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Mothers of East Los Angeles: Collective Urgency,
Taking on All the Threats, and Barrio Self-Determination

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Chicana/o and Central American Studies

by

Rocio Rivera-Murillo

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Mothers of East Los Angeles: Collective Urgency,
Taking on All the Threats, and Barrio Self-Determination

by

Rocio Rivera-Murillo

Master of Arts in Chicana/o and Central American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Genevieve Carpio, Chair

In this thesis, I highlight the Mothers of East Los Angeles and their struggle to protect their East LA community from state violent projects. I argue that through their struggle against the prison, oil pipeline and toxic incinerator, we can better recognize the ways that state violence against marginalized communities is normalized in the regime of racial capitalism. In addition, I argue that MELA was driven by what I refer to as “radical love,” or the act of engaging in collective urgency, taking on multiple state violent threats, and pursuing barrio self-determination. This thesis highlights how MELA’s struggle was a significant coalitional movement where they joined the anti-prison movement and environmental justice (EJ) movement to secure the safety of their community, especially the children of East L.A.

The thesis of Rocio Rivera-Murillo is approved.

Maylei Blackwell

Gaye Theresa Johnson

Genevieve Carpio, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

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Introduction

Yo como madre de familia, y como residente del Este de Los Angeles, seguíe luchando sin descanso por que se nos respete. Y yo lo hago con bastante cariño hacia mi comunidad, y digo “comunidad” porque me siento parte de ella, quiero a mi raza como parte de mi familia, y si Dios me permite seguíe luchando contra todos los gobernadores que quieren abusar de nosotros.

[As a mother and resident of East Los Angeles, I shall continue fighting tirelessly so we will be respected. And I will do this with much affection for my community. And I say "my community" because I am part of it. I love my raza, my people, as part of my family; and if God allows, I will keep on fighting against all government officials who want to take advantage of us.]¹

~ Juana Gutierrez in Pardo (1998)

It was not the first time Juana Gutierrez and her community had been negatively impacted by the state’s decision to make them targets by dumping unwanted projects in their community. During the 1950s and 1960s, the construction of L.A. freeways had already displaced thousands of East LA residents, including Juana Gutierrez.² With these violent displacements came pollution. Working-class communities of color faced the brunt of the consequences, and they were tired. When California Governor George Deukmejian suggested the construction of a prison in 1984 in East Los Angeles (East LA), a working class Latina/o community, with the help of a local priest, Juana Gutierrez and other Mexican women and mothers founded the Mothers of East L.A. (MELA), a group of women and their families that "mobilized four thousand people, and defeated the first state prison planned for an urban

¹ Mary S. Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1998), 61-62.

² Gabriel Gutierrez, “The Mothers Strike Back” in *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*, 1994. 220.

setting."³ Upon learning that the designated location for the proposed prison was near their Boyle Heights community, Juana made sure she would fight tirelessly against government state officials to ensure that her community was, in her words, not taken advantage of and respected. For the next eight years, MELA worked with community members to organize and wage an anti-prison campaign that would turn into a battle for environmental justice.

In this thesis, I focus on the Mothers of East LA and their efforts to protect their East LA communities from state violent projects. I suggest that the prison and the environmental injustices that they struggled against are manifestations of normalized state violence. I borrow from environmental justice scholars Erik Kojola and David Pellow to maintain that state violent projects are those that inflict physical and emotional harm that leads to premature death. I argue that through their struggle against the prison, oil pipeline and toxic incinerator, we can better recognize the ways that state violence against marginalized communities is normalized in the regime of racial capitalism. In addition, I argue that MELA was driven by what I refer to as “radical love,” or the act(s) of engaging in collective urgency, taking on multiple state violent threats, and pursuing barrio self-determination. More so, MELA’s struggle was a significant coalitional movement where they joined the anti-prison movement and environmental justice (EJ) movement to secure the safety of their community, especially the children of East L.A.

I begin by turning to my methods where I highlight two archival collections, the Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Mothers of East Los Angeles collection and the Pardo (Mary Santoli) collection located at California State University, Northridge in the Special Collections and Archives. Then, I turn to critical prison studies and environmental justice scholarship to reveal

³ Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities*, 3.

how prisons and environmental injustices, such as the ones MELA successfully defeated, are forms of normalized state violence. Following this, I contextualize MELA's efforts by drawing from prison abolition, critical environmental justice, women of color feminisms, and social movement scholars to employ what I call radical love as an organizing tool and framework. Afterwards, I shift to my findings where I reveal how MELA members were driven by a deep love for their community that shaped a platform defined by collective urgency, taking on all the threats, and pursuing barrio self-determination. I contend that collective urgency, an ethos of taking on all the threats and barrio self-determination are pillars or tenets of radical love. My greatest hope is to shed light on a very important legacy that changed the physical landscape of Los Angeles and enable us to dream about abolitionist futures.

Methods

Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors, and more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society.⁴

- Robin D.G. Kelley

Activist archives create genealogies that have the potential to inform the tactical evolution of contemporary movements and foster solidarity across geographies and temporalities.⁵

- Rachel Lobo

I started visiting the Special Collections and Archives at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) shortly after taking "Chicana/o Studies: Third World Feminisms" with Dr. Mary Pardo in Spring 2018. In her course, I learned about the Mothers of East Los Angeles' and wanted to learn more. During this semester, I had an academic advisement appointment with Dr.

⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002. 12.

⁵ Lobo, Rachel. "Archive as Prefigurative Space: Our Lives and Black Feminism in Canada." *Archivaria* 87, no. 87 (2019): 68–86., 81.

Gabriel Gutierrez, son of MELA activist Juana Gutierrez, who suggested that I check out his mother's archive at CSUN. Shortly after Dr. Pardo's class and meeting with Dr. Gutierrez, I landed in the archives in July 2018. What started as an inquisitive endeavor to learn about women-led environmental justice and anti-prison campaign organizing in Los Angeles turned into a research project.

Borrowing from geographer Laura Pulido, I approach this work as a scholar activist, as someone whose scholarship is directly linked to how I live my life ⁶ with ties to organizations that are working towards creating alternatives to policing in my community. Additionally, my position as a Graduate Student Researcher in the Million Dollar Hoods' archive team, an initiative which documents and maps the fiscal and human cost of mass incarceration in Los Angeles, places me in a unique position to do this research. With that said, I came to this topic and the archives with the following questions, 1) What can these Mexican women teach us about organizing against state violence? 2) If we read closely, what can we learn from grassroots organizers about the linkages between prisons and environmental justice? 3) What knowledges can be found in these activist archives that have not been acknowledged? Here, I specifically think about historian Robin D.G. Kelley's assertion that "social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions."⁷ I believe that the Mothers of East Los Angeles generated new knowledges and theories that have yet to be unpacked. Like Kelley, who terms poetic knowledge to define the ability of participants to observe the future in the present, in unpacking her mother's library Chicana historian Maria Cotera enables us to rethink the personal

⁶ Laura Pulido. "FAQs: Frequently (Un)Asked Questions About Being a Scholar Activist." In *Engaging Contradictions*, 341–366. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019.

⁷ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. 9.

collections of Chicanas as “sites of feminist praxis.” She argues that they are more than just archives that record the past, but rather collections “invested in collective transformation” that grapple with the present and future.⁸ Similarly, I consider the collection of Dr. Mary Pardo and the Mothers of East Los Angeles as sites of feminist praxis that are grounded in radical love that can further empower us to organize for alternative futures.

In this thesis, I draw from two archival collections, both located in CSUN’s Library 1) the Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Mothers of East Los Angeles, which contains 17 boxes of material that includes, but is not limited to, flyers, newspaper clippings, correspondence, and government documents and 2) the Pardo (Mary Santoli) collection, which includes Dr. Pardo’s field notes, photographs, and audio recordings of interviews from the 1990s with co-founders and members of MELA. I focused on these archives for my research because they were not only accessible, but also the largest MELA collections available. I began this research in July 2018 by examining the Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Mothers of East Los Angeles collection. At the time, I was specifically interested in reviewing documents on how the organization started. Since I knew it started with protesting a prison, I decided to primarily focus on the archives that highlighted their anti-prison campaign efforts. Since then, in August 2021, I acquired access to boxes in Series I: Administrative Records 1984-2002 and Series II: Community Activism 1978-2004 of Mothers of East LA collection.⁹ In my archival research, I have placed particular focus on MELA’s organization pamphlets, MELA project summaries, MELA newsletters, local newspapers articles

⁸ Maria Cotera. “Unpacking Our Mothers’ Libraries: Practices of Chicana Memory Before and After the Digital Turn” in *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2018. 300.

⁹ Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I was unable to visit the archives and instead was provided the option to request archives in advance and receive access to them in increments. I was granted access on Box, an online platform that allows for collaborative sharing of documents.

and clippings. From the materials that I was able to acquire, I spotlight these materials because they highlighted the work MELA did in the community best. In addition, I concentrate on Juana Gutierrez's organizing within MELA because she was one of the primary organizers and her involvement was heavily emphasized in the Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Mothers of East Los Angeles collection.

Additionally, I accessed Dr. Mary Pardo's collection, Series I: Correspondence 1967-1997 and Series II: Research Files 1940-1997. From this collection, I draw from the photographs and two audio recorded interviews that Dr. Pardo included in her archive, specifically the two she conducted with Juana Gutierrez, president of MELA in 1992. While these interviews just include one of MELA's members, Gutierrez, they provided substantial insight on MELA's motives. In addition, throughout my findings, I turn to photographs in Dr. Pardo's archive because they illuminate the importance of protest in MELA's work.

