement addressing the severity of the population problem, alongside the development and accessibility of "perfected contraception" and abortion on demand as methods to address the problem. On the question of coercion, Ehrlich urged local control and voluntary measures, while also adding that "if the problem degenerates to where coercive measures are required, it probably means it is too late."[93] Commoner, in contrast, argued that population growth is a political and social question that should be developed by the public, rather than by experts: "The moment you say that the only way to make society work is to cut the number of people, you are saying that society is not workable." Instead, Commoner called for changes in the production and consumption of non-renewable resources.[94] Thus, while Commoner presented a version of environmental population centered on structural change, Erhlich's attention, and largely that of the Commission, remained trained on reproduction.

The Commission's Interim Report, submitted to Congress and the President on March 16, 1971, outlined the questions raised by the Commission about the probable impact of future population growth. Behind the scenes, members of the Commission disagreed over the severity of population growth as a problem, with some members

[93] CPGAF, "Summary of the Commission Meetings" (Dec. 21-22, 1970).
[94] Ibid.

arguing population should be characterized as "an intensifier and multiplier of whatever social political and ecological problems are facing the country" while others saw it as the "root cause" of such problems.[95] The published Interim Report ultimately balanced these interpretations, declaring, "Our view, at this stage of our inquiry, is that population growth of magnitude we have had since World War II has aggravated many of the Nation's problems and made their solution more difficult."[96] In this respect, the Commission distinguished itself from groups like PCC and ZPG, offering a more temperate view while nonetheless contributing to the framing of population as a serious problem.

The interim report also largely delayed clarifying the Commission's position on fertility control, contraception, and abortion as well as the status of women to the final report. Members of the Commission recognized the significance of its position on abortion; as Commissioner Bernard Berelson wrote in a letter to the project's executive director, Charles F. Westoff, "Note that if we do what everyone is urging us to do, we would with one minor exception be recommending for the first time as national policy the provision of induced abortion for demographic reasons, as against medical or philosophical ones. This obviously ties in with your growing appreciation of the desirability of hooking demographic consequences to other things that are good in their own right (in this case, for example, the freedom of women)."[97]

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[95] Ibid.
[96] CPGAF, "An Interim Report to the President and the Congress from the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future," Mar. 16, 1971, U.S. Government Printing Office, 4, Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2752, RAC.
[97] Letter, Bernard Berelson to Dr. Charles F. Westoff (Apr. 19, 1971), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2734, RAC.

Following the publication of the interim report and at the halfway mark of the project's two-year tenure, the Commission initiated a series of public hearings to be held in Washington, D.C. (April 14-15); Los Angeles, California (May 3-4); Little Rock, Arkansas (June 7-8); Chicago, Illinois (June 21-22); and New York, New York (September 27-28).[98] The hearings were intended to demonstrate that the final report would "reflect a broad public involvement, thus foreclosing possible criticism that it was prepared by a group of cloistered 'experts.'"[99]

Just a few weeks before the hearings began, Nixon issued a statement recommending that abortion law be administered by states rather than at the federal level, adding his own answer to the abortion question: "From personal and religious beliefs I consider abortion an unacceptable form of population control. Further, unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand, I can not square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life—including the life of the yet unborn….A good and generous people will not opt, in my view, for this kind of alternative to its social dilemmas."[100] While, in this statement, Nixon was commenting on guidelines relating to the performance of abortions at military base hospitals, its larger implications set some of the context for the discussion of abortion within the Commission's report. Following the first hearing sessions, *The Washington Post* reported, "Abortion apparently is the single most divisive issue facing the Commission," with its members largely leaning toward

[98] "Summary of the Commission Meeting" (Apr. 13, 1971), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2750, RAC.
[99] Memo, Gerald Lipson to All Commissioners, "Planning the Hearings" (Feb. 3, 1971), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2758, RAC.
[100] "Nixon Abortion Statement," *The New York Times*, Apr. 4, 1971, L28.

"legalizing abortion as a means of controlling population growth."[101]

During the hearings, witnesses spoke to a variety of concerns relating to population, reproduction, and their relationship. Following internal discussions within the Commission initiated by Dr. Paul B. Cornely regarding the absence of Black perspectives within the Commission, the Washington D.C. hearings hosted two witnesses who would address the question of whether population programs represented a form of "black genocide." The two witnesses, Charles V. Willie of Syracuse University and Naomi Gray, a family planning consultant, stressed the importance of self-determination, emphasizing the need for community control of family planning and the broader concerns of health, welfare, and economic security within the Black community that superseded the population problem.[102] Subsequent press coverage of the hearings emphasized concerns around racialized coercion; Gray cited the recent walkout of the Congress on Population and Environment's Black caucus, and assessed, "To many blacks, the zero sounds like zero black children" and "the only population control that I see blacks being interested in is the control of the white population which threatens to use up all of the resources in both the white and the non-white worlds."[103] Also in D.C., Wilma Scott Heide, then Chairwoman of the National Organization of Women (NOW)'s board, addressed the assumptions of sexism in the interim report which framed the changing role of women as a laudable outcome rather than an end unto itself. Heide argued, "On the

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[101] William Chapman, "Population Unit Hears Critic of Nixon's Stand on Abortion," *The Washington Post* (Apr. 15, 1971), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2758, RAC.
[102] "Summary of the Commission Meeting" (Mar. 16-17, 1971 and Apr. 13, 1971), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2750, RAC.
[103] Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2758, RAC.

question of overpopulation and the quality of our social and total environment: no matter how safe, effective, and universally available is any contraceptive method for women or men, women will continue to be reproducers of excess children and exploited by the consumership role instead of producers of ideas, inventions, art, and leadership unless they have viable significant alternatives to motherhood as their raison d'etre from the second of birth."[104] Heide also questioned the makeup of the Commission, of which only four of twenty-four members were women, and the near absence of feminist viewpoints. Such inquiries had been raised internally within the Commission.[105] Heide called for the group to meet its "tremendous potential" by acting to "publicly legitimatize and specifically support the women's rights and liberation movement."[106] As she reasoned, the Commission could be put to more productive use if it devoted "less attention to passive demographic studies of society's drift to population patterns, less computerizing of mobility patterns in sophisticated research constructs, less quantification of the consequences of the status quo and its trends," and more to the Commission's potential role in liberalizing reproductive rights and access and broadening the social roles of women.[107]

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[104] Wilma Scott Heide, "Testimony for the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future" (Apr. 14, 1971), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2751, RAC.
[105] For example, Commissioner Bernard Berelson asked Emily Moore, a Population Council staff member, for guidance on the discussion of women by the Commission. In a memo, Moore responded to this inquiry by writing "May I say quite frankly that while I/we are delighted that you and Charlie have asked for our guidance on this matter, we would all be happier if a real feminist–male or female–were present to defend the view when challenged." Memo, Emily Moore to Bernard Berelson, "Presidential Commission's discussion on women," (Oct. 21, 1970), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2751, RAC.
[106] Heide, "Testimony for CPGAF."
[107] Ibid.

Heide's position was not, however universally accepted. At the Los Angeles hearings, anti-abortion speakers urged the Commission to oppose the use of abortion as a population control measure.[108] And once again in Little Rock and Chicago, Black witnesses expressed their skepticism of programs dedicated to the distant problem of population, overlooking the "'more basic'" question of the existing unequal distribution of resources, which prevented the country's poor from participating in the quality of life and resource consumption in question within the hearings.[109] Reverend Jesse Jackson, in his Chicago testimony, contended, "The total population thesis is founded on false premises."[110] Describing population programs as means of controlling and removing "the weak, the poor, quite likely the black and other minorities whose relative increase in population threatens the white case in this nation," Jackson called instead for a "a hunger

[108] James Wrightson, "Abortion Foes Have a Day and Say Before Nixon Population Probe Group," *Sacramento Bee* (May 4, 1971); Gilbert Bailey, "Picketed by Birth-Limit Foes, U.S. Panel Seeks Curb on L.A. Sprawl," *Long Beach Independent* (May 4, 1971); "Population Panel Hears Smog, Abortion Views," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* (May 5, 1971); "Students Urge Sex Education" *Los Angeles Examiner* (May 5, 1971); Richard Dalrymple, "A New Champion for the Unborn," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* (May 8, 1971); Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2758, RAC.

[109] CPGAF, "List of Witnesses, Little Rock Public Hearing"; "Biographical Sketch, Little Rock Public Hearing"; Edwin A. Roberts, Jr., "The Black Fear of 'Genocide' in Birth-Control Programs, *National Observer* (June 21, 1971); "Rockefeller (John) Delivers Warning at Population Talks" *Arkansas Democrat* (June 7, 1971); "Losing Population Fight," *Arkansas Democrat* (June 8, 1971); "Social Welfare Plans Benefit the Affluent, Not Poor, Walker Says," *Arkansas Gazette* (June 8, 1971); "Social Welfare for the Affluent," *Kansas Gazette* (June 9, 1971), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2758, RAC.

[110] Robert Signer, "Birth Curbs Misused, Jesse Says," *Chicago Daily News* (June 22, 1971); "Rev. Jackson Says: Spread the Wealth, Don't Control Births," *Chicago Today* (June 22, 1971); Rudolph Unger, "Jesse Hits Priority of Population Limit," *The Chicago Tribune* (June 23, 1971); Michael M. Conway, "Birth Control a form of Genocide: Jackson," *Chicago Sun-Times* (June 23, 1971), Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2758, RAC.

control and removal policy" rather than a "birth control program."[111] These testimonies demonstrate the plurality of views on populationism and its deep imbrication in pressing issues of resource distribution, reproductive autonomy, and racial and gender equality.

Before the publication of the Commission's final report, Paul Ehrlich shared his recommendations at John D. Rockefeller III's request. Ehrlich relayed a "dream list" while noting "you and your colleagues are surely the best judges of how far you can usefully go."[112] In his recommendations, Ehrlich clarified his own positions on the origins of environmental problems and the stakes of reproductive autonomy. Ehrlich argued that the Commission should affirm that "control of population and environmental quality are not just within the legitimate sphere of governmental activity but are, indeed, the duty of any responsible government." On this last point, he clarified, "Emphasize, however, that population control in the United States can probably be achieved without coercion if we act with alacrity now." Other recommendations centered more directly on reproduction and the issue of racial coercion; Ehrlich recommended that the Commission "expose the false dichotomy promoted by the family planning conservatives that the only alternatives are full access to contraceptives and coercion," noting that the Commission could distance itself from accusations of coercion through advocating "strong governmental support for women's liberation." And, finally, he recommended that the Commission should "deal forthrightly with the problems of differential reproduction of groups within our society and with the fears of minorities about genocide." As he advised, "Admit that many affluent whites would like to restrict the reproduction of

[111] Ibid.
[112] Letter, Dr. Paul Ehrlich to John D. Rockefeller III, (Aug. 6, 1971), John D. Rockefeller III Papers, Series 3, Subseries 4, Box 69, Folder 456, RAC.

Blacks, Chicanos, and others while merrily continuing on their own thoughtless course. Discuss the disproportionate environmental impact of the affluent, and make the point that the best way to erase fear of genocide among the minorities is to erase the white racism which is its source."[113] Here, Ehrlich demonstrated a strong investment in differentiating between environmental populationism and racialized population control, yet left the door open to coercion should more voluntary and even liberatory measures fail.

The final report issued by the Commission projected moderate consensus despite its underlying disagreements. Finding that the results of the inquiry did not "add up to 'alarm' or 'crisis,'" Berelson argued that the evidence should push the Commission in a "more moderate, more focused, perhaps more modest direction" and narrower scope, such that the report would emphasize the group's status as a "'population' commission– not a commission on health, governmental organization or capacity, or race, or minority ethnic status, or women, or children."[114] On the question of reproduction, the report made five recommendations: 1) "The elimination of legal restrictions on access to

[113] Ibid.

[114] Prior to the Report's publication, numerous Commissioners provided dissenting statements; Paul B. Corneley challenged the racial make-up of the Commission and the reticence of its leadership to incorporate minority perspectives, both in terms of race and on larger questions including opposition to "abortion on demand," immigration, and the distribution of contraceptive advice and services to minors. James Rummonds argued that there was a "real conflict of goals and values" within the Commission belied by the "exclusive monopoly of one limited perspective that effectively dominates this opposition," and he urged that alternative perspectives be published alongside the resulting report. Paul B. Corneley, "Statement for the President's Commission on Population Growth and America's Future"; Memo, J. Rummonds to Commissioners, "ruminations," (Dec. 16, 1971); "Bernard Berelson dictation by telephone" (Dec. 21, 1971); Letter Draft, Bernard Berelson to Commission (Dec. 20, 1971); Population Council, Box 299, Folder 2735, RAC.

contraceptive information and services, and the development by the states of affirmative legislation to permit minors to receive such information and services"; 2) "The elimination of administrative restrictions on access to voluntary contraceptive sterilization"; 3) "The liberalization of state abortion laws along the lines of the New York State statute"; 4) "Greater investments in research and development of improved methods of contraception"; and 5) "Full support of all health services related to fertility, programs to improve training for and delivery of these services, an extension of government family planning project grant programs, and the development of a program of family planning education."[115] Although the report was published with separate statements of dissent from eleven of its twenty-four members, with several expressing their opposition to the liberalization of abortion laws, its conclusions nevertheless represented a significant endorsement of reproductive rights and access to quality reproductive care.[116] This significant step was validated, notably, in and through its relevance to the more moderate question of population.

Dissent within the Commission, however, was quickly eclipsed by the news of Nixon's reaction to the final report. The report was published in three installments in March 1972. In early May, Nixon issued a formal response which firmly voiced his continued opposition to abortion, using his statement to "reaffirm and reemphasize that I do not support unrestricted abortion policies," referring to abortion as "an unacceptable form of population control." While asserting some level of concern for population

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[115] CPGAF, *The Report of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future* (*The Center for Research on Population and Security*: Mar. 27, 1972), https://www.population-security.org/rockefeller/001_population_growth_and_the_american_future.htm#TOC.
[116] Ibid.

growth, Nixon's statement in effect defined population as a problem outside of the scope of government, leaving it to voluntary self-regulation. As Nixon's statement asserted, "I have a basic faith that the American people themselves will make sound judgments regarding family size and frequency of births, judgments that are conducive both to the public interest and to personal family goals–and I believe in the right of married couples to make these judgments for themselves. Distancing himself from the report and its conclusions, writing that he "disagr[eed] with the general thrust of some of the Commission's recommendations," he thanked the Commissioners for their work and then proceeded to ignore its recommendations. As the *Times* assessed, "Last week, President Nixon gave this thoughtful report the back of the hand."[117]

Public reactions to the Report's publication were varied. After the press reported that, of the mail CPGAF received, 5 to 1 of the letters received passionately opposed the Commission's recommendation of abortion liberalization, in part resulting from a letter campaign coordinated by churches, the project's Executive Director recalled receiving almost 200 letters of support for abortion liberalization.[118] Some of these letters were no doubt coordinated by nascent ZPG chapters who initiated their own letter writing campaigns in affirmation of the Commission's report. ZPG dedicated an issue of its newsletter *The National Reporter* to the report's publication, recognizing its utility for broadening public investment in environmental populationism.[119] As ZPG writers

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[117] "Population Rebuff," *The New York Times* (May 11, 1972), Population Council, Box 299, Folder 2734, RAC.
[118] UPI, "Population panel male running 5-1 against abortions" (May 11, 1972), Population Council, Box 299, Folder 2734; Memo, C.F. Westoff and remaining staff to CPGAF, "Final Progress Report" (June 8, 1972), Population Council, Box 299, Folder 2734, RAC.
[119] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 4, No. 4 (Apr. 1972).

assessed, although the report contained ”little that is really new,” its significance lay in its high profile and its affirmation of ZPG’s basic premise: “What is important about the report is that a group as diverse and unfamiliar with the population field as the Commission, backed by the prestige of the Congress which created it, has come out and said that two years of study leave no reasonable doubt that it is time for the U.S. to adopt an official policy of zpg.”[120]

Altogether, the CPGAF, its internal debates, and its final report demonstrate a moment of state investment in population growth as a problem to be solved, as well as underlying tensions it brought to the surface such as the liberalization of abortion and contraceptive laws, the changing of women's social roles, and the relationship between population and environment. Representing a moderate view within environmental populationism, the CPGAF nonetheless contributed to the legitimization of abortion and contraceptive access by expressly tying reproductive autonomy to demographic concerns. Instrumentalizing access to reproductive health as a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself, the CPGAF indexed the range of public impressions around population growth and control in relation to other social problems and goals, significantly heightening the public profile of environmental populationism. The following section attends to environmental population’s key champion, Zero Population Growth, closely tracking its evolution as a grassroots political mobilization and organization over its first decade.

[120] Ibid.

## III. Zero Population Growth in the 1970s

*Defining the Organization*

More than any other organization, Zero Population Growth sits precisely at the intersection of populationism and environmentalism. From its start in 1969, ZPG's vision of change centered on reproduction, through its two-pronged advocacy. On the level of the individual, ZPG called on its members' sense of personal responsibility for the overpopulation crisis, initiating a "stop at two" policy wherein two-child families would enable so-called "replacement level fertility." At the level of the state, ZPG lobbied extensively for access to birth control, advocating for the repeal or weakening of laws restricting abortion, contraceptive access, voluntary sterilization, and adoption. In September 1969, the organization presented its mission statement, with reproduction as its center point:

> Our goal is to bring about a state of zero population growth in the United States by the year 1980. This means stabilizing our population by bringing our birth rate down to equal the death rate. This does not mean no births; it does mean that births each year do not exceed the deaths. To achieve our goal we will lobby for laws to make contraception, sterilization, and abortion available to everyone. We will educate the public to accept the idea that two children is the maximum number of children that a responsible family should bring into the world. Those who want to raise a greater number of children will be encouraged to adopt an unwanted child. If each woman has no more than two natural children (only replacing herself and her husband in the next generation), then we will reach our goal of zero population growth.[121]

This mission statement captures how, early on, the organization strove to bring together both personal and legislative forms of intimate regulation.

From its founding and into the 1970s, debates within the organization over its direction and scope were reflected in its monthly newsletter, the *ZPG National Reporter.*

[121] *ZPG Newsletter* (Sept. 1969).

The newsletter brought together editorials, reprints of relevant articles, features on reproductive law and medicine, updates from local chapters, and letters to the editor from ZPG members. Initial issues focused on determining the organization's structure and scope. For example, in July 1969 the then-titled *ZPG Communicator* announced that ZPG would become a lobbying organization.[122] Over its early years, ZPG would toggle back and forth between a range of political orientations and strategies.[123] At different points chapters and the national organization engaged in direct action, service provision, and education.[124]

In December 1969, ZPG initiated a political agenda which paired political lobbying and campaigning in Washington with the grassroots structure it considered to be its greatest strength.[125] In 1970, several of the organization's university chapters, including Yale, Rutgers, and the University of Pennsylvania, were profiled in a *Life* magazine feature which hailed ZPG as an "organized challenge" to American ideals of growth, just a few days prior to the first Earth Day.[126] The article notes that ZPG members view population as responsible for social problems including "pollution, violence, loss of values, and of individual privacy" and endorse a range of tactics in service of solving the problem: "Most of the young campaigners pledge themselves to restrict the size of the families they soon will have to the ZPG limit of two. They vigorously support such ancillary activities as abortion reform, legalization of birth

[122] *ZPG Communicator*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (July 1969).
[123] *ZPG Newsletter* (Dec. 1969).
[124] *ZPG Communicator* (July 1969).
[125] *ZPG Newsletter* (Dec. 1969).
[126] "A New Movement Challenges the U.S. to Stop Growing," *Life* 68, no. 14 (Apr. 17, 1970): 31-37.

control, and changes in welfare regulations and tax exemptions for children."[127]

As the organization grew explosively over its first six months, increasing from thirteen chapters in October 1969 to one hundred chapters in April 1970, members reflected on ZPG's public perception, linking their growing membership to ZPG's growing strength in the political arena.[128] In the newsletter, editors envisioned the ZPG's scope as much greater than the student movement it was linked to in *Life'*s coverage, and instead capable of changing "the hearts and minds of middle class America."[129] The organization saw its best chance of accomplishing this in its grassroots structure, which, as the editors described, understands "our political power as flowing directly from the non-elite mass of people of all ages who are concerned about the basic problems of trying to exist on an increasingly crowded and polluted spaceship called Earth."[130]

Members of the emerging organization hotly debated their relationship to the wider environmental movement, with some members seeing ZPG as a broadly environmental organization and others envisioning its role as a single-issue population organization. Nationwide, ZPG chapters participated extensively in the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, with chapters in California, Idaho, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, New York and Virginia coordinating marches, beach clean-ups, campus teach-ins, and school bake sales.[131] Garrett De Bell, ZPG's Washington representative, edited the *Environmental Handbook* in preparation for Earth Day with support from Friends of

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[127] Ibid.
[128] *ZPG NR* Vol. 2, No. 4 (Apr. 1970); *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 3 (May 1970).
[129] *ZPG NR* (May 1970).
[130] Ibid.
[131] *ZPG Newsletter* (Jan. 1970); *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 3 (Mar. 1970); *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 3 (May 1970).

the Earth. Commenting that compiling the anthology might have taken a year, De Bell noted it had been assembled in a month because "a year is about one-fifth of the time we have left if we are going to preserve any kind of quality in our world."[132] This sense of urgency permeated the text, which included Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons," De Bell and Ehrlich's assessment of population's role in looming "eco-catastrophe," sections on eco-action, and a bibliography of relevant books and films. Within this text and Earth Day itself, overpopulation was represented as a legitimate and urgent environmental concern. In its early years, ZPG aligned with other environmental groups in opposing the Vietnam War and lobbying against supersonic transit (SST) and highway construction.[133]

Yet within the organization broadly, opinions varied on the organization's role in coalitional politics. One newsletter contributor, for example, questioned members assumptions that "the different groups which make up the ecology movement are pursuing various portions of a complete, internally consistent policy," with ZPG taking on the role as "the group that deals with overpopulation," which was recognized as "an obstacle in the path of other environmental and social programs."[134] The writer described the ecology movement, instead, as a composition of diverse visions of an environmentally sound society, comprising conflicting positions on issues including economic growth, pollution, and nuclear power. The writer thus questioned ZPG's efficacy within the confines of such a movement.

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[132] Garrett De Bell, ed., *The Environmental Handbook* (Ballantine Books, 1970).
[133] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May 1970); *ZPG NR,* Vol 2, No. 7 (Aug. 1970); *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 9 (Sept. 1971).
[134] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Mar. 1971).

In the *National Reporter*'s "Letters" section, ZPG members debated the role of the organization in environmental coalitions. A writer from Seattle, Washington questioned ZPG's mobilization around SST, arguing for ZPG to narrow its posture from that of a "conservation organization' with the messianic goal of curing the world of all its ills." Rather than take up the divisive politics of environmentalism and potentially "risk[ing the] alienation of a single potential friend by aligning ourselves with another cause," the writer argued ZPG should instead to focus on building up the population movement.[135] As another writer from Los Alamos, New Mexico put it, "If ZPG becomes a broad environmental organization another political population group will have to form."[136] On similar grounds, a letter writer from Los Altos, California decried ZPG's participation in a parade with the group Ecology Action, arguing that ZPG's association with such "radical friends" represented a departure from its mission.[137] Still others, such as a ZPG member who was also active in the Highway Action Coalition and Environmental Action, made the case for coalition building between labor unions, conservation groups, consumer groups, urban organizations, minority groups, suburban housewives, and student activists.[138]

After its early stretch of extensive growth, by late 1971 ZPG's membership waned in numbers and degree of commitment. The September 1971 newsletter announced that ZPG's membership had dropped from its all-time high of 37,000 members and 400 chapters in June 1971 to 33,000 members and 380 chapters by

[135] *ZPG NR,* Vol 2, No. 7 (Aug. 1970).
[136] *ZPG NR* (Mar. 1971).
[137] *ZPG Newsletter* (Nov. 1969).
[138] Barbara Reid, "Building an Eco-Alliance," *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 4 (Apr. 1971).

September 1971. The newsletter attributed this decline to a change in record keeping procedures to reflect only continuously active members and chapters, and therefore, the newsletter described, did "not constitute a sudden ZPG failure."[139] From this point on, ZPG also began to invest greater resources in membership recruitment.[140] Some ZPGers attributed the decline in membership to the organization's overstretching of its mission. A writer from Arlington, Virginia noted that although ZPG's recent membership survey had determined that the majority of members felt ZPG should be active in environmental issues as well as population issues, ZPG's emphasis on environmentalism might limit its potential impact. As the writer explained, although those concerned with the environment are often concerned with population, those concerned with population were not always concerned with the environment. As a result, she suggested ZPG would be most effective with "broad-based support from *all* Americans," contending that the more "other" issues adopted, more likely ZPG was to alienate potential members.[141]

As ZPG's fragmentary alliances with feminist and reproductive rights groups demonstrate, the delineation of ZPG's scope would continue to be a site of tension and possibility during its early years as a preeminent environmental populationist organization. The following sections analyze two aspects of ZPG's activity during the period of its greatest prominence in the early 1970s. First, I consider the role of ZPG in promoting a reimagining of the nuclear family and alternative roles for women, attending to ZPG's own efforts as well as its relationship to feminist groups. Second, I examine ZPG's approach to reproductive autonomy, highlighting its endorsement of abortion, its

[139] *ZPG NR, Vol*. 3, No. 9 (Sept. 1971).
[140] Ibid.
[141] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 4, No. 2 (Feb. 1972).

forays into service provision, and its approach to voluntary sterilization. Overall, I am interested in the ways in which ZPG instrumentalized feminism and reproductive autonomy as means to the ends of population stabilization, rather than as worthy goals in and of themselves, and the resulting tensions that underlaid the organization's politics. ZPG, there is no doubt, played a significant role in suturing reproductive politics to environmentalism in the 1970s; my interest, here, is in considering the outcome of this relation.