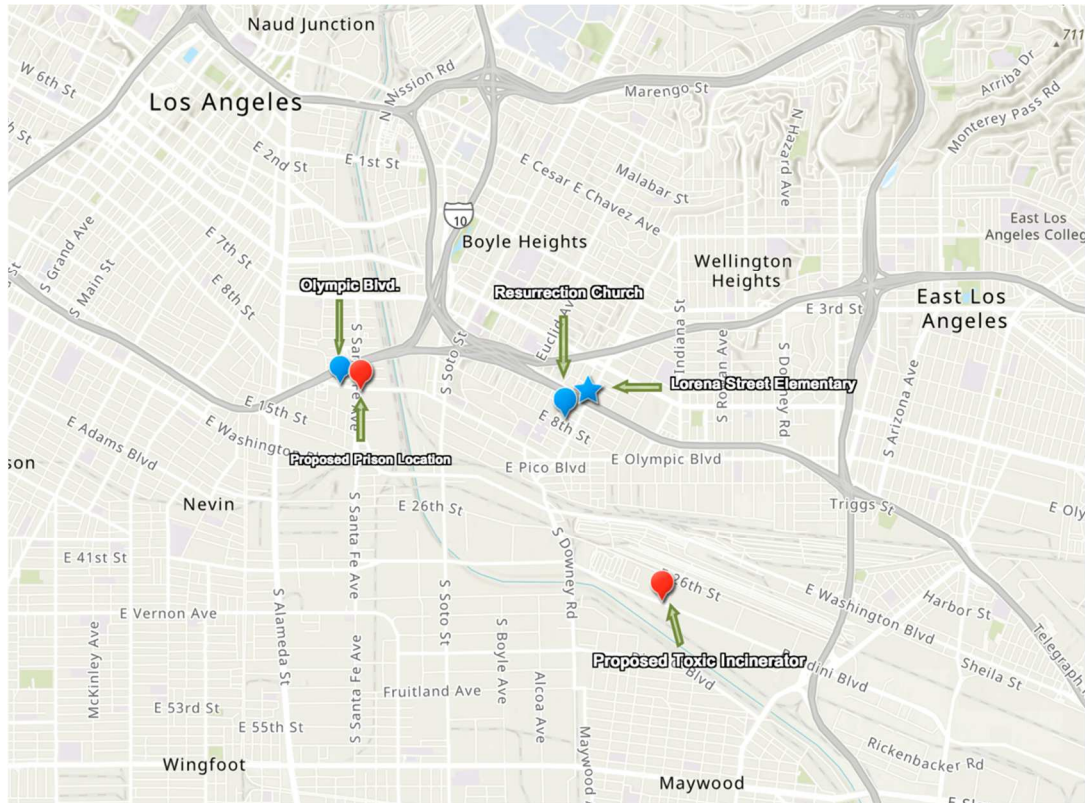
In addition to archival research, I use ArcGIS to map sites written out of historiography and reveal how places in MELA's community served as active agents in their work. When defining place, geographer Tim Creswell writes "Place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world. Place, at the basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power."¹⁰ With this in mind, the map highlights six places: a church, an elementary school, proposed prison site, Olympic Blvd., proposed toxic incinerator site, and an oil pipeline. I selected these sites based on their significance to MELA, as revealed in the archives. For example, Juana Gutierrez, co-founder of MELA, expresses how instrumental the

¹⁰ Tim Creswell. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004. 12.

Resurrection Church was to their organizing efforts in an interview with Dr. Pardo.¹¹ Juana shares that Father Moretta, who helped establish MELA, encouraged her to make announcements after mass on Sundays to let the community know about their organizing efforts and invite them to participate in creating transformative change in their community. In this way, Juana perceived the church as not only a sacred place, but also a place to organize her community against state violent projects such as the prison. Due to this, I identified and mapped the church as an important organizing site for MELA. In her book, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race*, race and space scholar Genevieve Carpio uses maps to illuminate the histories she highlights in the Inland Empire. Carpio writes that maps can “challenge the status quo and raise public consciousness in support of interventionist agendas. Brought together, inland Southern California’s rebel archive reveals countermappings of the region that challenge traditional cartographies.”¹² I hope to take a similar approach that reveals countermappings of East Los Angeles with the aim of uncovering how significant these places were for the Mothers as they organized for their children’s future.

¹¹ Box 4, Item 2, Digital Folder, MSPa2 Audio: Interview - "Mothers Of E.L.A., Juana Gutierrez," 1998 January 15.

¹² Genevieve Carpio. *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019. 16-17.



Map 1. MELA sites of struggle, ArcGIS.

I use a close textual analysis to uncover how MELA changed the landscape of Los Angeles. Through this approach, I contextualize their efforts against state violent projects as radical love. Robin D.G. Kelley writes that “freedom and love may be the most revolutionary ideas available to us, yet as intellectuals we have failed miserably to grapple with their political and analytical importance.”¹³ It is my greatest hope to engage with these ideas by highlighting the following three themes as they emerge in these collections, 1) collective urgency, 2) an ethos of taking on all the threats, 3) barrio self-determination. To be clear, while these are my own interpretations of MELA’s organizing, I name my findings by directly drawing from the language used by MELA in pamphlets, newspaper clippings, and protest signs.

Literature Review

¹³ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, 12.

By exploring the Mothers of East LA and their organizing legacy, I highlight the relationship between prisons and environmental injustices recognized by grassroots activists. By placing activists' frameworks in conversation with critical prison scholars and critical environmental justice scholars, I suggest that through MELA's struggle against the prison, the toxic incinerator, and the oil pipeline we can better recognize normalized state violence writ large, violence that the state cosigns and spearheads that can cause bodily harm to a targeted population. Naming and understanding this violence enables us to think critically about the state's actual role in the lives of marginalized communities.

I first highlight contest to prisons by drawing from prison abolitionist scholars and through unpacking MELA's efforts to resist the siting of a prison in East LA. I then examine MELA's work alongside environmental justice scholars to showcase how communities of color are rendered expendable and have historically been subject to environmental degradation by the state. Following this, I highlight the relationship between prisons and environmental justice issues—which are typically addressed as separate issues. By highlighting the relationship between the two, I build on scholar activists Braz and Gilmore's assertion (2006) that MELA identified connections between the two because of how their families would be impacted. In addition, I am arguing that love was central to their efforts. I end by analyzing MELA's efforts by drawing from prison abolition, critical environmental justice, women of color feminisms, and social movement scholars to employ what I term “radical love,” an organizing tool and framework that can help us consider love as not just an ethereal feeling, but also a force that drives movement struggles. I aim to reveal the importance of love in the Mothers of East Los Angeles organizing.

Prisons

In the United States, prisons, incarceration, and criminalization have historically served as systems to contain undesired people and to organize society. In the book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, abolitionist scholar Angela Y. Davis examined the first US penitentiaries and discusses how the prison system is a type of reform. According to Davis,

The penitentiary as an institution that simultaneously punished and rehabilitated its inhabitants was a new system of punishment that first made its appearance in the United States around the time of the American Revolution. This new system was based on the replacement of capital and corporal punishment by incarceration...Imprisonment itself was new neither to the United States nor to the world, but until the creation of this new institution called the penitentiary, it served as a prelude to punishment.¹⁴

Thus, imprisonment was not new to society. However, upon establishing the first penitentiary, punishment was institutionalized. Moreover, the increase of prisons and incarceration was a direct reform of corporal punishment. While prisons seemed more modern and civilized by comparison, the point Davis makes is that reform, rather than ending violence, allows it to continue in other forms. Thus, the call from Davis for *prison abolition* rather than prison reform. Briefly, prison abolition is a distinct political vision which seeks to eradicate prisons and prisonlike institutions and create nonpunitive alternatives to this violence.

We observe a similar phenomenon with the 13th amendment and the “end” of slavery. The 13th amendment prohibits slavery, except as a punishment for crime. Immediately after, the US witnessed the life conditions of previously enslaved Black communities to be constructed as crimes. For example, states passed vagrancy laws. These laws targeted Black people in the South, and many were put to labor in what became the convict leasing system.¹⁵ The “end” of

¹⁴ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 26.

¹⁵ Davis, 28-29.

slavery was a type of social reform and criminalization was used to organize society along racial lines that existed during slavery to ensure the exploitability of Black people and profit for white people. Thus, prison abolitionists such as Davis maintain that prisons are an extension of Black slavery.

These slavery logics extended across racial and social categories. For instance, in her book, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles 1771-1965*, historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez highlights how vagrancy laws were used to imprison people across racial categories in Los Angeles County. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, Indigenous peoples were commonly arrested on vagrancy charges and, as a result, would be auctioned to white employers every Monday at the Los Angeles County Jail. In the same way, Hernandez underscores how in the early 1900s Mexicans were commonly arrested in the Plaza District on vagrancy charges, which “were used to compel Mexican labor.”¹⁶ In sum, vagrancy laws, an extension of slavery, have been used historically to target and control people of color, further revealing the deep-rooted history of carcerality, which is the captivity of people in carceral spaces, that include but are not limited to jails, prisons, and detention centers. This is particularly significant to MELA because East Los Angeles has historically been a hub for Mexicans and Chicana/os.

Los Angeles is a central site to study carcerality. By providing a historical analysis of incarceration in Los Angeles, Hernandez strikingly uncovers how on any given day, Los Angeles County incarcerates more people than any other city in the world. She specifically states that “since 1848, L.A. County has led the state, the nation, and even the world in policing,

¹⁶ Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965*. University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 148.

incarceration and deportation.”¹⁷ Thus, MELA’s efforts to resist the construction of a prison in East Los Angeles and join the Coalition Against the Prison, a collective of organizations in Los Angeles that were organizing to stop the construction of the prison, are heightened when one considers the larger carceral context and the leading role of Los Angeles in that project.