*Greening the Family and Feminist-Environmental Coalitions*

In its early years as an organization, ZPG gained national prominence through its advocacy of abortion and birth control legalization, working at times alongside other population, environmental, reproductive rights, and women's organizations. Although organized as a multi-issue organization, ZPG was influenced by the growth of women's movements in its adoption of the demand for the repeal of abortion laws. By their September 30, 1969 meeting, its Board of Directors had adopted abortion as core to the "basic human right to limit one's own reproduction."[142] The Board also stressed that its demands for birth control legalization were designed to support voluntary birth control.

While issues of contraception and women's roles were front and center in ZPG's vision of achieving population stabilization, the organization also extensively critiqued the nuclear family form through efforts to challenge pro-natalism in both culture and policy and drives to expand women's roles and opportunities. Although an occasional member wrote in to criticize ZPG's support for the feminist movement–as one writer put

[142] Suzanne Staggenborg, *The Pro-Choice Movement: Organization and Activism in the Abortion Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 53.

it, “The issue of women's rights should not be included in a discussion of zero population growth if you intend to win widespread disapproval for the latter”–the majority of members and leadership seemed to support efforts to broaden women's roles beyond motherhood and unsettle cultural norms around childbearing.[143]

Letters from ZPG members demonstrate how the concept of zero population growth had influenced their decision-making regarding reproduction and family planning. A self-described twenty-seven-year-old housewife from Carrboro, North Carolina, who had long desired to have at least five children, wrote in to describe how her mind had been changed in recent months as she had “sometimes a bit against my will” been “lectured, preached to, or in some other form addressed” about the overpopulation crisis.[144] While initially defensive, after hearing Ehrlich speak, she described herself as “solidly convinced that I have a responsibility towards more than 'me and mine,” and was considering pursuing adoption after the birth of her third child. She concluded, “Let me say this: if you can convince me to stop having children, I won't say you can convince everybody, but I will say you can convince a lot of people that may still be on the other side.”[145] Another member from Parsippany, New Jersey shared an idea for ZPG members to “go to maternity wards of the hospitals all across our country and tell these new mothers about the dangers of overpopulation,” arguing “Don't underestimate us young mothers—NOBODY but *nobody* cares more about life and living than a young mother—especially one who has just had a baby. We are the only ones who can stop the population

[143] *ZPG Newsletter* (Oct. 1969).
[144] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Mar. 1970).
[145] Ibid.

explosion."[146]

ZPG also provided a space for its members to find community around alternative views around the family. An enduring feature of early *Reporter* issues were action alerts for letter writing campaigns which called on members to challenge television networks and advertisers who portrayed women stereotypically as housewives and mothers. One writer from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, wrote in describing herself as a twenty-three-year-old who was pregnant with her second child and planning to pursue a tubal ligation at the time of delivery.[147] In addition to the several doctors and months required for her to obtain permission for the procedure, the writer discussed the social pushback she encountered around her decision, writing, "I have met with social pressure when discussing my plans for sterilization. People react as if I were doing a monstrous thing and tell me I'm selfish because I don't want to breed." The experience had inspired her to look for a local organization working to increase access to voluntary sterilization in order to lend her support.[148] Another writer from San Francisco argued that, given ZPG's approach to population control as a "touchstone for our support of other issues, ZPG should consider Gay Liberation as part of its wider agenda, describing the stigma attached to homosexuality as a result of cultural pronatalism.[149]

The extent to which ZPG strategically aligned itself with women's liberation was, however, always up for debate. Several ZPG members wrote into *The National Reporter* to push the organization toward a more explicit, more consistent endorsement of feminist

[146] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 5 (May 1970).
[147] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 6 (June 1970).
[148] Ibid.
[149] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (May 1972).

values. A writer from San Francisco, for example, asserted that while "your organization and goals seem crucial to me," as a "radical woman" she needed to point out "how the structure of your organization is in direct conflict with your rhetoric."[150] Pointing to the significantly male leadership of the organization, she argued, "You too are doing your bit in confining us to motherhood for you offer us only subordinate roles….I await a reply from you...not about your lofty respect for women in non-breeding roles…but about changing policy. No reply will indicate your insistence on maintaining a chauvinistic organization while pleading with us to stop breeding."[151] Another writer from Rochester, New York, described a tension underlying ZPG's relationship with feminist groups. In her hometown, the writer explained, ZPG and NOW "keep in touch and are beginning informal coalitionist efforts" but relations were strained by feminists' assumptions that ZPG's policies would target and coerce poor women of color in the U.S. and abroad. As the writer assessed,

> One obstacle to support of ZPG by women's rights groups, especially those grouped in Women's Liberation, is a prevalent belief that involuntary sterilization has been foisted on Third World women by birth control programs funded by American agencies and on welfare mothers by hospital doctors. The *Reporter* could do a great service by making clear that ZPG respects Puerto Rican aspirations as much as those of the Dutch, that it respects welfare women and poor women as much as it respects middle class women, and that it views women's problems with as much seriousness as men's problems.[152]

These letters demonstrate a willingness among participants in the women's movement to support ZPG's brand of environmental populationism as well as fractures between these respective movements from the start.

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[150] *ZPG Newsletter* (Nov. 1969).
[151] Ibid.
[152] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 3 (Mar. 1971).

The May 1971 issue of the *ZPG National Reporter* took on "Alternative Roles for Women." The issue included articles with specific instructions on setting up a child care center, and essay on equal rights legislation which described ZPG's role in pushing for the Equal Rights Amendment and the Women's Equality Act of 1971.[153] An editorial by Rhonda Levitt and Madeline Nelson, frequent contributors to *NR,* framed the issue as "conceived and carried out by women," with male contributors agreeing to step back.[154] In their editorial, Levitt and Nelson framed overpopulation as an outcome of gender inequality and expressed impatience with the notion that women were responsible for resolving the problem through contraception alone, writing, "The population explosion will not be stopped by passing out contraceptives. We women will not take them unless we are able to assert our humanity outside of motherhood and servitude to our husbands….And as long as childbearing is the only creativity we are allowed, no man has the right to ask us to give it up."[155] Levitt privately described the issue as an opportunity to "present our anger and rage to an audience which would probably not be exposed ordinarily," noting that "ZPG seems to be really getting to move in the area of women's rights" and that "many of the women in ZPG are also active in the women's movement."[156] For Levitt, then, the concerns of ZPG could animate those of the women's movement, and vice versa, particularly around the question of supporting alternative

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[153] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (May 1971).
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Levitt sent the issue and an accompanying letter to the leaders of the Women's History Research group, where she described ZPG's growing interest in aligning with the women's movement. Letter from Rhonda Levitt, ZPG to Women's History Research Project (Apr. 13, 1971). From H. Population Control (I211). Sept. 22, 1965-74. MS Women and Health/Mental Health: Section Four: Birth Control/Population Control Reel 8A. The National Women's History Project. Women's Studies Archive.

social roles for women beyond motherhood.

Further clarifying this ephemeral partnership, in a December 1973 issue, Wilma Scott Heide, then President of NOW, shared a letter written from the imagined perspective of a future child who had benefited from feminist gains.[157] The letter began by acknowledging ZPGers' "insight and foresight in recognizing the potential of feminism back in the 1970's to achieve your valuable goals." Because of the work of groups like ZPG, the imagined writer added, "I pledge to you for my part that woman (that includes man) and our world will build on your health foundations so humanity may reproduce by choice only the quantity and quality of population that humane decency and human fulfillment suggests would thrive." Heide signed off with a note, adding, "Meanwhile, for NOW, I'm glad that ZPG and NOW are working together in our many areas where we have common cause."[158]

Other ZPG leaders and members were more reluctant to dilute ZPG's primary focus on population with related but potentially ancillary concerns. For example, in April 1972, a ZPG member from La Jolla, California, wrote to *NR* to express his concerns about the association of ZPG with women's liberation.[159] The writer questioned the organization's priorities, writing, "Women's Lib should be number one for those women and men who consider it so, and I believe in the main it deserves support. But it musn't be No. 1 for ZPG as an organization."[160] The writer referenced Nixon's recent veto of a childcare bill. Predicting that federally sponsored daycare would only result in more

[157] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 5, No. 8 (Dec. 1973).
[158] Ibid.
[159] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Apr. 1972).
[160] Ibid.

middle-class mothers entering the workforce and displacing poor male heads of families, the writer assessed, “This would be very bad, and the effect goes some way toward justifying Nixon's otherwise rather nauseating rhetoric about the sanctity of the family. The point here is that Nixon effectively put good government and sound social policy above Women's Lib.”[161] Thus, in the cost-benefit analysis of governance, the writer presumed that women’s liberation would prove too costly.

As these internal debates unfolded, externally, feminist groups discussed their own reticence about aligning with population groups like ZPG. The summer 1971 edition of *Off Our Backs,* a D.C.-based radical feminist periodical, for example, sharply criticized the “doomsday people” responsible for perception of the imminent “population explosion”: “The term population control is being thrown around a lot these days. Newspapers write about it, government officials discuss it, advisory panels recommend it.”[162] Rather than take these recommendations at face value, however, the article poses the question of “who controls population control?” with particular attention to the question of why population control had come to be the default answer to the problem of hunger. After briefly narrating the history of Malthus and the American eugenics movement, the article ultimately contends that the answer to this question could be found by following the money to the population establishment. Rather than bringing women “more control over their lives,” groups such as Planned Parenthood-World Population increasingly placed primary emphasis on “bringing population control to the masses.”[163]

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[161] Ibid.
[162] “Who Says Too Many?,” *Off Our Backs: A Women's News Journal* 1, no. 24 (Sept. 1971), 24-25. National Women's History Project, Reel 12, 1970-1974, Section Seven/Special Issues of Mass Periodicals.
[163] Ibid.

The authors of *Off Our Backs* argued that voluntary programs could quickly become compulsory, stressing the connections between population control efforts domestically and abroad. Within their analysis, efforts within the U.S. to link welfare eligibility to birth control and sterilization in Prince George's County, Maryland; Chicago; and Washington, D.C. were essentially tied to U.S. foreign aid distribution and birth control testing in Chile, Puerto Rico, and India. The article concludes by connecting population control efforts to American capitalism and empire:

> When the government talks of population control or "surplus population" as a "problem," what it means is that these people are a problem for continued U.S. control over world resources and world markets. The government is trying to divert attention from a more adequate analysis of the pain and poverty caused by U.S. imperialism…When the U.S. government says population control it really means it.[164]

As this article indicates, some feminists of the era were already skeptical of the idea that feminist visions of reproductive autonomy could be aligned to the project of population control.

### *Crisis or Liberation? Reproductive Choice, Bodily Autonomy, and The Coercion Faultline*

From its early days, ZPG promoted a considerably expansive vision of access to reproductive control in its time, arguing that all forms of birth control (including contraception, abortion, and sterilization) should be accessible to the general public and that all laws regulating the sale or use of birth control should be repealed.[165] The *National Reporter* was a tool for tracking abortion legislation and lawsuits and a resource connecting those seeking abortions with service provision. Issues beginning in late 1969

[164] Ibid.
[165] *ZPG Newsletter* (Nov. 1969)

listed a phone number for abortion advice from ZPG member Helen Morrison and highlighted chapter activities to provide reproductive services and information, such as abortion referral services in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, a vasectomy counselling service in Marin County, California, vasectomy clinics in Cincinnati, Ohio and Ann Arbor, Michigan, and a laparoscopy clinic in San Diego, California.[166] By September 1971, ZPG's national headquarters had set up its own abortion referral service and distributed information for similar services operated by clergy and women's liberation groups.[167]

In a dedicated abortion issue in August 1970, ZPG made the case for abortion access as a means to solving the overpopulation problem. Helen Morrison, a sculptor, ZPG member, and head of the Palo Alto Chapter of the California Committee to Legalize Abortion, authored an essay entitled "Jane Is Pregnant Not Insane" which confronted the terms of existing therapeutic abortion laws and pointed to extensive issues in access to abortion under the existing system.[168] Morrison recounted the story of a woman from Stockton, CA who had seen four doctors before finding a physician who would not provide abortion services but shared Morrison's phone number after seeing it in a ZPG newsletter. While Morrison was ultimately able to help her access a psychiatric abortion, the woman required a more intensive procedure due to the time spent navigating restrictive laws. As Morrison noted, "The law, in being somewhat relaxed, has given some people the feeling that there is no longer an urgent need for reform. The woman

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[166] *ZPG Newsletter* (Dec. 1969); ZPG NR, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Feb. 1970); *ZPG NR*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (May 1970); *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 3 (Mar. 1971); *ZPG NR*, Vol. 10, No. 9 (Nov. 1978).
[167] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 9 (Sept. 1971). For an expansive discussion of the role of clergy in abortion referral services, see Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life.*
[168] *ZPG NR*, Vol 2, No. 7 (Aug. 1970).

who from lack of money or lack of knowledge is forced to have an unwanted child wouldn't agree with this." Such circumstances led for Morrison to call for the repeal, rather than the liberalization, of abortion law.[169] James Clapp, a board member for ZPG, New Yorkers for Abortion Law Repeal, and NOW, also contributed to the issue, making his case for pushing for the full repeal, rather than reform, of abortion law as consistent with ZPG's Board of Directors' statement made in September 1969.[170] Additionally, ZPG vocally supported and campaigned for George Michaels, the New York assemblyman who provided a critical vote in the passage of the state abortion law, thus obliterating his chances at reelection.[171]

Yet as the ZPG grew, efforts emerged within the organization to alter its association with the issue of abortion. In a 1972 issue of ZPG's *National Reporter,* the organization's executive director, Hal Seielstad, noted that radio talk shows and ZPG members alike seemed to "think of ZPG solely as an advocate of abortion." While this was "certainly not true," Seielstad assessed that the frequency of this assumption made further clarification necessary. In his depiction of the organization, Seielstad sought to distance ZPG from its affiliation with abortion alone, argung that the divisiveness of abortion as an issue would become an obstacle to ZPG:

> [ZPG] was formed to stabilize the population of the United States. The question of abortion is a minor one in the entire program of achieving zero population growth in this country by 1990. And yet at this moment it is the major concern of

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[169] Ibid. The article also mentioned within last year, Morrison had arranged over sixty abortions and had not yet failed to make arrangements for a woman seeking assistance.
[170] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 8 (Sept. 1970).
[171] Michaels addressed a letter to ZPG, which campaigned for Michaels in the absence of his party's endorsement, writing, "I want your organization to know that I am deeply indebted to it for all the help and encouragement which I received from the members of your group. It was inspiring in many instances, and I continue to hear frequently from many of your members." *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 9 (Oct. 1970).

> numerous ZPG members, chapters, and federations in Michigan, New York, Connecticut, Vermont, North Dakota, Florida, and elsewhere. It is important that we achieve this part of our total portfolio of goals. It is also important that we not neglect the other goals and become largely identified in the public mind with this one issue. It is an extraordinarily emotional issue and difficult to deal with rationally with many people.[172]

Notably, in 1972, ZPG also engaged in a protracted dispute over its reputation and aims when the film *Z.P.G.: Zero Population Growth* portrayed a totalitarian state that outlawed childbirth on penalty of death, claiming to be inspired by Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*.[173] In this same context, Seielstad argued that while ZPG "advocates personal freedom of choice regarding all means of birth control," nevertheless "abortion remains the last and least desirable means of terminating unwanted pregnancies."[174] Such reticence would be further amplified after *Roe v. Wade* when ZPG shifted its emphasis to other aspects of population policy.

In addition to abortion lobbying and advocacy, ZPG engaged actively in the liberalization of voluntary sterilization, seeking to provide information, reduce stigma, and eliminate barriers to procedures including vasectomy and tubal ligation (colloquially known as getting one's "tubes tied"). Historian Rebecca Kluchin catalogued how contraceptive sterilization "existed on the margins of medical practice in the 1950s and 1960s," with many hospitals establishing restrictive policies designed to deter women from obtaining the tubal ligation in compliance with postwar pronatalism.[175] While these

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[172] Hal Seielstad, "Abortion and ZPG," *ZPG NR* Vol. 4, No. 6 (June 1972).
[173] Jesse Olszynko-Gryn and Patrick Ellis, "Malthus at the Movies: Science, Cinema, and Activism around Z.P.G. and Soylent Green," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 1 (2018): 47, 55-59.
[174] Seielstad, "Abortion and ZPG."
[175] The most common of these restrictions was the 120 rule, an age/parity restriction that prevented women from obtaining procedures unless their age multiplied by the number of

policies tended to focus on women's reproductive health rather than men's, doctors could also discourage male patients from obtaining vasectomies on similar grounds. The greatest exception to these rules was their divergent application on the basis of race. Whereas white women confronted obstacles to voluntary sterilization, Black women "underwent sterilization at a considerably higher rate than white women and do not appear to have formally complained about their inability to obtain this service."[176] As Kluchin explains, "Although they did not openly target white women, hospital restrictions disproportionately affected white women, the group most celebrated by postwar pronatalism."[177] Therefore, while white women found their access to voluntary sterilization restricted and sought to expand access through lawsuits, Black women were "conspicuously" absent in these complaints, in part due to the significantly greater exposure of women of color to sterilization abuse during the period.[178]

Within the pages of the *National Reporter,* members used the "Letters" column to share their experiences obtaining voluntary sterilizations. In an early newsletter, an anonymous ZPGer who described himself as a twenty-seven-year-old father of two children, wrote in to describe his experience of obtaining a vasectomy so that other ZPG members could better understand the procedure.[179] He described the steps of consulting with his physician and the follow-up appointment in which the doctor confirmed with his wife that the couple would move forward with the procedure. The writer wrote candidly

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their children exceeded 120, or in some cases 150 or 175, as some hospitals adopted in order to protect themselves against future litigation. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied,* 21-22.
[176] Ibid., 21-23.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.
[179] *ZPG Newsletter* (Jan. 1970).

about his processing of the experience, noting, "During the interval, I experienced an unexpected emotional reaction. Even though I felt positively about my present marriage and even though I felt positively about adoption in the future in whatever circumstances would exist, I still was upset by the idea of doing something to myself that I could possibly never reverse." Yet ultimately, having moved forward, he wrote, "I am very happy that I had an emotional reaction before being sterilized" so that he could know it was the right decision. He explained, "This is not the most desirable thing for some to do; but it is very good for many others. I wish only to let people know who are considering it that they may well have reactions they never anticipated. Don't be surprised; a person has to work his way through those feelings to one conclusion or the other."[180] The newsletter in this case provided a setting for the knowledge sharing common in abortion storytelling efforts, while also providing a rare space to consider male reproductive decision-making. Numerous members wrote in to express their support for the letter or describe the obstacles they faced in seeking the procedure.[181] One writer, C. Anthony Federer, added that he wished for his name to accompany his letter in order to raise the social acceptance and public knowledge of such options.[182]

Female ZPGers also addressed their challenges in obtaining tubal ligations.[183] Following the publication of an article on tubal ligation in a previous *NR,* a writer from Belmont, Massachusetts wrote in, describing how the article had led her to reflect on her challenges with other forms of contraception and, ultimately, to pursue tubal ligation.[184]

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[180] Ibid.
[181] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Feb. 1970); *ZPG NR* (May 1970).
[182] *ZPG NR* (Feb. 1970).
[183] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (June 1970); *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jan. 1971).
[184] *ZPG NR* (Jan. 1971).

She described her resulting "peace of mind" within the terms of ZPG's ethos of self-regulation, writing, "Finally I don't have to sweat out every month wondering if I'm going to help overpopulate."[185] For others, ZPG newsletters provided inaccessible healthcare information; for example, one member from Columbus, Ohio, wrote in to inquire whether tubal ligation procedures triggered menopause.[186] AVS wrote in to the *National Reporter* to update readers on the latest hospital guidelines for tubal ligation procedures as well as lawsuits underway to challenge restrictions, and a member from Westfield, New Jersey, offered to connect women to an attorney in New York City seeking plaintiffs for a lawsuit which would challenge restrictions on female sterilization.[187]

The perspective on sterilization offered in the pages of the *National Reporter,* however, were based in the particular racial and class perspective of its members. A membership survey published in the January 1971 issue of the newsletter, when ZPG was made up of 26,000 members and 325 chapters, showed that the typical ZPG member was highly educated; 32% had some college or post-high school training, 28% had a bachelor's degree, and 29% had a master's or doctorate.[188] ZPG was also predominantly male (64%).[189] While membership had changed substantially by the latter half of the 1970s, a 1978 survey reported that 43% of members had incomes of $21,000 or more, 90% had college degrees, and 52% had postgraduate degrees.[190] While ZPG surveys did not analyze its members' racial demographics, the existing data demonstrates that the

[185] Ibid.
[186] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 2, No. 9 (Oct. 1970).
[187] Ibid; *ZPG NR* (Jan. 1971).
[188] *ZPG NR* (Jan. 1971).
[189] Ibid.
[190] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 10, No. 9 (Nov. 1978).

organization's members tended to be college-educated professionals.

Meanwhile, for many poor women and women of color, sterilization politics took on a very different tenor. As mentioned previously, an early letter writer had argued that feminists would be more likely to join ZPG if the organization made it clear that it recognized the complexity of sterilization abuse and its ongoing influence on the perception of birth control programs among women of color and within poor communities.[191] Negotiating this complexity was a continued point of tension for ZPG.[192] In the spring of 1971, ZPG began organizing around "Operation Lawsuit," a collaboration between ZPG, AVS, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to liberalize access to voluntary sterilization. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists amended its sterilization guidelines in 1969 and 1970 to make voluntary sterilization easier to obtain.[193] These changes, in essence, made it possible for a woman

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[191] As historian Laura Briggs describes, in the 1970s, U.S. mainland-based groups including the Coalition to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA), the Coalition for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA), and some socialist feminist scholars came to understand Puerto Rico's statistically significant rate of sterilizations of about one-third of women of childbearing age, as "an exemplary case study of how birth control could be used for capitalist social engineering with racist ends." Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (University of California Press, 2003), 143; *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 3 (Mar. 1971).

[192] Alexandra Minna Stern has written about the need to account for "uncomfortable nuances" within the history of sterilization practices. While accounting seriously for the occurrence of involuntary, coercive sterilization, she also notes the importance of recognizing reasons why women, including working class women and women of color, sought sterilization procedures. Stern, *Eugenic Nation,* 8. Laura Briggs traced a similar dynamic in mainland-American feminists' efforts to trace sterilization in Puerto Rico to eugenic colonial motives and capitalist exploitation. As Briggs writes, mainland feminists at times "turned the Puerto Rican sterilization story into an allegory for a continental U.S. issue," in turn neglecting a more complicated story in which Puerto Rican feminists negotiated reproductive autonomy in contestation of both U.S. colonialism and Puerto Rican nationalist pronatalism. Briggs, *Reproducing Empire,* 142-161.

[193] The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists first replaced the 120 rule with a guideline requiring the consent of two senior obstetrician-gynecologists and the

to obtain a surgery with only her doctor's consent. Yet ZPG surveys of local hospitals found that few institutions had updated their guidelines on the procedure to reflect these changes. The work of Operation Lawsuit, then, was to force local hospitals to implement these new guidelines such that the legality of the procedure would be enforced in practice.[194]

Within Operation Lawsuit, the ACLU provided legal support, the AVS drew on its field representatives and funding to publicize and implement the program, and ZPG chapters surveyed local hospital sterilization policies and locate plaintiffs where needed.[195] The ACLU had initially been reluctant to join in league with the AVS given its eugenic history, asserting that sterilization was not a "civil liberties concern."[196] When approached by ZPG and AVS in 1971, the national ACLU determined against endorsing the campaign, but local affiliates like the New York state chapter became especially active. Kluchin assesses the divergent motivations underlying this collaboration, noting that while the ACLU "undertook these suits in the interest of defending women's right to contraception without arbitrary interference" in alignment with its earlier opposition to punitive sterilization legislation and its developing position on reproductive freedom, the AVS and ZPG "sought to open access to sterilization in order to increase its prescription for poverty, dependence on welfare, and illegitimacy."[197] The Operation Lawsuit coalition avoided direct conflict, Kluchin describes, because the ACLU's national

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patient, and later revised the consent requirement again to eliminate the need for a second physician's opinion. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied,* 117-18.
[194] Ibid.
[195] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 4, No. 2 (Feb. 1972); Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied,* 121.
[196] Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied,* 119.
[197] Ibid., 87.

organization never formally committed to the campaign, leaving the ACLU to engage "on a case-by-case basis rather than through a broad commitment to the politics of its partners."[198]

In contrast to Kluchin's description, within ZPG chapters Operation Lawsuit was framed as an extension of its larger project of reducing obstacles to contraceptive access for the general public, a conception of the public inevitably shaped by the organization's broadly middle-class and professional demographics. In April 1971, ZPG's national headquarters sent an Information/ Action Kit on Voluntary Sterilization to every chapter. The kit included an explanation of recent changes to sterilization guidelines, a list of "Current Instances of Hospital and Physician Discrimination against Women in the Right to the Use of Their Own Bodies in Obtaining Voluntary Sterilization," descriptions of legal challenges to sterilization law, pamphlets on the medical techniques of sterilization, a brochure entitled "Should You Sue Your Hospital," and a form for ZPG chapters to invite AVS leaders to speak at their meetings.[199] The *Reporter* tracked how ZPG chapters actively contributed to Operation Lawsuit by surveying local hospital policies in Los Angeles, Sante Fe, Milwaukee, Champlain Valley, Vermont, and Miami and developing legal challenges.[200] The Santa Fe chapter sought a Chicana plaintiff, citing that Mexican Americans were frequently discriminated against in the area, while the Milwaukee ZPG chapter sought to "locate a low-income plaintiff for their fight against County General Hospital."[201]

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[198] Ibid.,120-21.
[199] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 4 (Apr. 1971).
[200] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 3, No. 9 (Sept. 1971); *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 10 (Oct. 1971).
[201] *ZPG NR* (Oct. 1971).