MELA members understood how their communities were made targets of state violent projects and how racism and class informed their lives and their children’s lives. During the 1960s, the United States saw an intensification of criminalization as a tool to organize society by placing Black communities in subordinate positions. Since the 1960s, the country’s prison population began to expand, and it soared after the 1980s when Ronald Reagan announced the “War on Drugs.”¹⁸ Davis notes that during Reagan’s presidency, there was a massive prison expansion project that doubled California’s prison population in five years (1984-1989).¹⁹ In her book, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities*, the central text on MELA, Chicana feminist Mary Pardo writes that following the “stiff mandatory sentencing laws in the 1970s, the state’s prison population had risen to more than 87,000 in the 1990s.”²⁰ As the work of Davis and other scholars demonstrate, prisons are state responses to the lives of people of color. This is important to note because MELA members’ experiential knowledge of living in Boyle Heights provided them with a critical lens

¹⁷ Gabriel Gutierrez, “The Mothers Strike Back” in *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* (1994), 225.

¹⁸ Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 2.

¹⁹ Davis, 12-13.

²⁰ Mary S. Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1998), 52.

of state officials and how they perceive low income, Mexican American communities as “criminals.” In fact, Pulido, Barraclough, and Cheng (2012) shed light on the racist assumptions made by the Department of Corrections and a particular public official who suggested that the Mexican mothers should be grateful that a prison would be located close and nearby, “because their children were the ones most likely to be incarcerated.”²¹ Thus, further illuminating the state’s logics of placing a prison in a predominantly Latina/o community.

To further expand our understanding of prisons as racist institutions, it is important to understand the concept of the prison industrial complex (PIC). In 1998 activists and scholars, such as Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Mike Davis, gathered in Berkeley, California and began a movement to address the violent impact of incarceration. These efforts included developing a national organization, Critical Resistance, to struggle and build a more livable world. Part of their efforts included developing the concept of the PIC. According to Critical Resistance, PIC is a term that is used "to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems."²² In addition, the PIC maintains power and authority over disenfranchised communities and this power presents itself in a multitude of ways, "including creating mass media images that keep alive stereotypes of people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, youth and other oppressed communities as criminal, delinquent or deviant."²³ The

²¹ Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng. *A People's Guide to Los Angeles*. University of California Press, 2012. 78.

²² “What is the PIC? What is Abolition?,” criticalresistance.org, 2018.
<http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/>

²³ “What is the PIC? What is Abolition?,” criticalresistance.org, 2018.

PIC is a useful concept because it allows us to see how the state works *with* capitalist industries to organize society. In the case of the proposed prison in East LA that MELA fought against, this was a state project that, if it had gone forward, would have required capitalist industries to build and serve this carceral site to manage what the state positions, as mentioned previously, as problem populations. While MELA did not reference the PIC specifically, they understood how their identities as immigrant, working-class people of color made their children vulnerable to the criminal legal system. In this way, MELA and scholar activists were observing and organizing against the same phenomenon but using different language to address it.

The work of Critical Resistance outlived the 1998 conference and continues to inform today's prison abolition movement. Critical Resistance understands imprisonment, policing, and surveillance as oppressive and strives to create alternatives to punitive solutions. This vision requires that we reimagine a different world and create models that can help us build a different future. Davis asks, "How can we imagine a society in which race and class are not primary determinants of punishment? Or one in which punishment itself is no longer the central concern in the making of justice?"²⁴ That is to say, abolition demands alternatives to policing and prisonlike institutions. Davis suggests that schools can undoubtedly be some of the most powerful alternatives to prisons and jails. Similarly, while MELA members were not prison abolitionists, like Davis, they profusely advocated for "schools not prisons" and believed these were appropriate alternatives to the prison. The following section will turn to environmental justice scholarship and how it pertains to MELA's struggles.

Environmental Justice

²⁴ Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 107.

MELA's environmental justice struggle began shortly after the US environmental justice movement acquired traction in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when activists challenged toxic hazards that were disproportionately placed in communities of color. For example, in 1982, Black communities mobilized refusing the expansion of a chemical landfill in Warren County, North Carolina.²⁵ Critical sociologist David Pellow states that "even during its earliest days, the EJ movement articulated a transformative vision of what an environmentally and socially just and sustainable future might look like, at the local, regional, national and global scales."²⁶ Similarly, MELA was invested in stopping environmentally toxic projects because they were tired of the state constantly placing unwanted projects in their community.

In order to understand how communities of color are impacted by environmental injustices, and specifically environmental racism,²⁷ it's important to consider how space is racialized.²⁸ In *How Racism Takes Place*, George Lipsitz writes that "racism takes place."²⁹ Lipsitz states that when he suggests that racism takes place, he does so figuratively, but also drawing from cultural geographers who have argued that "social relations take on their full force and meaning when they are enacted physically in actual places."³⁰ In other words, Lipsitz

²⁵ Nadia Kim. *Refusing Death: Immigrant Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice in LA*. Stanford University Press, 2021. 15.

²⁶ David Pellow, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018. 4.

²⁷ Environmental racism as defined by environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard "refers to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color."

²⁸ Bullard, Robert D. "The Threat of Environmental Racism." *Natural Resources & Environment* 7, no. 3 (1993): 23-56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40923229>, 24.

²⁹ George Lipsitz. *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011. 5.

³⁰ Lipsitz, 5.

suggests that upon examining places, such as where environmentally toxic hazards are located, we can better recognize how racialized communities are disproportionately impacted. Consider *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (1993), wherein Robert Bullard demonstrates a pattern of racial and socio-economic discrimination that depicts how Black and Brown people are subject to toxicity per hazardous waste, landfills, and industrialization.³¹ In addition, racial and socio-economic discrimination includes diverse forms of environmental racism such as the creation of jails and prisons near low-income communities that, due to histories of racial capitalism³², tend to be communities of color. Early EJ scholarship, such as Bullard's, is imperative because it showcases how racism and classism is central to environmental degradation in working class communities of color.

Recent EJ scholarship suggests that the state is a perpetuator and investor in state violence. Thus, like prisons, incarceration, and policing, we can consider environmental injustices as state sponsored forms of violence. Geographer Laura Pulido writes that the state, as in the government, is not concerned with addressing, what she calls the environmental racism gap, or the disproportionate environmental inequalities between nonwhite and white communities, because it would disrupt the state itself.³³ Rather the state has created performative initiatives and measures that do not create material change. Thus, she calls for environmental

³¹ Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism*, 11-14.

³² Coined by Cedric Robinson in his seminal book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, racial capitalism emerged from European civilization which sought “not to homogenize but to differentiate” people across racial categories. (26) This differentiation includes exploitation and the process of devaluing racialized people and as a result are made targets to violence (i.e, environmental injustices and prisons).

³³ Laura Pulido. "Geographies of Race and Ethnicity II." *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 4 (2017): 524-33, 529.

racism to be analyzed as state-sanctioned violence and a part of racial capitalism, since environmental racism is endorsed and, in most cases, spearheaded by the state.³⁴

In addition to Pulido, Erik Kojola and David Pellow build on previous EJ scholarship and maintain that EJ movements would be more compelling if environmental injustices were perceived beyond manifestations of discrimination, but also as forms of violence. They argue that framing environmental injustices as violence would enable communities to engage more deeply with systems of domination that continue to perpetuate the devaluation of marginalized communities.³⁵ More specifically, Kojola and Pellow contend that “environmental injustice is a form of violence created through systems of racial capitalism, settler colonialism and enslavement that are sustained by the state.”³⁶

In the case of MELA, the prison, toxic incinerator, and oil pipeline that was proposed by state officials was intentionally proposed to be placed in close proximity to their predominately Latina/o community. Thus, drawing on Pulido, Kojola, and Pellow, I suggest in this case it is also an iteration of state violence given that state officials were responsible for the proposed prison, toxic incinerator, and oil pipeline near their East LA community.

Connecting Prisons and Environmental Justice Issues

I have examined literature that highlights prisons and environmental justice issues and I have suggested that each of these are forms of normalized state violence. In this section, I highlight how these individual forms of violence are connected and suggest that prisons must

³⁴ Pulido, 529.

³⁵ Erik Kojola & David N. Pellow (2021) New directions in environmental justice studies: examining the state and violence, *Environmental Politics*, 30:1-2, 100-118, DOI: [10.1080/09644016.2020.1836898](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2020.1836898)

³⁶ Kojola and Pellow, 103.

also be theorized through an environmental justice framework. Thus, it is important to consider the environmental justice implications of prisons and policing. In doing so, I build on Rose Braz and Craig Gilmore who asserted in “Joining Forces: Prisons and Environmental Justice in Recent California Organizing” that MELA made connections between the two. Where scholars of environmental justice have begun to make the connections between EJ and prisons, in MELA we see an example of how radical love was employed to make the connections between prisons and environmental justice issues because of the negative implications these violent projects would have had on their lives.

Recent EJ scholarship, specifically the work of David Pellow, convincingly links incarceration and environmental racism. Pellow suggests that since people of color are disproportionately incarcerated, aside from the socio-economic and political repression they already experience in the United States, their exposure to hazardous waste and contaminated water and land within these carceral spaces further exacerbates their marginal experience.³⁷ Elizabeth Bradshaw reinforces Pellow’s points by underlining a 2007 report by Prison Legal News. The report emphasizes how in 2004, the Salinas Valley State Prison was found to have contaminated water from nearby agricultural fields.³⁸ In addition, in 2007 at Merced County Jail, employees filed a complaint against the county suggesting that the water was undrinkable. Importantly, incarcerated people were not included in this report, despite also facing the burden of these conditions. According to the National Priorities List, at least 600 prisons in the United

³⁷ David N. Pellow, *What is critical environmental justice?* (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 80.