The project's leader, Carol Petrick, described sterilization as "an emotion ridden choice."[202] From Petrick's vantage point, the complexity of sterilization resulted in part from a doctor's *opposition* to restricting women's reproductive capacity, rather than from coercive pressure to do so. She described the case of a twenty-three-year-old Seattle woman who had written into Operation Lawsuit after being turned away from a supposedly "open-minded" physician "who is concerned about the population explosion and who performs abortions and sterilizations." The letter attested that the physician had "expressed disgust at her decision to be sterilized and commented that she was 'the kind of mother we need.' He remarked that he would feel differently if she were a welfare recipient. The operation was not performed."[203] Revealingly, ZPG's analysis of injustice focused on the denial of reproductive autonomy to a woman actively seeking sterilization, sidelining concern for the differential application of sterilization regulations by class and likely race.

The January 1972 newsletter reported that on November 30, 1971, ZPG, AVS and ACLU had filed a $40,000 class action suit against Kaiser Hospital of Los Angeles with the intent of liberalizing the hospital's policy on voluntary sterilization.[204] One of the case's plaintiffs was Larry Barnett, a former national President of ZPG, who had recently been refused a vasectomy on the grounds that he was too young and because he and his wife did not have children. The suit represented the first within what ZPG envisioned as a nationwide campaign. In order to solicit additional plaintiffs, ZPG National began sending monthly "Operation Lawsuit" reports to ZPG, Planned Parenthood, NOW, and

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[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid.
[204] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 4, No. 1 (Jan. 1972).

ACLU chapters, and encouraged Planned Parenthood and NOW chapters in particular to steer possible plaintiffs to ZPG.[205] In March 1972, *NR* announced that Kaiser Hospital in Los Angeles had "backed down" in the face of the lawsuit and voluntarily changed its policies to remove restrictions on voluntary sterilization.[206] ZPG continued to seek plaintiffs for similar efforts in Lansing, Michigan, and Miami, Florida, framing the lawsuits as a critical opportunity to lessen the number of unwanted births in the country.[207]

During Operation Lawsuit, ZPG, AVS, and the ACLU followed a series of steps. ZPG would send congratulatory letters to hospitals that had adopted the new policies on voluntary sterilization and directed complaints to institutions which had not complied that suggested the potential for legal recourse if the policy remained unchanged, later adding a list of successful cases to letters to strengthen their written implication of a legal challenge. If a hospital failed to revise its policy, a ZPG member would meet with a hospital representative, offering the institution the opportunity to change their policy within a month or risk litigation. In the meantime, ZPG secured representation from a local ACLU chapter and began to search for a plaintiff.[208] The plaintiffs involved were not selected by racial criteria, and yet no Black women or women of color served as plaintiffs, suggesting that they had not found their access to sterilization obstructed by existing policies. As Kluchin assessed, "Operation Lawsuit received complaints from white women in all regions except the South, but not from women of color from any

[205] Ibid.
[206] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 4, Nov. 3 (Mar. 1972).
[207] Ibid.
[208] Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied,* 120-23.

region. The AVS and ZPG did not need to make race a qualification for their choice of plaintiff; only white women appealed for assistance."[209] While the project ambitiously sought to initiate lawsuits nationwide, funding restrictions narrowed its scope. Nonetheless, by December 1974, Operation Lawsuit had resolved five cases, with seven pending and three withdrawn.[210]

Challenges to sterilization restrictions were one aspect of securing reproductive autonomy and challenging norms around women and childbearing. As Kluchin writes, "Sterilization restrictions promoted pronatalism by denying women access to contraception that held the potential to liberate them from their 'natural' role of mother."[211] Janet Stein, an early Operation Lawsuit plaintiff, wrote that she sought voluntary sterilization because, "as a woman, I feel I should be free to decide what course my life should take."[212] Stein filed a suit against Northern Westchester Hospital in Westchester, New York on May 11, 1970, and refused to drop her lawsuit even after the hospital accepted her request for surgery in order to establish a legal precedent for future cases, demonstrating her commitment to expanding access to reproductive autonomy beyond her own circumstances. In October 1973, Northern Westchester Hospital settled the case, according $2,000 to Stein as compensation for the "mental anguish, invasion of privacy and denial of Constitutional rights" its restrictive policy had caused.[213]

Yet sterilization was also a particularly fraught domain because of its use as a

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[209] Additionally, none of the white plaintiffs resided in southern states, suggesting that the region with the highest population of Black women less commonly employed age/parity restrictions than other regions. Ibid., 123-24.
[210] Ibid., 123-24.
[211] Ibid., 23.
[212] Quoted in Ibid., 124-25.
[213] Quoted in Ibid., 126.

form of social control in the context of coerced sterilization, including of eugenic sterilization that remained on the books during the postwar period for those deemed "unfit" for parenthood, a precedent established in *Buck v. Bell* in 1927.[214] Categories of mental unfitness could be used elastically to punish or control those deemed "feebleminded," immoral, or socially deviant, with these terms most often projected onto poor, racialized communities.[215] Later, in the 1960s, physicians, social workers, and state eugenics boards drew on existing legal statutes to sterilize poor Black women with the intention of reducing the number of welfare recipients.[216] The liberalization of sterilization policies sought by ZPG members had significant and adverse impacts on those most vulnerable to coercion. As Kluchin writes, "Physicians who treated patients receiving government aid benefited from the legitimization of contraceptive sterilization and the absence of hospital policies governing informed consent…As contraceptive sterilization gained legitimacy and as federal family planning brought together poor women, especially women of color, and physicians who sought to control their reproduction and funded these interactions, forced sterilization increasingly occurred during childbirth."[217]

ZPG's activity on behalf of voluntary sterilization thus enabled a subset of women to defend their access to reproductive autonomy while foreclosing potential coalitions with feminist groups advocating for the full range of reproductive freedom for all women.

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[214] Ibid., 23.
[215] Ibid., 16.
[216] Ibid., 73.
[217] Kluchin notes that while the exact number of American women involuntarily sterilized between 1950 and 1980 remains unknown, particularly because many such cases were reported as voluntary, experts and contemporary activists have estimated that the number could range from a few thousand to several hundred thousand women. Ibid., 73-4.

The ACLU notably "worked on behalf of both women denied access to permanent contraception and women forced to accept the surgery"; ZPG and AVS, in contrast, focused their efforts on expanding access to sterilization rather than ensuring it was properly safeguarded.[218] ZPG weighed in on the topic of *involuntary* sterilization in August 1973, following news that two Black teenage girls, Minnie Lee and Mary Alice Relf, had been involuntarily sterilized at a federally-funded family planning clinic in Montgomery, Alabama.[219] ZPG's newsletter commented on the lawsuit brought by the Relf sisters' father and Julian Bond of the Southern Poverty Law Center, noting, "If the clinic failed to obtain informed consent from the mother of the two girls, the legal and ethical issues fall out quite simply…But, partly because of the lack of clarity of the facts of the case, primarily the question of whether the mother gave informed consent, the debate, though emotionally very charged, has been imprecise and confused." ZPG prevaricated, characterizing the event as a "difficult situation" and outlining its position as follows:

> The position taken by ZPG and religious and women's groups who favor such services is currently that: Federal funds for voluntary sterilization of adults should definitely be continued, as this is a very important means of birth control for those not wishing to have more children. But, since so far no one has come up with appropriate nationally-applicable guidelines for adequate protection of minors, there should be *no federal funding for sterilization of minors.* This is obviously a difficult position for an organization like ZPG, which has traditionally championed each individual's right to reproductive choice. But we have also taken the position that genuine voluntariness is essential, and that programs should not discriminate against economic or ethnic minorities. The fact that many states continue to maintain on their statute books eugenic sterilization statutes providing for *in*voluntary sterilization, that these statutes are administered in ways that discriminate against the poor and minorities, and that incidents occur such as that in Montgomery, make it essential that *publicly* funded programs in this field

[218] Ibid., 115-6.
[219] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (Aug. 1973).

provide adequate safeguards or suspend all sterilization of minors.[220]

While this stance maintained ZPG's opposition to compulsory forms of birth control, it stopped short of the broader stance taken by women of color–led groups like the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA) in this period which held that the possibility of coercion necessitated greater safeguards. CESA issued its own set of nationally-applicable guidelines just a few years later, designed to protect those most vulnerable to sterilization abuse and coercion.[221]

ZPG's approach to sterilization demonstrates just one iteration of its difficulty, and often failure, to walk the line of voluntary reproductive healthcare and coercion. Other tensions within and from beyond ZPG revolved around race and legacies of compulsory birth control regimes. These tensions were made visible publicly during the First National Congress on Optimum Population Growth and Environment (COPE), an event held from June 7-11, 1970 in Chicago. COPE was intended to bring together national groups and individuals with different special interests to work on the common problem of the population/environment crisis.[222] Yet, ultimately members of COPE's Black Caucus staged a walkout during a speech given by Ehrlich.[223]

The Black Caucus penned a position statement challenging the conference's content and structure, calling for "the immediate reconstitution" of the Conference's body to more fully integrate input from communities of color, which it regarded as essential if

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[220] Ibid.
[221] Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life,* 226-49.
[222] COPE: Reports and Resolutions, Population Council, Central Files, Box 299, Folder 2751, RAC; *ZPG Newsletter* (Jan. 1970).
[223] Casey Bukro, "Blacks Leave Congress on Environment, Claim Race is Target of Birth Proposals," *Chicago Tribune,* June 12, 1970, 17; Thomas Leroy, "Blacks Scorch Meeting here." *Chicago Daily Defender*, June 15, 1970, 5.

the Conference wished to deal effectively with the "total problem of *human* ecology." It also cautioned against the group's tendency to justify policies in the present on behalf of imagined future beneficiaries, arguing, "It is irresponsible to use hypothetical future generations as a means to escape the consequences of our failure to reorient the present-day priorities, which are inconsistent and detrimental to the interests and needs of Black people. The appeal of a new cause cannot be allowed to distract us from the unpleasant realities of today."[224] Within its recommendations, the Black Caucus submitted that "present deliberations…cannot be based on the assumption of a common national life style," pointing to the "present system of disproportionate allocation of resources" and later adding that "Black peoples' lives are *already* being destroyed through exploitation, overcrowding, disease, starvation and drugs." Consequently, the Caucus argued, "Birth control is no solution for the present day problems of the living, vis-a-vis comprehensive health care." The group, however, did not reject birth control wholesale, insisting that COPE adopt "that *no coercive* family planning or population stabilization measures are allowed to become a part of a national or local legislative body, but that voluntary measures, emphasizing an individual's freedom, be implemented" alongside other requirements including a guaranteed minimum income, comprehensive healthcare, adequate nutrition, and comprehensive education. Rejecting the terms of the "symbolization of the anxieties through concern about air, water and land, and projection of fears over one's own annihilation," the Black Caucus asserted that the premise of overpopulation misconstrued the greatest sites of political urgency.[225] The Black Caucus

[224] COPE: Reports and Resolutions, RAC.
[225] Ibid.

thus challenged environmental populationism's premise that proposed actions on behalf of "hypothetical future generations" could justify coercion and the neglect of existing injustices in the present.

Other critiques of ZPG were more direct and internal. In early 1970, Richard M. Bowers, one of ZPG's founders, responded angrily to a "false and foolish rumor" that Bowers "advocated the genocide of black people" at a family planning meeting the previous year.[226] As this so-called rumor, based on an actual exchange between Bowers and the Reverend Carl. E. Flemister, an African American Baptist minister, social worker, and executive director of Planned Parenthood of New York City, circulated and generated controversy, members of ZPG sought to distance themselves from Bowers and allegations of racism at the heart of environmental populationism. Garrett Hardin wrote to Ehrlich, calling the controversy representative of Bower's larger "Foot-in-the-Mouth Syndrome" and questioning whether Bowers should be removed from the Board, due to the potential that "if he gets very much public attention this may be fatal for Zero-Pop."[227]

The subsequent month's *ZPG National Reporter* seemingly addressed such

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[226] Bowers accused Reverend Carl. E. Flemister of starting the rumor in a letter, which copied members of the population establishment and attracted controversy as it circulated. Flemister responded, "You are absolutely correct…I must accept full responsibility for saying that you convey a genocidal attitude. It would be a disservice to the minority group communities, whom we happen to have great concern for, to let you go unchallenged," promising his own opposition to Bowers as well as the opposition of trusted community leaders so long as Bowers continued to hold and voice such views. Letter, Richard M. Bowers to Carl Felmister (Jan. 9, 1970), Population Council, Administrative File, Record Group 2, Box 364, Folder RG2 Box 364, Folder 3542, RAC; Letter, Carl Flemister to Richard M. Bowers (Jan. 16, 1970), Population Council, Administrative File, Record Group 2, Box 364, RAC.

[227] Letter, Garrett Hardin to Paul Ehrlich (Feb. 11, 1970), Population Council, Administrative File, Record Group 2, Box 364, Folder 3542.

concerns head-on, aiming to stem the perceived connection between ZPG and racism. In a "Special Statement from the President of ZPG," Ehrlich addressed, "Because I have occasionally been misquoted and because the official positions of ZPG have sometimes been misunderstood and misstated, as President and one of the founders of ZPG, I want to state clearly where ZPG and I presently stand on certain issues."[228] Ehrlich outlined the following positions:

1) **FIRST. We oppose compulsory birth control** just as we oppose compulsory pregnancy. We encourage every person to exercise the utmost responsibility in his own reproductive and to recognize that having large families is socially irresponsible; we do not presently favor legal compulsion to stop people from having children. On the other hand,we do favor every governmental effort that might be made to encourage people everywhere to limit the number of children they want and have…
2) **SECOND. ZPG condemns birth control measures used against the interest of any minority group.** We advocate that all forms of birth control be made available to all members of society, but we unequivocally oppose the concept of limiting some for the benefit of others. Furthermore, overpopulation in the United States is essentially a white middle-class phenomenon because the white middle-class majority use up more than their share of resources and do more than their share of polluting…
3) **THIRD. We believe that responsible reproduction begins at home.** Each person has an individual responsibility...The affluent Americans, since they consume the most, pollute the most, and place the greatest burden on the world's limited resources, have a special responsibility. The United States, as a nation, has a special responsibility to provide world leadership by setting an example.
4) **FOURTH. ZPG is a non-partisan educational organization.**…By education and by broad-spectrum social activity, ZPG seeks to advance the interests of everyone everywhere. We seek to solve the population problem which threatens us all."

Through this corrective, Ehrlich sought to re-center ZPG's public perception by stressing its emphasis on the population problem as most acute among the majority white middle-class society, as well as its commitment to "voluntary limits" regulated through individual responsibility and state interventions. In keeping with a larger organizational

[228] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 3 (Mar. 1970).

tendency, Ehrlich nevertheless kept the door to *involuntary* methods open in his provocation that compulsory control might be necessary in the absence of such voluntary limits.[229]

Another ZPG controversy occurred on the pages of the McGill Student Society's *Birth Control Handbook,* first published in 1968 and with subsequent editions in 1969 and 1970. Within the ZPG community, word spread that the *Handbook*'s introduction to the 1970 edition directly criticized ZPG. In the introduction, the McGill *Handbook*'s authors argued that Black and Third World communities were "correct in suspecting genocidal motives," arguing that ZPG "supports forced sterilization in Third World Nations" and that Paul Ehrlich had advocated for coercive controls on Indian population growth. Describing Ehrlich and ZPGers as "neo-Malthusian bullshitters," they argued that ZPG failed account for the maldistribution of resources, explaining, "never once do they mention that only in respect of the laws of capitalism can food be destroyed in a starving world. The Z-pop movement suggests that people are starving because they dare to be alive, if they were not alive they would not starve. The solution that they suggest is genocide." Setting themselves apart from such groups, the writers asserted that organizations distributing the *Handbook* "have a responsibility to continually raise the issues of women's liberation whenever dealing with birth control."[230]

Yet in the summer of 1971, controversy erupted within ZPG over whether members should read and distribute the *Birth Control Handbook*, with one writer

[229] The May issue of the 1970 Board of Directors meeting included notes on the meeting but not the names of Board members, so it is unclear if Bowers was ultimately dismissed at this time. *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 3 (May 1970).
[230] Ibid.

commenting, “Your strong advisement not to purchase and distribute [the *Handbook*] because it contains 'two pages of editorial material that levels serious charges of genocide and compulsion against both ZPG and Paul Ehrlich' is a contemptible attitude in 1971,” instead asserting “McGill Student Society's views and your displeasure are superb reasons to purchase the handbook.”[231]

Another member, from East Haven, Connecticut, wrote describing his concern for the “little space devoted to ideas which run counter to the ‘official line’ of ZPG National” within the newsletter.[232] The perspectives he felt were excluded, however, were moral opposition to abortion and ZPG’s efforts to focus on the white middle-class, arguing this amounted to an assumption “that poor people were justified in wanting more children, whereas middle class people weren’t.” After suggesting that ZPG devote an issue to the welfare system and its role in rewarding or forcing large families among the poor, he concluded by assessing, “population control is a complex issue involving much more than abortion and Women's Lib, but these two issues seem to be dominating the *National Reporters*.”[233] Yet within the very same “Letters” section, a writer from Seattle, Washington, wrote in to express her “strongest possible disapproval” of ZPG’s stated goal of “ending subsidies, direct and indirect, to large families.’” As the writer explained, cutting government aid would amount to a form of punishment which would in turn result in ZPG losing important allies; as she contended, “You are losing the potential and powerful support of the women's liberation movement (which shares many goals with ZPG) through this inhumane and insensitive proposal. Many feel as I do. This goal

[231] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 8 (July/Aug. 1971).
[232] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 9 (Sept. 1971).
[233] Ibid.

perpetuates the image of ZPG as an upper class phenomenon desiring to control, suppress and disregard the rights of the poor, the disadvantaged, and of women."[234] These two letters demonstrate the plurality of perceptions of ZPG and its approach to environmental populationism and crucial questions of power and coercion among its own members.

Members of ZPG's Political Department staff, chimed in later in the year to commend the dialogue among members which "helps all of us sharpen our thinking."[235] While advocating against distributing the Handbook, despite its otherwise excellent, they went on to reaffirm ZPG's opposition to economically differentiated reproductive policies. As they reasoned:

> Special policies aimed at the poor are both discriminatory and ineffective; a reduction in family size among the poor of two children would be one third as effective as policies producing an overall reduction in family size in all groups of one child only. Obviously, we wish to avoid policies which discriminate in a pro-natalist direction for the poor. This is why ZPG worked last year for the Tydings bill, designed to provide the poor with equal access to contraceptives; why we support the repeal of abortion laws even where "reform laws" have provided the middle class with access to abortion; why we favor eliminating the discrimination against childless couples and single people in the Family Assistance Plan; and why we feel it is vital that all forms of contraceptive services be covered in any scheme of national health insurance.[236]

In this assessment, ZPG staffers affirmed the organization's commitment to equality of access to reproductive health and contraceptive services. This commitment, they explained, also shaped ZPG's approach to social policy incentives for and against natalism. Yet although "ZPG does not favor indiscriminate attacks on programs designed to protect the welfare of children," the writers did oppose existing forms of state subsidy, in health insurance and housing, for large middle-class and wealthy families, writing, "It

[234] Ibid.
[235] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. II (Nov./Dec. 1971).
[236] Ibid.

is this type of discrimination we oppose, not measures whose effect is to provide a decent environment for children in both large and small families."[237] Within this framing, ZPG's programmatic focus on the fertility and resource consumption of the white middle class, rather than poor or minority communities, was justified on its basis of ecological expediency. Here, the political department insisted on ZPG's vision of environmental populationism as non-discriminatory against the poor and racial minorities, while stopping before going so far as to affirm a broader commitment to reproductive freedom and autonomy.

The ZPG's official commitments, however, were not always shared among its members. For example, following a May 1970 newsletter announcement that ZPG's executive director, Shirley Radl, had condemned California Governor Reagan's endorsement of compulsory birth control classes for welfare mothers, arguing this represented "an unnecessary and unprincipled attack on the basic human rights of welfare mothers," a ZPG chapter coordinator from Albuquerque, New Mexico, wrote in to express her dissent.[238] Radl's statement, she argued, "has caused quite a bit of opposition to ZPG…There is a great deal of resentment about welfare mothers being able to have as large a family as they want, at the taxpayer's expense, while the taxpayer is being asked to limit himself to only one or two natural children."[239] Policies opposing mandatory classes for welfare recipients, she argued, ran contrary to the assumptions of potential ZPG members. As she noted, "One of the first statements made by uncommitted persons upon being approached by ZPG ideas is 'When something is done to prevent my money

[237] Ibid.
[238] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 2, No. 3 (May 1970).
[239] *ZPG NR,* Vol 2, No. 7 (Aug. 1970).

being used to support a population explosion among the welfare recipients, I'll start thinking about keeping my own family small.'"[240] The letter writer pushed for ZPG to change its stance, a position which was raised again and again by ZPG members.[241]

Despite its asserted focus on voluntary measures to reduce population growth, the specter of involuntary measures continued to follow ZPG within its external perception and internal debates. The organization, therefore, remained fractured by the fault line of coercion which threatened to shift ZPG's policy of voluntary intimate regulation to stricter forms of compulsion, undermining its gestures toward bodily autonomy and narrowing its scope to a more limited, and even temporary, form of reproductive choice.

## IV. Conclusion

In recent years, news outlets including *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic,* and *The New York Times* have published articles describing a growing percentage of young Americans choosing to not have children due to climate change. With headlines like "To Breed or Not to Breed?" or "A World Without Children," these articles express young people's deliberations over the ethics of bringing a child into the world amid climate crisis as well as their fears that said child will contribute to deepening that crisis.[242] Other news stories report on growing eco-fascism, exemplified in the El Paso mass shooting in

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[240] Ibid.
[241] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 3, No. 3 (Mar. 1971).
[242] Alex Williams, "To Breed or Not to Breed?," *The New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2021, https:// www.nytimes.com/2021/11/20/style/breed-children-climate-change.html; Emma Green, "The World Without Children," *The Atlantic,* Sept. 20, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/ archive/2021/09/millennials-babies-climate-change/620032/; Megan Mayhew Bergman, "Should I Have Children? Weighing Parenthood amid the Climate Crisis," *The Guardian*, Nov. 13, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/nov/13/children-parenthood-climate-crisis.

2019 and the Buffalo mass shooting in 2022, which take population growth theories to disturbingly violent ends, targeting racially marginalized and immigrant groups as causes of environmental destruction.[243] Environmental populationism thus persistently holds sway over environmental and reproductive rights groups as a commonsense, and remains deeply intertwined with other strands of populationism.

Scholars have attributed ZPG's drop-off in membership, and the waning of populationist fervor in the mid-1970s to the widely reported decline in the U.S. birthrate.[244] Such pronouncements seemed to make the organization and its claims of impending doom irrelevant. Others have attributed ZPG's waning significance to *Roe v. Wade*, arguing that the Supreme Court's decision on January 22, 1973, either obviated the need for a group like ZPG by liberalizing reproductive rights or decimated the chances of a group like ZPG by aligning it to the subject of an emerging backlash.[245] By February 1973, ZPG's Executive Director Hal Seielstad addressed newsletter readers by describing the organization's crisis: "*Your* organization is in desperate need of two fundamentals– members and money. You, the members, are the only ones who can solve our crisis-the

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[243] Natasha Lennard, "The El Paso Shooter Embraced Eco-Fascism. We Can't Let the Far Right Co-Opt the Environmental Struggle," *The Intercept,* Aug. 5, 2019, https://theintercept.com/ 2019/08/05/el-paso-shooting-eco-fascism-migration/; Oliver Milman, "Buffalo Suspect May Be Latest Mass Shooter Motivated by 'Eco-Fascism,'" *The Guardian*, May 17, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/17/buffalo-shooting-suspect-eco-fascism.

[244] Michael Stern, "Birth Rate Declines Here, Reversing a 3-Year Trend," *The New York Times*, Oct. 3, 1971, A1; Jack Rosenthal, "Birth Rate Drop Is Accelerating," *The New York Times*, May 24, 1972, L7; Jack Rosenthal, "U.S. Birth Rate Drops to a Record Low," *The New York Times*, Mar. 2, 1973, A1; Derek S. Hoff, "'Kick That Population Commission in the Ass': The Nixon Administration, the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, and the Defusing of the Population Bomb," *Journal of Policy History* 22, no. 1 (Jan. 2010): 23–63.

[245] Hoff, "'Kick That Population Commission,'" 30-31; Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment,* 201-220.

malaise of APATHY...ZPG's strength is/was in being a grassroots national organization with vigorous local members acting independently and, in concept, through chapters. Without members and chapters we will become a totally ineffectual organization, indeed, a nonexistent one." Alongside a call for growth in members, Seielstad called for a broadening of ZPG's scope to more fully incorporate environmentalism, writing "We should teach the public what 'carrying capacity' is all about and speak to the inextricable issues of resources and time. Why should not ZPG work on the total issue? A too narrowly focused organization is doomed to ephemerality. Now that the long battle for abortion reform has been won, a new wave of apathy may well set in among those of you who have been particularly concerned with this issue. We need more issues, not fewer ones."[246]

Others within ZPG attributed the organization's membership decline to its success in accomplishing its early goals of establishing an environmental populationist commonsense. Carl Pope, ZPG's Washington lobbyist, argued that these growing pains were the result of the organization and the population movement more broadly entering its third phase. Phase I closed with the publication of the CPGAF report in the spring of 1972, which, he argued, represented the mainstreaming of ZPG and its allies' views. Phase II was defined by the "summer and winter of our discontent" wherein falling birthrates led to media proclamations that z.p.g. had been accomplished. Alongside this demographic shift, the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and Right to Life Movement began to stall efforts to institutionalize an effective national population policy. Yet whereas at start of 1973 the population movement was "on the defensive," the

[246] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Feb. 1973).