³⁸ Elizabeth A. Bradshaw, “Tombstone Towns and Toxic Prisons: Prison Ecology and the Necessity of an Anti-Prison Environmental Movement.” *Critical Criminology* (Richmond, B.C.) 26 (3): 407–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-018-9399-6>.

States are within a three-mile radius of a Superfund site and at least 100 more prisons are located one mile away from a site.³⁹ Considering this, Pellow suggests that the most marginalized communities, the incarcerated, are exposed to environmental hazardous waste and pollution at alarming rates. Thus, according to Pellow, prisons are not only sites of oppression but also environmentally racist institutions.

In addition to Bradshaw and Pellow, scholars of environmental justice have now begun to link state violence and incarceration to environmental injustices. More specifically, Liam Downey and Brigid Mark draw from the insights of EJ scholars, green criminology, and health disparities literature to argue that police and incarceration, both of which are a part of the criminal legal system, concurrently produce and are forms of environmental inequality.⁴⁰ They compellingly suggest that police and prisons are central to the built environment of the lives of people of color, and “their regular and threatened use of physical, psychological, and emotional violence, produce social outcomes (beyond police presence and violence) that increase some people’s and groups’ expose to environmental harms while decreasing their access to environmental amenities.”⁴¹

While scholars such as Pellow, Bradshaw, Downey and Mark have recently begun to connect issues of incarceration and environmental justice, activist-scholars Rose Braz and Craig

³⁹ Nathalie Baptiste, “Report: America’s Prisons Are So Polluted They Are Endangering Inmates.” Mother Jones, last modified June 8 2017, <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2017/06/report-americas-prisons-are-so-polluted-they-are-endangering-inmates/>.

⁴⁰ Liam Downey and Brigid Mark, “State Violence, Black Lives, and Environmental Justice.” Environmental Justice 00:00, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2021.0010>

⁴¹ Downey and Brigid Mark, 3.

Gilmore suggest that MELA made these connections decades ago because both forms of state-sponsored violence "posed threats to their families' welfare." ⁴² In other words, their experiences as women of color in Los Angeles provided them with important insight in how society organizes itself along racial and class lines so that their communities are made more vulnerable to these issues. Centering their children's livelihood and protection from "prisons, police, and pollution" enabled MELA to better understand the linkages between prisons and issues regarding the environment. ⁴³ That is to say, MELA drew from radical love to make these linkages.

Analyzing MELA: What's love got to do with it?

I have reviewed literature that uncovers the genealogy of the prison industrial complex (PIC), sheds light on the work of environmental justice scholars, and revealed the relationships between the two as I argue that both are forms of normalized state violence given the Mothers' of East Los Angeles' organizational struggles. In doing so, I have extended Craig Gilmore and Rose Braz's assertions that MELA made the connections between prisons and environmental justice issues because both "posed threats to their families' welfare" by highlighting how MELA drew on radical love to protect not just their children, but their entire East Los Angeles community. ⁴⁴

In this section, I draw from prison abolition, critical environmental justice, women of color feminisms, and social movement scholarship to propose that MELA employed what I term "radical love." I reconsider the radical love they employed as both a tool for community

⁴² Rose Braz and Craig Gilmore, "Joining Forces: Prisons and Environmental Justice in Recent California Organizing." *Radical History Review*, last modified 2006, date accessed August 15, 2018., 99.

⁴³ Braz and Gilmore, "Joining Forces," 99.

⁴⁴ Braz and Gilmore, "Joining Forces," 98.

organizing and a framework to think through how organizers of color, specifically MELA members, resist state violent projects. I borrow from Kojola and Pellow to contend that state violent projects are those that inflict physical and emotional harm that lead to premature death.⁴⁵ With this in mind, I argue that the radical love the Mothers of East LA employed is a gendered fight against premature death. In my findings, I reveal that three factors consistently hold these acts together 1) demonstrating collective urgency, 2) an ethos of taking on all the threats, and 3) pursuing barrio self-determination. I position the themes above as the pillars of radical love and situate them within the scholarship mentioned. By stopping state violent projects from being built in their East LA community, the mothers changed the physical landscape of East Los Angeles and, as a result, the lives of children whose lives would have been otherwise impacted by this violence.

To begin with, my work on MELA is guided by Pellow's critical environmental justice framework, which seeks to simultaneously examine and contest all forms of oppression. In his book *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*, Pellow draws on EJ studies, critical race theory, ethnic studies, gender studies, and more to present a critical environmental justice (CEJ) framework that is made up of four pillars. The first pillar seeks to recognize that social inequality and oppression "in all forms intersect."⁴⁶ The first pillar understands that *-isms*, such as racism, classism, and ableism, work in tandem to reproduce systems of oppression and subordination. The second pillar calls attention to the need to "focus on the role of scale in the production and

⁴⁵ Erik Kojola & David N. Pellow (2021) New directions in environmental justice studies: examining the state and violence, *Environmental Politics*, 30:1-2, 100-118, DOI: [10.1080/09644016.2020.1836898](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2020.1836898)

⁴⁶ David N. Pellow, *What is critical environmental justice?* (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 18.

possible resolution of environmental injustices.”⁴⁷ This pillar enables one to, for example, examine the environmentally racist projects proposed in East LA would omit toxins into MELA’s community, which would negatively impact people’s health, but also exacerbate climate change. In short, the second pillar seeks to identify the multiple scales at which environmental injustices occur.⁴⁸ This includes the proposed prison site on Santa Fe Avenue near East LA that MELA successfully defeated. In the third pillar, Pellow suggests that social inequalities, such as the -isms previously mentioned, are fixed into our current society, therefore our current social order is a barrier in and of itself to environmental justice.⁴⁹ The fourth and final pillar focuses on indispensability. Historically, in the United States, communities of color have been rendered expendable and the fourth and final pillar argues that it is necessary to position people of color and marginalized othered communities as indispensable to our futures. In the case of MELA, their initial reasoning to become invested in the struggle to stop the prison was to protect their children. In this way, they consider their children’s lives indispensable to our future. In this pillar, Pellow challenges previous environmental justice scholarship that considers environmental racism a civil rights violation rather than a form of extermination or genocide.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Pellow, 20.

⁴⁸ Pellow, 21.

⁴⁹ Pellow, 22.

⁵⁰ Pellow, 28-30.



Figure 1. Courtesy of CSUN's Special Collections and Archives in box 5, folder 1. ⁵¹

Central to MELA's organizing was advocating for their children's survival. In doing so, MELA understood that their children's well-being was indispensable to their future. This is where the theme demonstrating collective urgency derives: from MELA refusing the states' proposals of violence and struggling against this violence is a rendering of collective urgency. For example, in figure 1, protestors are pictured carrying signs that state "DON'T POISON OUR CHILDREN," "The people will stop the incinerator," and "Don't kill our children." Here, MELA organizers understood that environmental racism could not be reduced to a civil rights violation, as Pellow writes, but rather a form of extermination. MELA acknowledged that children's lives were at stake, and it was up to them to demand alternative material conditions for future generations.

Geographer and prison abolitionist scholar Ruth W. Gilmore argues that abolition not only calls for the destruction of prisons, but also the production of day-to-day resources that many of our communities' lack. In other words, it is also the act of imagining a different world, and it is about changing the "conditions under which violence prevails."⁵² With this in mind,

⁵¹ Pardo (Mary Santoli) Collection, Box 5, Folder 1.

⁵² Rachel Kushner, "Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind" NYTimes.com, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html>

Ethnic Studies scholar Dylan Rodriguez states that “abolition is not merely a practice of negation – a collective attempt to eliminate institutionalized dominance over targeted peoples and populations – but also a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community building) practice.”⁵³ Considering this, I do not suggest that MELA members identified as abolitionists, but rather I suggest that abolition is an important framework to consider MELA’s work. MELA engaged in the act of reimagining a different East LA community, their mobilizations for schools and not prisons show that while they were not abolitionists, their desire to build safety for their communities led them to similar conclusions as abolitionists today. Gilmore argues that "abolition is everything-ist," and therefore, it must also be green and be "about the entirety of human-environmental relations."⁵⁴

Drawing on Gilmore and Rodriguez, I maintain that MELA, while not abolitionist, engaged in “everything-ist” struggles, by taking on all the threats (ie prisons, environmental justice, etc) which is central to radical love, because they felt a sense of responsibility to their community. Thus, members of MELA centered their radical love for their communities in their efforts to tackle a prison and environmental injustices. That is, they understood that to secure their communities’ survival, they had to mobilize and struggle to take on all the threats. In this way, MELA’s struggle was a coalitional moment where the environmental justice (EJ) movement and the anti-prison movement were joined to protect their community.

⁵³ Dylan Rodriguez. “Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword.” *Harvard Law Review* 132. No.6 (2019): 1567.

⁵⁴ Rachel Kushner, “Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind” *NYtimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html>

In addition to CEJ and prison abolition, women of color feminist theories, specifically mothering and motherhood theorizations are important to analyze MELA's work and central to thinking through collective urgency and taking on all the threats, which form pillars of radical love. First, MELA drew on the concept of motherhood in their resistance struggles. According to sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn, motherhood is a social construction that heteronormatively organizes society. Feminists mark motherhood as a social construction and question the dominant ideology that "all women need to be mothers."⁵⁵ While this is an important intervention, the fact that motherhood is a social construction means that people can intervene in the mean-making processes and politicize the concept of motherhood, as MELA did. As Chicana sociologist Mary Pardo has demonstrated, MELA members politicized motherhood to include children who were not biologically theirs. Like the Mothers of East LA, Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC) similarly redefined motherhood and used it as an organizing strategy to improve their children's lives. In her book, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore spotlights the organizing efforts of Mothers ROC, an organization in California that began in 1993, at a time when Black and Latino men were being increasingly targeted by the criminal legal system. Gilmore writes that Mothers ROC understood "the potential power of "motherhood" as a political foundation from which to confront an increasingly hostile state and the polity legitimizing it."⁵⁶ Both MELA and Mothers ROC politicized motherhood by employing collective urgency to take on the states' violent threats.

⁵⁵ Kelly D. Weisberg, ed. *Applications Of Feminist Legal Theory*. (Temple University Press, 1996) www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs8md, 867.

⁵⁶ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 187.

Lastly, social movement scholarship is central to thinking through radical love. As mentioned in my methods, the work of Robin D.G. Kelley was central to my theorizations on radical love. In his work on Black radical movements, he reminds us about the “political and analytical importance” of freedom and love and enables us to think deeply about how these revolutionary ideas are central to creating alternative futures. I follow Kelley’s lead in acknowledging that love is central to social movements like those spearheaded by the Mothers of East Los Angeles; those that fight for something bigger than them, their children, and future generations.

I now turn to the first section of my findings, where I posit how MELA engaged in what I term radical love as a tool for organizing. I will then demonstrate how they exercised radical love through the three pillars that I have conceptualized make up radical love, 1) collective urgency, 2) an ethos of taking on all the threats, and 3) pursuing barrio self-determination.

Findings

Radical love as a tool for organizing: “Quiero a mi raza como parte de mi familia”

I argue that central to MELA members organizing was a deep love for their community that shaped a platform defined by 1) collective urgency, 2) an ethics of taking on all the threats, and 3) pursuing barrio self-determination. These pillars drove their efforts to defeating a prison, a toxic incinerator, and an oil pipeline from being built in their community. In this section, I draw from the work of interdisciplinary feminist scholars to theorize radical love as a framework that shows how organizers of color, specifically MELA members, resist state violent projects.

Feminist author and educator bell hooks writes,

...it is the most militant, most radical intervention anyone can make to not only speak of love, but to engage in the practice of love. For love as the foundation of all social movements for self-determination is the only way we create a world that domination and

dominator thinking cannot destroy. Anytime we do the work of love we are doing the work of ending domination.⁵⁷

bell hooks reminds us that love is not just an ethereal feeling, but the utmost *militant* or *radical* act that we can engage in. In doing so, she states that love is central to all social movements and by engaging in love or doing the work of love, we can end domination. In this way, bell hooks enables us to think about love as praxis. Likewise, MELA understood that if successful, the State's efforts to place a prison or environmentally toxic project in East LA would be detrimental to their community. In response, they drew from their love for their community, especially their children, to mobilize against these state violent projects. Like bell hooks, Juana Gutierrez, co-founder of MELA, propels us to think about the role of love and how it can be the force that drives movement struggles. Here, I turn to Gutierrez words from the introduction which remind us that central to MELA's efforts was love:

Yo como madre de familia, y como residente del Este de Los Angeles, seguíre luchando sin descanso por que se nos respete. Y yo lo hago con bastante cariño hacia mi comunidad, y digo "comunidad" porque me siento parte de ella, quiero a mi raza como parte de mi familia, y si Dios me permite seguíre luchando contra todos los gobernadores que quieren abusar de nosotros.

[As a mother and resident of East Los Angeles, I shall continue fighting tirelessly so we will be respected. And I will do this with much affection for my community. And I say "my community" because I am part of it. I love my raza, my people, as part of my family; and if God allows, I will keep on fighting against all government officials who want to take advantage of us.]⁵⁸

While bell hooks suggests more explicitly that love is indispensable to social movements, Gutierrez expresses that she loves her East L.A. community as a family and this is essentially

⁵⁷ hooks, bell. *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 176.

⁵⁸ Pardo. *Mexican American Women Activists*, 61-62.

why she began to organize against government officials that threatened them. By fighting tirelessly against state officials who impose their domination on Gutierrez's community through normalized state violence, she is engaging in what bell hooks calls the practice of love. Gutierrez is extending the idea of family, to an entire community of people in one place, specifically her East LA barrio.

The mothers' intersectional identities placed them in a vulnerable social position, but it was these experiences that provided them a lens with which to understand the world and that compelled their activism. Connecting MELA's activism, mothering, and environmental justice, Rhetoric and Communication scholar Christopher Scott Thomas compels us to think about how MELA engaged in what Patricia Hill Collins terms "othermothering," a model of mothering that entails caring for and being responsible for children who are not their biological children.⁵⁹ This concept brought forth by Collins is both "rooted in political activism" and situated "within a Black Feminist paradigm."⁶⁰ Drawing from Collins, in *The Chicana Motherwork Anthology*, the authors apply Collins' theorizations of motherwork to conceptualize Chicana M(other)work, which they describe as a "strategy for collective resistance within institutions that continue to marginalize" them.⁶¹ Collins' othermothering and the Chicana Mother-Scholars concept "Chicana M(other)work" is useful to understanding the ways in which mothers of color have

⁵⁹ Patricia Hill Collins. "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. (New York: Routledge, 2000) in Christopher Scott Thomas. "The Mothers of East Los Angeles: (Other)Mothering for Environmental Justice. (Southern Communication Journal, 2018) 83:5, 293-309.

⁶⁰ Kaila Adia Story. "Patricia Hill Collins: Reconceiving Motherhood." Edited by Kaila Adia Story. Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2014.

⁶¹ C. Caballero, Y. Martínez-Vu, J. Pérez-Torres, M. Téllez & C. Vega (Eds.). *The Chicana Motherwork Anthology*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019. 4.

politicized their identities to work towards alternative futures. With that, I argue that “othermothering” is an act of radical love. MELA members drew on the concept of mothering for their activism, and their efforts shaped the educational future of not only their biological children, but the communities’ children in general, and that in turn contributed to the children’s quality of life. As the example of Juana Gutierrez reveals, MELA members conceptualized the community as part of their family, and their activism came from a motherly love for this extended family. This idea permeated the materials in both the archive collections.

MELA members’ consideration of their communities as their own family enabled them to conceptualize community as a "household responsibility."⁶² That is, MELA perceived community engagement and organizing as an extension of their duties at home. During an interview conducted with Mary Pardo, Gutierrez talks about the many community projects and activities she is involved in. Pardo, stunned at her ability to engage in so much and still keep up with her responsibilities at home, asks how she handles everything and in response Gutierrez states “Dios me ayuda” and that she just makes time for everything.⁶³ For Gutierrez, community organizing was as important as her actual household responsibilities. Chicana feminist Mary Pardo urges us to think about how MELA politicized the concept of motherhood and used it "as a metaphor for civic responsibility and action."⁶⁴ In her book, she recalls that during a MELA meeting, a young woman expressed her support for the mothers, and called herself a resident of East L.A. In response, MELA member, Erlinda Robles, told her “When you are fighting for a

⁶² Mary S. Pardo. Mexican American Women Grassroots Community Activists: ‘Mothers of East Los Angeles. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 11 (1):1-7.

⁶³ Pardo (Mary Santoli) Collection. “MSPa2 Audio: Interview – “Mothers of E.L.A., Juana Gutierrez,” 1998 January 15.

⁶⁴ Pardo, 115.

better life for children and 'doing' for them, isn't that what mothers do? So you don't have to have children to be a mother." ⁶⁵ In other words, MELA redefined the concept of mother to include "women who are not biological mothers," ⁶⁶ while simultaneously calling for the inclusion of social and political activism within motherhood.

It is important to note that white feminists have often understood motherhood as oppressive and have historically focused their political efforts on reproductive rights that emphasize having the right not to be mothers (e.g. right to the birth control pill and the right to abortion). During the second wave feminist movement, middle-class white women argued that access to legal abortion was the most pressing goal to achieving reproductive autonomy. ⁶⁷ On the contrary, women of colors' reproduction, specifically the right to be mothers, has historically been targeted by the state. For example, in the documentary *No Mas Bebés* (2015), we see multiple instances of sterilizations. *No Mas Bebés* (2015) calls attention to a 1975 lawsuit where Mexican immigrant mothers sued doctors in Los Angeles for being unknowingly sterilized upon giving birth. Chicana feminist Aida Hurtado reminds us that Chicanas were contesting forced sterilizations in the 1960s, while "forced sterilization for white women has not been a central in their writing or in the white feminist political agenda; certainly not as central as abortion rights."⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Pardo, 115.

⁶⁶ Pardo, 115.

⁶⁷ Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. 3.

⁶⁸ Aida Hurtado. "Sitios y Lenguas: Chicanas Theorize Feminisms." *Hypatia* 13 (2): 131-161. 139.

It is because of these experiences that women of color often deploy the notion of motherhood to advance their communities' interests, like MELA did. Mothers ROC, for example, employ "the ideological power of motherhood to challenge the legitimacy of the changing state" and deliberately connected their work to Third World activist mothers. In her book, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles*, race scholar Gaye Theresa Johnson terms spatial entitlement which "values the ways in which freedom seekers have attempted to claim human and social rights and recognizes the philosophies of freedom and equality that connect local articulations to international movements."⁶⁹ In the context of MELA, they were freedom seekers who connected their mothering work to international movements as well. In fact, the Mothers of East Los Angeles got their name by Father Moretta, who was inspired by the work of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, an Argentinian group of mothers who similarly deployed mothering to demand answers from the state following the disappearances of their children. Driven by radical love, MELA deployed motherhood and struggled to advance their community's interests. I now turn to the first pillar of radical love, collective urgency.

⁶⁹ Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles*, 4.