January 22nd Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade* had changed everything. Phase III, therefore, would require the population movement, as well as environmentalists, minority groups, consumers, farmers, business, and labor, to shift to a new concern: the control of public resources, and the uses to which those resources are to be put. As Pope described, in *Roe v. Wade* the population movement had "won the last major battle in which it could honestly say 'What we are asking costs no one. We are only asking for the state to lay its hands off.'" Pope thus called for a shift from state intervention as the lack of interference with reproductive privacy, as in the case of abortion law, to state intervention through the *active* regulation of population. As Pope wrote, "Now, increasingly, the question we face is how we can ensure that a sufficient flow of public resources can be maintained into population related programs to ensure that the present trend towards lower births is sustained for the next half century."[247]

While ZPG never regained the height of its membership, the organization remained active in population and environmental spheres into the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, and changed its name to Population Connection in 2002.[248] While continuing to emphasize population's relationship to reproduction with particular attention to public funding of abortion and the liberalization of voluntary sterilization, by mid-1973 ZPG began to invest resources and greater focus on issues including immigration, land use planning, and international family planning.[249] With John Tanton as the head of ZPG's

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[247] Ibid.
[248] Marian Starkey, "Whatever Happened to 'ZPG?'," *Population Connection* (Apr. 7, 2017), https://populationconnection.org/blog/whatever-happened-to zpg/#:~:text=The%20name%20 Population% 20Connection%20was,materials%20when%20it%20makes%20sense.
[249] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 5, No. 7 (Nov. 1973); *ZPG NR,* Vol. 6, No. 3 (May 1974).

immigration committee, in April 1974 the Board voted on a resolution "to urge an end to all illegal immigration and a reduction in legal immigration to rates approximating emigration from the U.S."[250] By June 1975, ZPG's Board voted to concentrate time and resources on U.S. population stabilization, the development and promotion of a U.S. population policy, and illegal immigration, designating abortion as a lower priority focus.[251] As historian Suzanne Staggenborg notes, ZPG made this transition in spite of its declining membership, while organizations like NOW substantially grew their membership by emphasizing the abortion issue in a period in which it was increasingly under threat.[252] At the organization's 10th Annual Meeting in 1978, John Tanton, by then a two-time president of ZPG, was inducted as a board member and the organization authorized staff to assist Tanton in establishing the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR).[253]

When ZPG celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1978, it assessed the organization's accomplishments. ZPG celebrated its role in "putting population issues on the agenda for environmentalists and feminists, and drawing the critical core to make it safe later for family planners and demographers to join the population cause," mobilizing its grassroots support to "[help] political leaders put population on the federal agenda," and acting as a "a major voice for legalization of abortion and for birth control law reforms, when traditional family planning groups were more timid and apolitical."[254] By November

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[250] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 6, No. 3 (May 1974); *ZPG NR*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (June 1974).
[251] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 7, No. 10 (Dec. 1975).
[252] Suzanne Staggenborg, "Organizational and Environmental Influences on the Development of the Pro-Choice Movement," *Social Forces* 68, no. 1 (Sept. 1989): 230-31.
[253] *ZPG NR*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (June/July 1978).
[254] *ZPG NR,* Vol. 10, No. 9 (Nov. 1978).

1978, ZPG had significantly changed as an organization; with membership at 8,000, it negotiated new funding limits by shifting from lobbying around family planning toward an emphasis on its core concern of population stabilization and the "defense of the idea of z.p.g."[255] While a hard decision, particularly because "a central part of ZPG's work–both in chapters and in Washington–has been to promote availability of the full range of birth control methods, as well as legal abortion," this shift would recalibrate ZPG, bringing its agenda of populationism to the forefront and its at times contentious relationships to environmentalism, reproductive rights, and feminism to the background.[256]

In some ways ZPG is notable as a result of its ephemerality. During the brief period between 1968 and 1973 in which ZPG was a bustling, rapidly growing organization, ZPG carved out a particular role at the intersection of the population, environmental, and reproductive rights movements, at times succeeding and others failing to negotiate the relation between these three tendencies. Yet its influence, and membership, waned after 1973. Historians have debated the nature of the relationship between populationists, reproductive rights advocates, and feminists. Linda Gordon's *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* (1976) assessed that "population control was the major, defining part of the politics of reproduction" during the 1960s, an influence that would continue into the 1970s.[257] Suzanne Staggenborg suggests that ZPG's "women's right's approach to abortion" can be partly attributed to its overlaps in national leadership with groups like NARAL and NOW.[258] Assessing this relationship differently, Rebecca M.

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[255] Ibid.
[256] Ibid.
[257] Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (Penguin Books, 1990), 395.
[258] Staggenborg, *The Pro-Choice Movement,* 53.

Kluchin contends, "ZPG members were some of the earliest supporters of the movement to legalize abortion, but most supported this goal to combat overpopulation, not empower women."[259] Felicia Kornbluh clarifies that the "mid-twentieth century consensus around population control," which "had even shaped the campaign to decriminalize abortion," aligned with campaigns around the legalization of abortion and contraception yet was at odds with movements for reproductive freedom which held the right to not have children and the right to *have* children in equal measure.[260] And as Elena R. Gutiérrez summarizes,

> While overlapping in content to some extent, the population control platform was, in fact, in direct opposition to the reproductive rights platform. Thus, while mainstream feminists lent support (perhaps unwittingly) to population control efforts and the struggle for zero population growth during the first half of the decade, many disaffiliated themselves from the population control cause as they realized that birth control advocates were not necessarily interested in guaranteeing women's rights to control their own bodies.[261]

Historians have thus varied in their assessment of the nature of the relationship between feminism and populationism, recognizing how populationism in some ways structured the conditions of possibility for reproductive rights and freedom in the 1970s as well as the foundational cracks underlying their potential alignment. This chapter has explored how ZPG, the key representative of environmental populationism, understood itself in relation to feminist, reproductive rights, and broader populationist groups as it navigated questions of reproductive autonomy, gender liberation, and the reimagining of the family.

The case studies of ZPG and its predecessors demonstrate the limits of

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[259] Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950-1980* (Rutgers University Press, 2011), 34.
[260] Kornbluh, *A Woman's Life,* xvi-xvii, 58-59.
[261] Gutiérrez, *Fertile Matters,* 29.

environmental populationism's incorporation of both contemporaneous understandings of reproductive freedom and contemporary conceptions of reproductive justice. Following the debates and transitions in ZPG's early years makes clear how persistently the organization attempted to reconcile its anxieties surrounding overpopulation-induced environmental catastrophe with a full embrace of reproductive autonomy and liberation from norms structuring gender and the family. For ZPG, the former concern profoundly shaped and constrained its commitment to the latter. Historian Rickie Solinger assesses that no national population policy, whether pro- or anti-natalist, has ever fully guaranteed the right and the resources to be a mother as well as the right to contracept and the right to terminate a pregnancy.[262] As she explains, "The question that remains, as the human population moves toward nine billion, is whether demographers, politicians, policymakers, environmentalists, and others can turn away from polices that define the bodies of the poorest women as vehicles for achieving various goals of government and instead integrate the reproductive justice framework into their plans for saving the earth."[263] In the process of achieving this end, there remains a need to cut out the logics of populationism at environmentalism's roots.

[262] Solinger, "Bleeding across Time," 27.
[263] Ibid.

## Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how cultural understandings of reproduction and the family constituted and preoccupied environmental politics in the 1970s, demonstrating the imbrication of environmentalism–and associated understandings of health and futurity–within the neoliberal cultures that defined the historical moment. Throughout the 1970s, diverse political actors leveraged claims to protect the future, often signified through children and unborn generations, to situate their activities and claims. The assertion of defending future generations recurs again and again in these case studies as a site of generating claims to power and legitimacy; whether through sustaining economic growth, mitigating hazardous waste, justifying gender-based labor exclusions, or calling for a rapid reduction in population. Rather than engendering a broad sense of social responsibility for a sustainable and collectively sustaining future, the four case studies in the dissertation demonstrate how assertions of protecting the children in the 1970s narrowed the scope of environmental politics to individual, rather than structural, solutions. This narrowed vision has fundamentally undermined the futures of the future generations environmental politics have so often claimed as its imagined beneficiaries.

In this context, I argue, four concepts endemic to neoliberalism became dominant frames within environmental politics: *privatization, deservingness, responsibility, and regulation.* Authorizing the privatization of public resources, stratifying those deemed deserving of care from those deemed undeserving, narrowing a sense of public accountability in favor of individualized responsibility, and justifying the intimate regulation of bodies while deregulating industries, these concepts defined the scope of environmental politics around the private interests of the family and its continuity. As a

result, environmentalism in the 1970s sacrificed broader visions of collective futurity which would have required lasting structural interventions and the reconciliation of broader social inequities.

Within the scope of this dissertation, capitalism is understood within a particular historical phase of emergent neoliberalism defined by a cultural politics of family values in the 1970s. As political and feminist theorists have contended, the politics of family values emergent in this era largely resonated with neoliberal economic policies which saw the curtailing of state spending on social supports as necessary to familial freedom, with the most adverse effects falling on families and communities outside of the normative white, middle class, heterosexual unit these policies privileged.[1] The regulatory initiatives established in the early 1970s, including the EPA and OSHA, represent, as Nancy Fraser writes, "a parallel of sorts to New Deal agencies that supported social reproduction" as well as the postwar political economic "regime's last major effort to internalize externalities as objects of state regulation."[2]

In historical and theoretical scholarship on neoliberalism and neoliberal family values, there is a danger in nostalgia for the pre-neoliberal age, with its Fordist family wage, New Deal compact between capitalism and government, and trust in the state as a tool of social redistribution (even if only nominally). This romanticization of the postwar

[1] Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, (Columbia University Press, 2019); Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Zone Books, 2017); Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (Jan. 1994): 309-36; Sara Matthiesen, *Reproduction Reconceived: Family Making and the Limits of Choice after Roe v. Wade* (University of California Press, 2021).
[2] Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism,* 101.

New Deal era's unfulfilled promise of generalized abundance has particular implications for environmental history and politics.

Of course, the postwar period did not initiate today's overlapping environmental, climate, and social crises–earlier processes of primitive accumulation and expropriation, and the forms of racialized domination they engineered, founded such contradictions of life and set in motion today's crises, both new and inherited.[3] As Potawatomi scholar-activist Kyle Powys Whyte, drawing inspiration from fellow environmental advocate and friend Lee Sprague, contends, "in the Anthropocene… some indigenous peoples already inhabit what our ancestors would have likely characterized as a dystopian future."[4] Scholars Justin Hosbey and J.T. Roane similarly remind us of the long and unequally distributed unfolding of today's environmental crises, noting, "Variable exposure to phenomena associated with the defilement of the planet did not emerge with smoke stacks and automobility but rather with the origins of the racial capitalocene in the articulation of the plantation-industrial complex beginning in the colonization of the Americas."[5] Rather than a unique experience of our historical moment, today's crises extend from longstanding systemic arrangements. "Dispossession, slavery, neoliberalism,

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[3] Winona LaDuke, "A Society Based on Conquest Cannot Be Sustained: Native Peoples and the Environmental Crisis," in *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*, ed. Richard Hofrichter (New Society Publishers, 1993), 98–106; Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (University of California Press, 2017); Silvia Federici, "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons in an Era of Primitive Accumulation," in *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (PM Press, 2019), 102-115.

[4] Kyle Powys Whyte, "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now. Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene" in *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, eds. Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (Routledge, 2017), 206-218.

[5] J. T. Roane and Justin Hosbey, "Mapping Black Ecologies," *Current Research in Digital History* 2 (2019).

and climate change," Elisabeth Anker writes, "are understood falsely as premodern, past, present, and future events, though in truth they upend any kind of historical trajectory."[6]

Still, the postwar era's modes of production and consumption accelerated processes in place in past eras, such that the postwar period represents what energy historian Caleb Wellem calls a "key moment of petrocultural formation," with the United States at its center.[7] As Wellem expands, "Although energy infrastructures and the (sub)urban modernity that they fostered were necessary antecedents, US petroculture actually emerged in the postwar period in parallel with the world's 'great acceleration' in global energy use and CO2 emissions."[8] As Nancy Fraser notes, "Refined oil […] powered social democracy…The irony went largely unnoticed: what underwrote increased public spending on social welfare in the Global North was intensified private plunder of nature in the Global South. Apparently, capital would foot the bill for some social reproduction costs here only if permitted to dodge a much larger bill for natural reproduction costs there."[9] Just as activists, politicians, and corporations today authorize various activities on behalf of future generations, in his 1930 essay "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," John Maynard Keynes, architect of the postwar Keynesian economic system which neoliberalism so targeted, argued that continued economic growth would alleviate the historic struggle for subsistence, eliminate

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[6] Elisabeth R. Anker, *Ugly Freedoms* (Duke University Press, 2022), 30.
[7] Caleb Wellum, *Energizing Neoliberalism: The 1970s Energy Crisis and the Making of Modern America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023), 12-29.
[8] Here Wellum references J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke's *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945* (Harvard University Press, 2016) which charts 1945 as the start of an anomalous period of resource consumption, environmental degradation, and CO2 emission (4-5). Wellum, *Energizing Neoliberalism,* 12-29.
[9] Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism,* 99-100.

inequality, and inaugurate an "age of leisure and of abundance" for future generations.[10] While the 1970s spelled the demise of the Keynesian vision of the state's relationship to capitalism, the 2020s seem to signal the demise of another.

While the dissertation is based in the "long 1970s," it is inevitably shaped by the present.[11] At their mid-point, the 2020s have encompassed (with many exclusions) an epoch-defining global pandemic, historic mobilizations around the unfinished project of racial justice, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and criminalization of reproductive and bodily autonomy, a devastating U.S.-funded war in Palestine, and the re-election of Donald Trump to the presidency. I certainly didn't set out to write a dissertation about government agencies, but it is nevertheless strange to conclude a dissertation that highlights the inadequacy of  government bodies emerging from reform and radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s–including the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission–during a moment in which even these insufficient and compromised mechanisms are under attack in the name of efficiency. Disability is, once again, being marshalled as a cautionary tale by Make America Healthy Again enthusiasts who promise individual solutions to contamination—not from industrial waste or air pollution but from vaccines, as they cut funding for Medicaid, Social Security, and research and regulatory bodies including the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control, and the National Institutes of

[10] John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren (1930)," in *Essays in Persuasion* (Harcourt Brace, 1931), 358–73.
[11] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Free Press, 2001).

Health.[12] Even PBS's *Sesame Street* is facing cuts following the termination of a federal grant program that funded children's educational television.[13]

Meanwhile, the twelve year deadline for the world to limit global warming to 1.5 °C, determined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's "Special Report" in 2018, is set to expire in 2030.[14] As Naomi Klein writes, in such a "knife-edge moment," we are witnesses to the unfolding in which "another 'last decade to save the world' is rapidly slipping away."[15] In 2024, ExxonMobil reported earnings of $33.7 billion and CO2 emissions once again exceeded the previous years' record; hazardous waste resulting from postwar industries continues to poison homes and ecosystems, with Black and Native communities most affected, while existing environmental justice protections are stripped; the Green New Deal's agenda of aligning good jobs with clean environments has been undermined; and eco-fascists alternate between overpopulation fatalism and eugenic pronatalism.[16] Nancy Fraser, in her 2023 book *Cannibal Capitalism,* writes that

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[12] Beatrice Adler-Bolton, Artie Vierkant, and Phil Rocco, “Waste, Fraud and Abuse,” *Death Panel* Apr. 16, 2025, https://soundcloud.com/deathpanel/waste-fraud-and-abuse; Apoorva Mandavilli and Roni Caryn Rabin, “Trump’s Budget Cuts Funding for Chronic Disease Prevention,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/02/health/ trump-budget-cdc-chronic-conditions.html.

[13] Benjamin Mullin, “Trump Administration Kills Grant for PBS Children’s Shows,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/06/us/politics/doe-kills-grant-pbs-childrens-shows.html.

[14] Jonathan Watts, “We Have 12 Years to Limit Climate Change Catastrophe, Warns UN,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 8, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report.

[15] Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World* (Picador, 2023), 166-67.

[16] "ExxonMobil announces 2024 results" *Exxon Mobil* Jan. 31, 2025, https://corporate.exxon mobil .com/news/news-releases/2025/0131_exxonmobil-announces-2024-results; Zeke Hausfather and Pierre Friedlingstein, "Analysis: Global CO2 emissions will reach new high in 2024 despite slower growth," *Carbon Brief* Nov. 13, 2024, https://www.carbon brief.org/analysis -global-co2-emissions-will-reach-new-high-in-2024-despite slowergrowth/#:~: text=Carbon%20

the "happy coincidence" of these colliding crises is that "all roads lead to one idea — namely, capitalism" which is "deeply implicated in seemingly non-ecological forms of social injustice, from class exploitation to racial-imperial oppression and gender and sexual domination."[17]

It is in this vein that although the project draws on historical archives and strives to emplace these archives within their context, it is also deeply presentist. When writing about environmental, reproductive, and familial politics of the 1970s within the 2020s, how could it be anything but? It is, for example, *because* oil companies' public relations programs' architected decades of climate denial and obfuscation which saturated the political approach to climate change in subsequent decades that the cultural politics of these programs is worth retracing. The significance of these past events–of racial and material divisions which undermine communities' efforts to fight environmental injustice;

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dioxide%20(CO2)%20emissions%20from,previous%20record%2C%20set%20in%20202 3; Environmental and Energy Law Program, Harvard Law School, "Rollback: Trump Rescinded Clinton's Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice." *Federal Environmental Justice Tracker* Jan. 21, 2025, https://eelp.law.harvard.edu/tracker/rollback-trump-rescinded-clintons-executive-order-12898-on-environmental-justice/; Keith Rushing, "Trump Guts Environmental Justice Policies, but the Fight for Justice Continues" *Earthjustice* Mar. 14, 2025, https://earth justice.org/article/trump-guts-environmental-justice-policies-but-the-fight-for-justice-continues; Leigh Phillips, "Brown Shirts, Green Dreams," *Noema Magazine* June 23, 2022, https://www. noemamag.com/brown-shirts-green-dreams/; Annabel Sowemimo, "Ecofascism Is Infiltrating the Conversation Around Reproductive Rights," *Novara Media* Feb. 18, 2022, https://novara media.com/2022/02/18/ecofascism-is-infilitrating-the-conversation-around-reproductive-rights/; Carter Sherman, "The Rise of Pronatalism: Why Musk, Vance and the Right Want Women to Have More Babies," *The Guardian* Mar. 11, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/usnews/2025/ mar/11/what-is-pro natalism-right-wing-republican; Kiera Butler, "Why Elon Musk and JD Vance Are Obsessed With You Having More Babies" *Mother Jones* Mar. 31, 2025, https:// www.motherjones.com/politics/2025/03/this-is-a-war-and-natalism-is-our-sword-and-shield-my-weekend-with-the-pronatalists/.

[17] Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System Is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do About It* (Verso Books, 2022), 78.

of the potential alliance of feminist, environmental, and labor groups; and of environmentalism's embrace of populationism– in the present is in part what makes these moments deserving of reconsideration. These case studies represent both pitfalls and possibilities of environmental politics in the 1970s which provide lessons for those seeking alternate modes to care for environments and communities in the 2020s. In Fraser's assessment of the present moment, she writes, "Ecopolitics, in a word, has become ubiquitous. No longer the exclusive property of stand-alone environmental movements, climate change now appears as a pressing matter on which every political actor must take a stand."[18] In revisiting these episodes from the past for lessons, this project is thus also oriented toward the future.

Notions of time and futurity are endemic to discussions of environmental politics and, now, climate change. Astra Taylor, in 2019, emphasized the overwhelming experience of simultaneity and urgency within the temporality of the climate crisis:

> One clock ticks forebodingly. And then another. And another. Mussels are roasting in their shells on the California coast, a mother orca carries her dead calf for seventeen days while her pod goes hungry, clear-cutting quickens pace in the rain forests of Brazil, the Maldives are sinking, and Arctic ice is receding. No wonder we are on edge, with all these alarms perpetually blaring…there are so many clocks and so little time: economic clocks, physical and chemical clocks, nature's innumerable biological clocks, our inner psychological clocks, and collective cultural clocks. It's a temporal cacophony, a disorienting polyrhythm.[19]

This disorienting passage of time also quickly dates environmental history and theory. Naomi Klein, for instance, wrote in her most recent book, *Doppelganger,* about the challenge of adapting the stories we tell about climate change under rapidly changing

[18] Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism,* 76.
[19] Astra Taylor, "Out of Time," *Lapham's Quarterly*, 2019, https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/ climate/out-time.

conditions. As she describes, she had "grown quite attached" to a particular narrative of change: "The story went like this: Things are bad. They are about to get a lot worse. But we can avert that a lot worse if we embrace a Marshall Plan/New Deal/World War II–scale mobilization that will transform our entire economy so that it is largely powered by the wind and the sun, while giving us a historic opportunity to battle pretty much every form of inequality under that sun. The catch was that we had to do it fast."[20] I have, admittedly, found this story so compelling over the years because it envisions broad-based repair after decades of privatization and deregulation initiated in the 1970s and promises collective forms of responsibility in which all people and nonhuman beings are recognized as deserving of care.

Yet "Decade Zero" moved quickly without sufficient progress; as Klein writes, "In 2020, based on the best available science, we said that, while it was too late to stop dangerous warming, there was still time to avert catastrophic climate change, but, once again, we would need to cut global pollution in half in a decade."[21] While at the start of 2020, the vibrance of the global, intergenerational climate movement calling for systemic change seemed to indicate this would be possible, following the onset of the pandemic and the results of the 2020, then 2024 presidential election, it seemed another decade would pass without sufficient transformation. As Klein recounts, "For me, it meant that I had run out of halfway-credible pathways away from disaster to offer. I no longer saw how we could avoid the social and ecological outcomes that so many of us most fear. That was the deepest source of my vertigo. Who was I without that story of possible

[20] Klein, *Doppelganger,* 320.
[21] Klein, *Doppelganger,* 320.

salvation to share?"[22]

There are models available in the case of such a reorientation to the conditions of the present. In 2016, Donna Haraway called for a praxis of "staying with the trouble," a collective pathway that refuses both "a comic faith in technofixes" and "a position that the game is over, it's too late, there's no sense trying to make anything any better, or at least no sense having any active trust in each other in working and playing for a resurgent world."[23] She describes this approach as one of "eschewing futurism" entirely.[24] In a different register, Melani McAlister, in her book *Promises, Then the Storm* chronicling her experience of witnessing nearly a year of the war in Gaza, describes the process of reckoning with the closure of once-possible political horizons. As she writes, "I am beginning to think we should read the history and the literature and music of previous eras not just as documents of the past, but as maps of imaginary futures…that once belonged to some people but perhaps are no longer available to us. We do still have options for imagining the world otherwise, but we cannot simply recycle the dreams of the past. In this sense, we read the texts of the past as reversible figures–both as statements of possibility in their moment and as grave markers for all those futures that never happened."[25]

Conceiving of futures around the continuity of normative reproduction and

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[22] Klein, *Doppelganger,* 320-21.
[23] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 3-4.
[24] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble,* 3-4.
[25] Within this section, McAlister is reflecting on David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Duke University Press, 2004). Melani McAlister, *Memory, US Politics, and the Israel-Gaza War* (Mack Books Limited, 2024), 48-9.

families, as this dissertation has shown, has done little to serve the interests of actual children. How we imagine the future remains a terrain of negotiation, where urgency must not be compromised by expediency, and care must extend beyond the family, the community, and the nation to encompass much broader conceptions of interdependence.

## List of Acronyms

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|---|---|
| AVS | Association for Voluntary Sterilization |
| ACLU | American Civil Liberties Union |
| CCPE | Campaign to Check the Population Explosion |
| CLUW | Coalition of Labor Union Women |
| COPE | First National Congress on Optimum Population Growth and Environment |
| CPGAF | Commission on Population Growth and the American Future |
| CTW | Children's Television Workshop |
| EEOC | Equal Employment Opportunity Commission |
| EPA | Environmental Protection Agency |
| ERA | Equal Rights Amendment |
| FLSA | Federal Labor Standards Act |
| LCHA | Love Canal Homeowners Association |
| NARAL | National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws |
| NEED | National Energy Education Day |
| NEPA | National Environmental Policy Act |
| NIOSH | National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health |
| NOW | National Organization of Women |
| OCAW | Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers Union |
| OSHA | Occupational Safety and Health Act |
| OSHRC | Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission |
| PBS | Public Broadcasting Service |
| PCC | Population Crisis Committee |
| PDA | Pregnancy Discrimination Act |
| UAW | United Auto Workers Union |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |
| ZPG | Zero Population Growth (organization) |
| z.p.g. | Zero Population Growth (concept, broadly) |

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Environmental Protection Agency Archives, National Archives II, College Park.

Love Canal Collection, Tufts Archival Research Center, Tufts University.

Love Canal Newspaper Database, University Archives, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York.

Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) Records, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, Special Collections and Archives Department.

Population Council Records, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY.

Rockefeller Family and Associates Files, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, NY.

Steve Wodka, personal files.

*Periodicals*

*Across the Board*
*Buffalo Courier-Express*
*The Buffalo News*
*Charleston Daily Mail*
*The Charleston Gazette*
*Chemical & Energy News*
*Electric Perspectives*
*Fortune*
*In These Times*
*Life Magazine*
*The Los Angeles Times*
*The Nation*
*The New York Times*

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