Collective Urgency: “No to Jails, Yes to Schools,” “Protect and Save Our Children”



Figure 2. “Padres, Madres, y Hasta Niños Protestan,” *El Eastside Journal en Español*. Courtesy of CSUN’s Special Collections and Archives in box 9, folder 20.⁷⁰

In this section, I unpack one the central pillars that define radical love as practiced by MELA: collective urgency. I define collective urgency as the act or practice of engaging in a struggle with the determination to win. Upon examining Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) and Pardo (Mary Santoli) collections, I found multiple images that highlight the many mobilizations of the Mothers of East L.A. In order to cultivate a collective sense of urgency, MELA organized with the understanding that they could not wait and had to organize because future generations’ quality of life was at stake. They made it their responsibility to mobilize their community to stop these state violent projects. After all, the Mothers of East Los Angeles did not start as an

⁷⁰ “Hundreds of people, young people and adults as seen in the photo, gathered last Monday at the corner of Olympic and Santa to show their discontent about the projected prison planned for an area near Boyle Heights. Next Monday at 7pm another demonstration will take place. The organizers suggest that all readers make an effort to be present. Only then, they say, will the construction of this prison be killed.” (Translated caption from La Opinion article)

organization, but as an anti-prison movement. As revealed in the archive, this collective urgency manifested in meetings, interviews, rallies, and protests.



Figure 3. “Protest Due Again Today” in El Eastside Journal. Courtesy of CSUN’s Special Collections and Archives in box 9, folder 10.

An important trend in the archived materials of MELA’s organizing efforts is the specific language used in MELA’s posters and chants. These include “schools not prisons” and “books not jails.” For example, MELA went as far as collecting the exact number of students at the 26 neighboring schools and creating signs demanding the protection of the students.⁷¹ In an informational pamphlet that sheds light on MELA’s community work between the years 1984 and 1999 found in the Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Mothers of East Los Angeles collection, the Mothers express that “it was blatantly clear that then Governor George Deukmejian and his Republican cohorts were more preoccupied with sending our children to prison than keeping

⁷¹ Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 9, Folder 10.

them in school!”⁷² As shown in Figure 1, some of the signs called for the protection of East L.A. children from the proposed prison, such as “Protect Lorena Street 878 Students” because they understood their children would be made targets by the state through incarceration.

In this case, the Mothers of East L.A. conceptualized their children’s future as a potentially fixed reality in the proposed prison near the Lorena Street elementary school. In another instance, as shown in figure 3, MELA and protestors held signs of a child behind bars that read “No Prison in ELA”. The Mothers demonstrated critical consciousness by demonstrating collective urgency through their organizing against state violent projects such as the prison, pipeline, and toxic incinerator. According to critical educator Paulo Freire, the process of *conscientização* involves the development of one’s critical consciousness. This includes learning about one’s “situated realities in the larger context of power relations, which leads to transformative collective action against dehumanization.”⁷³ Thus, they “realized the conscientization of motherhood.”⁷⁴ The mothers’ positionality, as working class, Mexican women of color, in East Los Angeles enabled them to understand how the state, politicians in particular, were the actors behind the dehumanization of their communities.

⁷² Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

⁷³ Malik Campbell, Kelly De Leon, Martha D. Escobar, Dezzerie González, Guadalupe Granados, Carla Martinez, Diego Paniagua, Rocio Rivera-Murillo, Tracy M. Sadek. “Ethnic Studies as Praxis: The Movement Against Racism at California State University, Northridge.” *Ethnic Studies Review*, 2019. 133.

⁷⁴ Gilmore, 196.



Figure 4. “Protestan contra cárcel en centrosur de L.A.” in *La Opinion*. Courtesy of CSUN’s Special Collections and Archives in box 9, folder 10. ⁷⁵

As a collective, MELA fiercely advocated for education where the State pushed for prison construction. During the protests against the prison, MELA members held signs that stated “schools not prisons” and “no to jails, yes to schools.” By juxtaposing schools and jails, they illuminate how the state has historically prioritized the building of jails and prisons, over educational spaces like schools. In Figure 2, a group of young women along with their children are pictured carrying signs that read “books not booking slips”, along with “save the children” and “jobs not jails.” While schools are places where carcerality is reproduced, for MELA, it was clear that they saw access to education as a pathway towards a better life.

MELA provided alternatives to the state’s proposition of a prison by suggesting that education get funded instead. As maintained by critical education scholar David Stovall, “education [at times] is not for the sole purpose of improving quality of life...instead education is a matter of life and death.” ⁷⁶ The language displayed in their posters, “protect and save our children,” depicts that their commitment to East L.A. was not just political but demands that we

⁷⁵ Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 9, Folder 10.

⁷⁶ David Stovall. “Making it All Make Sense: The Challenge of Creating a High School Across Two Communities.” *Schools: Studies in Education* 4(1): 137.

understand that it was about their children's survival. Given their investment in education, during the fight to stop the prison and in an interview conducted by Mary Pardo with Juana Gutierrez, Gutierrez shares that her son, Gabriel Gutierrez who at the time was a Chicana/o History PhD student at UCSB, called her asking if she was aware of the *huelga* taking place at UCLA because the student organizers wanted to have the Mothers of East LA's support. Juana stated that her son shared her contact information with a UCLA student organizer who shortly after called asking Gutierrez for the Mothers' to support their hunger strike efforts.⁷⁷ The hunger strikes that occurred at UCLA in 1993 were central to the creation of Chicana/o Studies major at UCLA and MELA was adamantly supportive of this effort, they believed that "one man shall not determine how our history is taught."⁷⁸ Upon the institutionalization of Chicana/o Studies at UCLA, MELA celebrated the win with the students and in response Gutierrez stated that "una de las armas de los latinos contra la pobreza es la educacion" which translates to "one of Latinos weapons against poverty is an education." Thus, MELA did not just support education, but Chicana/o Studies, a field within Ethnic Studies, that since its inception in the late 1960s has been under attack by school administrators and politicians. It is important to note that Ethnic Studies "is grounded in anti-oppressive values, imagines more just and livable worlds, and demands action to create social change."⁷⁹ The Mothers of East LA, who I argue employed

⁷⁷ Pardo (Mary Santoli) Collection. "MSPa2 Audio: Interview – "Mothers of E.L.A., Juana Gutierrez," 1998 January 15.

⁷⁸ Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 1, Folder 4.

⁷⁹ Malik Campbell, Kelly De Leon, Martha D. Escobar, Dezzerie González, Guadalupe Granados, Carla Martinez, Diego Paniagua, Rocio Rivera-Murillo, Tracy M. Sadek. "Ethnic Studies as Praxis," 148.

radical love in their work by drawing on their collective urgency, understood that an Ethnic Studies classroom could be a site of resistance and therefore an act of love.

MELA questioned the role of prisons and advocated for alternatives like education. In the Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) archive collection, a 1989 publication of *La Gente de Aztlan* includes the following excerpt of an unidentified person involved:

I want to be a part of the community against the prison in East Los Angeles. There's just too many prisons already. We don't need more 'human warehouses,' what is needed are better equipped schools to educate all with trades and other programs to prevent people from ending up behind wall and bars. One has to tackle the problems where they start not where they end.⁸⁰

The writer conceptualizes prisons as excess, "too many," and, similar to prison abolitionists today, marks them as "human warehouses." In this case, the writer urges for better schools and education to prevent people from ending up in prison. At the same time that they maintain that prisons are warehouses and cages used as "fixes" to social problems, they also argue for the construction of relationships and institutions that provide life opportunities so that people do not end up incarcerated.

With this in mind, MELA and supporters, additionally advocated for "jobs not jails." In a question and answer (Q and A) newspaper interview with Juana Gutierrez, interviewer Miniondas asks Juana if she can share the advantages and disadvantages of the prison, she begins by stating that the disadvantages are plenty, including the fact that 30 schools would be surrounding the prison and the area. "Las desventajas son muchas. Primeramente, temenos más de 30 escuelas alrededor de donde se piensa construir la prisión. Este afectaria muchisimo a

⁸⁰ Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 9, Folder 10.

nuestra área, a nuestros hijos, a la industria y el comercio adyacente al lugar.”⁸¹ Upon stating the advantages, Juana states that the government supposedly says that a prison would create 700 jobs.⁸² She stated, “Esto es ridículo porque si se lleva a cabo la edificación quedarían automáticamente mas de 2,000 personas sin empleos, que son los que ocupan las diferentes fábricas cercanas al proyecto.”⁸³

The logic that prison industrial complex creates job opportunities has since been repeated to support prison construction in disinvested communities, such as the Central Valley. In *Golden Gulag*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes that towns within the Central Valley were ideal prison sites because “political opposition to prison development was more easily managed by pro-prison forces, aided by CDC’s persuasive prospectuses promising new jobs and other amenities.”⁸⁴ In East Los Angeles, similar logics about employment opportunities were posed by CDC and government forces alike to persuade the community to accept the construction of the prison. Despite this, Juana called these employment tactics “ridiculous” because people would lose their jobs upon the prison’s construction.

“Muchas cosas: escuelas, lugares recreativos para nuestra juventud, albergues para el vagabundos. ¿Por qué el gobierno gastará tanto dinero si tiene problemas tan apremiantes, como es el future de nuestros hijos?”

The disadvantages are many. First of all, we have more than 30 schools around where the prison is planned to be build. This would greatly affect our area, our children, the industry, and commerce adjacent to the place.

⁸² Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 9, Folder 10.

⁸³ The advantages, according to them, the Government, is that it would generate jobs for 700 people. This is ridiculous because if the building is carried out, there would automatically be more than 2,000 people without jobs, which are those who occupy the different factories near the project.]

⁸⁴ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007), 7.

[Many things: schools, recreational places for our youth, shelters for the homeless. Why would the government spend so much money if it has such pressing problems such as the future of our children?]

Upon being asked what the community proposes instead of a prison, Gutierrez provides alternatives. She advocates for “schools, recreational places for youths, and homeless shelters.” She goes on to ask the interviewer, “why would the government spend so much money [on a prison] if it has pressing problems, such as the future of our children?”⁸⁵ The collective urgency MELA demonstrated, rooted in radical love and care for future generations enabled them to not give up and take no for an answer. By asking these very critical questions and refusing to take no for an answer, Gutierrez reminds us that central to their collective urgency was hope. Today, we are reminded by prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba that “hope is a discipline.”⁸⁶

The struggle against the prison lasted approximately 8 years, ending on September 16, 1992.⁸⁷ It is important to note that during the 8-year fight to stop the prison, the Mothers took on additional environmental threats, including an oil pipeline and then a toxic incinerator. In the next section, I delve into how they politicized their positionality as mothers to take on all the threats, or the second pillar of radical love.

Taking on All the Threats: “Las madres unidas contra todas las injusticias”

Before the prison proposal, Juana already had to move to make space for state projects on two different occasions. For context, during this time, there were numerous urban renewal campaigns that resulted from the passage of the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act. In his book, *The*

⁸⁵ Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 9, Folder 10.

⁸⁶ Kaba, Mariame, Naomi Murakawa, and Tamara K. Nopper. *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2021. Print.

⁸⁷ Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 9, Folder 10.

Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City, historian Eric Avila examines how “racial identity and racial ideology shaped the geography of highway construction in urban American, fueling new patterns of racial equality that exacerbated an unfolding “urban crisis.”⁸⁸

These early experiences provided insight for the analysis that MELA eventually made of the proposed prison, as well as an oil pipeline and incinerator. In an interview with Mary Pardo, Gutierrez recalls when a media spokesperson asked her “why do you think they want to build a prison here?” In response, Juana tells Pardo that she said that the reason that they [the government] wanted to build the prison and environmentally toxic projects near or in East Los Angeles is because they were Mexican, and the government does not like Mexicans.⁸⁹ Thus, Gutierrez understood that the state did not value their predominantly Latina/o community enough to protect them from such threats. Even more, not only were they not protected, but they acknowledged that their identities as Mexicans made them targets by the state and industry in these projects. Like MELA, Mothers ROC similarly understood that their positionality in this nation state made them targets to criminalization. Gilmore reminds us that The ROCers recognized that their socioeconomic status as poor working-class people made them targets of incarceration.⁹⁰

In a *New York Times* newspaper article, Juana Gutierrez explained that their community did not resist previous state projects because they thought "there was nothing you could do about

⁸⁸ Avila, Eric. *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

⁸⁹ Box 4, Item 2, Digital Folder, MSPa2 Audio: Interview - "Mothers Of E.L.A., Juana Gutierrez," 1998 January 15.

⁹⁰ *Golden Gulag*, Mothers Reclaiming Our Children, 237.

it."⁹¹ While Gutierrez may have perceived at the time that communities had not previously resisted, history and Avila's work demonstrates that this is not the case and in fact communities did resist. For example, in the process of removing community members from the Chavez Ravine, where the Dodgers' Stadium is now located, families, including elderly women and children, stood their ground and faced tremendous violence from police to remain and protect their homes. Like the connections Gutierrez made between freeway siting and communities of color, Pulido, Barraclough, and Cheng shed light on the racist assumptions made by the Department of Corrections and a particular public official who suggested that the Mexican American mothers should be grateful that a prison would be located nearby, "because their children were the ones most likely to be incarcerated."⁹² MELA member's experiences as working-class people of color in Los Angeles provided them with important insight into how society organizes itself along racial and class lines so that their communities are made more vulnerable to these issues.

What specifically compelled MELA to organize was connecting the dots on how their children's lives and futures were at stake, especially when they realized that they were targeted for various state-funded projects that posed a threat to their communities while white, affluent communities were often protected.⁹³ During the struggle against the building of the prison, residents found out about other state projects that were going to have negative ecological impacts on their community. While some members of the group suggested that they focus on one issue,

⁹¹ *New York Times*, "Mothers' Group Fights Back in Los Angeles," NYtimes.com, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/05/us/mothers-group-fights-back-in-los-angeles.html>

⁹² Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng. *A People's Guide to Los Angeles*. University of California Press, 2012. 78.

⁹³ Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 9, Folder 20.

fighting the prison, MELA decided to join the fight against the proposed construction of an oil pipeline and a toxic incinerator because they understood that these projects were detrimental to their community.⁹⁴ In order to stop the oil pipeline that would be constructed from Santa Barbara County to Long Beach, MELA formed a coalition with an environmental justice group.⁹⁵ This group was made up of predominantly white residents from Pacific Palisades, an affluent area in Los Angeles. MELA recognized that solidarity with an affluent community would make it easier to defeat the oil pipeline and they decided to join forces, eventually defeating the project.⁹⁶

Shortly after MELA stopped the construction of the oil pipeline, Pardo highlights how MELA was informed that Vernon, a city near Boyle Heights, had "granted permits to one of the first entirely commercial hazardous waste incinerators proposed for California."⁹⁷ Given that Vernon had the smallest population in L.A. County, Governor Deukmejian and DHS had contended that there were no nearby residential communities; therefore, the incinerator would not pose a threat to the city. MELA and residents argued that there were multiple food processing plants blocks from the incinerator and that the "already compromised air quality of the entire county would worsen."⁹⁸ Similarly, like the prison's proposed location, there were no

⁹⁴ Box 4, Item 2, Digital Folder, MSPa2 Audio: Interview - "Mothers Of E.L.A., Juana Gutierrez," 1998 January 15.

⁹⁵ Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 1, Folder 2.

⁹⁶ Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists*, 133.

⁹⁷ Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists*, 134-137.

⁹⁸ Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists*, 134-135.

environmental measures that were considered and the community, both elders and youth, understood that the state was responsible.



Figure 5. Protest Toxic Incinerator. Courtesy of CSUN's Special Collections and Archives in box 5, folder 1. ⁹⁹

In figure 5, an elder is pictured carrying a sign that states “¡Ya basta! E.P.A.” which translates to “Enough is enough E.P.A.!” The E.P.A, Environmental Protection Agency, which was created in the 1970s by President Nixon, was established to supposedly ameliorate environmental conditions, by broadly supporting research on the environment and enforcing environmental regulations that were meant to set standards for air and water. Pulido, Barraclough, and Cheng highlight how local regulatory agencies did not mandate environmental impact reports (EIR) for this proposed incinerator. Environmental journalist Dick Russell emphasizes that these regulatory government state agencies were the Southern California Air Quality Management District (SAQMD), the California Department of Health Services (DHS) at the state level, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These agencies did not just abandon the mandated environmental impact reports for this location but authorized the permits for the incinerator. ¹⁰⁰ This compelled the Mothers to collect signatures, hold rallies and protest.

⁹⁹ Pardo (Mary Santoli) Collection, Box 5, Folder 1.

¹⁰⁰ Dick Russell. “Environmental Racism: Minority Communities and Their Battle against Toxins.” (Amicus Journal 11, no 2. Spring 1989): 22-32.

MELA understood the power in collective action and they joined the environmentalist group Greenpeace to Casmalia, California to demonstrate against the toxic incinerator. Due to the community's tireless efforts, Assemblywoman Roybal-Allard was propelled to file a lawsuit against DHS. Pulido et al. write, "both the failure to require a full EIR and the plan to site such a facility adjacent to the Latina/o Eastside were seen as blatant acts of environmental racism."¹⁰¹ This further exemplifies the state's deliberate investment in destabilizing working-class communities of color through environmental violence. The state supported and cosigned on environmental racism, reinforcing Pulido's point that the State is a perpetrator and investor in racial violence "in the form of death."¹⁰²

While the Garden Grove based corporation had initially expected little to no resistance from this low income, Latina/o community, they decided to give up on the construction of this project. After a three-year struggle, MELA successfully defeated the toxic incinerator in 1988. Out of this struggle came Assembly Bill 58, "which provides all Californians with the minimum protection of an environmental impact report before the construction of hazardous waste incinerators."¹⁰³ MELA's efforts to mobilize, prevent harmful facilities from being built in their community, and setting a precedent to protect the quality of life of future generations, serve as

¹⁰¹ Laura Pulido, Laura Barraclough, and Wendy Cheng. *A People's Guide to Los Angeles*. University of California, 2012.

¹⁰² Laura Pulido. "Geographies of Race and Ethnicity II." *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 4 (2017): 524-33.

¹⁰³ Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists*, 135.

testimony to their resilience and understanding of the profusely violent relationship working-class communities of color have with the state and capitalist industries.¹⁰⁴

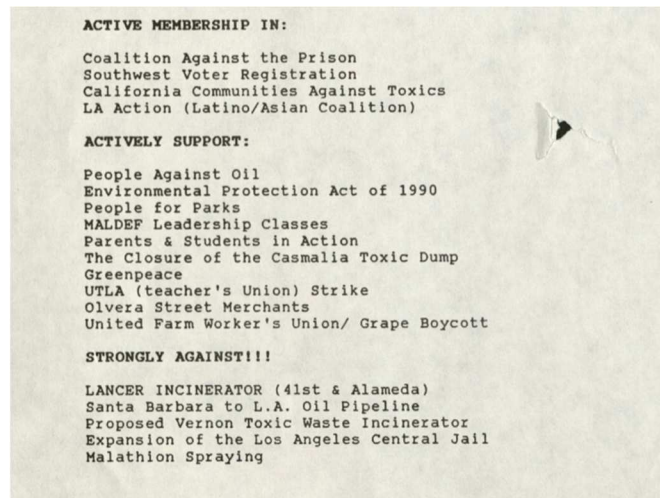


Figure 6. “Mothers of East Los Angeles.” Courtesy of CSUN’s Special Collections and Archives in box 1, folder 2.¹⁰⁵

In addition to stopping the prison, oil pipeline and toxic incinerator, MELA was invested in what I have referred to as “taking on all the threats,” or other struggles that impacted people in their barrio. In multiple informational pamphlets in the Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Collection, it is revealed that MELA was strongly against the Lancer Incinerator on 41st and Alameda, the expansion of the Los Angeles Central Jail, and strongly supported the United Farm Workers Union/Grape Boycott. They were invested in additional environmental justice struggles in their barrio and found that creating unity was essential to taking on different manifestations of environmental violence. For example, in a case study questionnaire by the International City/County Management Association on the incinerator siting, Ricardo Gutierrez, husband of

¹⁰⁴ While MELA’s work was instrumental to the community, it is important to note that the state has since abandoned its promises to protect neighboring communities from hazardous waste incinerators. Today, the city of Vernon has several incinerators and factories that contribute to one of the highest pollution index rates in the county of Los Angeles.

¹⁰⁵ Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 1, Folder 2.

Juana Gutierrez, writes on behalf of the MELA that “unity is to find a common ground that everyone can relate to. In our case, it was the environment, everyone has to live in it and whether it be the individual or group as a whole, nobody wants to die from it.”¹⁰⁶ In this way, MELA’s organizing was responding to the state’s consistent devaluation of their lives. It was about life or death. Due to this, they went on to support and amplify struggles that impacted other marginalized communities. Guided by love, collective urgency, and dedicated to take on all the threats, the next section will highlight how MELA pursued barrio self-determination and supported other barrios on their quest to self-determine.

Pursuing Barrio Self-Determination¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 1, Folder 4.

¹⁰⁷ “The Mothers of East Los Angeles at Santa Isabel is a community-based women’s organization committed to the empowerment and betterment of our barrios. Founded with the initial intent of protecting our community from unwanted, potentially unsafe government and corporate projects, the mothers have grown into a 500 member strong pro-active organization. Spearheading environmental and community awareness campaigns in the greater East Los Angeles area the mothers have become identifiable COMMUNITY LEADERS. With a membership composition of a previously politically and economically disenfranchised sector of our community, these mostly middle-aged woman have grown into a powerful political force in the barrio. Most importantly, the mothers have not only learned how to FIGHT, they have learned how to WIN! Armed with protective and nurturing instincts that only a mother can possess, THE MOTHERS OF EAST LOS ANGELES AT SANTA ISABEL have taken community organizing and mobilization to a higher level. Refusing to take past victories for granted, the mothers know that our barrios have a long way to go **in the pursuit of self-determination.**” in MELA Folder 1_Box 1.

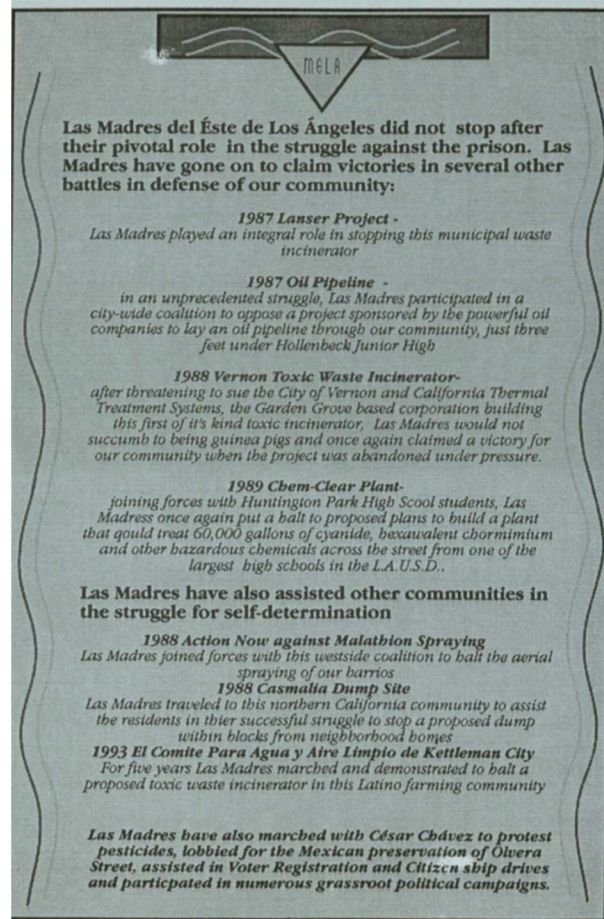


Figure 7 Mothers of East Los Angeles Pamphlet. Courtesy of CSUN's Special Collections and Archives in box 1, folder 1.¹⁰⁸

In this section, I draw directly from the language used on MELA's organizational pamphlets and on urban scholars' insights about the barrio. In doing so, I suggest that central to the Mothers of East LA's advocacy was pursuing barrio self-determination, which I conceptualize as a pillar of radical love. I define barrio self-determination as the community, in this case, the barrio, having the autonomy to make decisions about their livelihood. Urban planner David Diaz (2004) describes the barrio as a place that served "as the organizing platform

¹⁰⁸ Gutierrez (Juana) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

to create networks of solidarity, support, and self-determination.”¹⁰⁹ In the same way, barrio(s) are sites in the United States that have historically been targeted by normalized state violence (i.e, criminalization, environmental degradation, gentrification, etc.). Ethnic Studies scholar Lisa Marie Cacho writes that barrios are “so-imagined “lawless” places” that “are ontologized” and fundamental to the logics behind criminalization of populations of color.¹¹⁰ Thus, the barrio is both a place where normalized state violence is contested and legitimized. In *La Gente: Struggles for Empowerment and Community Self-Determination in Sacramento*, historian Lorena Márquez uncovers how the Chicana/o Movement manifested in Sacramento and the contributions of everyday people in invigorating a collective that sought to create transformative change in the ‘60s and ‘70s. In doing so, she highlights how communities in Sacramento worked towards self-determination by contesting multiple forms of oppression in the workplace, in school, and by challenging authority.¹¹¹ Considering this, I argue that the mothers driven by radical love pursued self-determination in East Los Angeles by resisting and contesting the state’s decision to place unwanted projects in their barrio and in the process, support other communities who were engaged in similar resistance struggles.

For the mothers, seeking barrio self-determination meant taking on all state violent projects that they understood would be detrimental to their children. As revealed in the archives, adopting self-determination as a politic enabled the mothers to address the disposability they

¹⁰⁹ David R. Diaz. *Barrio Urbanism: Chicanos, Planning and American Cities*. Routledge, 2005. 3.

¹¹⁰ Lisa Marie Cacho. *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. New York: NYU Press, 2012. 9.

¹¹¹ *La Gente: Struggles for Empowerment and Community Self-Determination in Sacramento*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020. 190.

faced by the state via state violent projects and called attention to the needs of their community. In figure 7, an informational pamphlet found in the Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) collection, the mothers highlight some of the battles they have had instrumental roles in, such as joining forces with Huntington High School students to stop the Chem Clear Plant which would have been right across the street from an LAUSD school with predominately students of color. In the same pamphlet, the mothers describe their dedication in stopping additional state violent projects outside of their community as “assisting other communities in their struggle towards self-determination.”¹¹² Here, the mothers showcase that self-determination for them is having the autonomy to make decisions about what is built in their neighboring environments. In addition, this reveals that employing self-determination in their organizing efforts often included stopping environmentally toxic projects.

MELA’s efforts to seek barrio self-determination did not stop locally, they expanded solidarity to barrios throughout California. Here, I turn to Neil Smith’s jumping scales, which is “to organize the production and reproduction of daily life and to resist oppression and exploitation at a higher scale – over a wider geographical field.”¹¹³ In MELA’s winter 2001 issue, MELA joined forces with Critical Resistance in support of the working-class people in Delano and Fresno who were organizing against the building of a maximum-security prison. Shortly after, in two months, a judge halted the construction of the prison.¹¹⁴ Due to their monumental organizing in Los Angeles, in 2001, two anti-prison organizations met with environmental justice organizations to host a conference, “Joining Forces: Environmental Justice

¹¹² Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

¹¹³ Neil Smith, “Contours of Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale.” *Social text*, no.33, 1992. 60.

¹¹⁴ Gutierrez (Juana Beatriz) Mothers of East Los Angeles Collection, Box 1, Folder 5.

and the Fight against Prison Expansion.”¹¹⁵ This event was said to be the first statewide conference that positioned prisons in relation to the environment, and it sought to help anti-prison activists “learn from environmental justice examples.”¹¹⁶ Juana Gutierrez opened the conference with comments. She began by commenting on how California’s 35th governor, George Deukmejian, believed that the community of East L.A. was made up of criminals. This is important to note because MELA members’ experiential knowledge of living in Boyle Heights provided them with a critical lens of state officials and how they perceived low income, Mexican American communities. With little to no formal education in the United States, the Mothers of East L.A. were able to understand the toxicity of “prisons and pollution.”¹¹⁷ MELA shifted the scale from their neighborhood, East LA, to barrios impacted throughout the state by similar manifestations of normalized state violence.

Conclusion

While the Mothers of East Los Angeles are no longer an active organization, they changed the built environment of East Los Angeles. MELA’s collective urgency to take on all the threats reveals the ways in which violence against marginalized communities is normalized in the regime of racial capitalism. Driven by a sense of urgency to protect their children, the Mothers of East L.A. defeated the building of a prison, an oil pipeline, and an incinerator. As previously stated, MELA considered their community a big family, and they politicized the concept of motherhood in their organizing to stop state violent projects from being built in their community. While aware of the feminist critiques of motherhood, in this essay I drew and build

¹¹⁵ Braz and Gilmore, “Joining Forces”, 98.

¹¹⁶ Braz and Gilmore, 98.

¹¹⁷ Braz and Gilmore, 98.

on feminists of color to consider how women of color, whose motherhood has often been targeted and restricted by the state and others, engage in “othermothering” by employing radical love. Members of MELA demonstrated a form of radical love that shaped their activism. Their love for their barrio, especially their children, informed their decisions to take on the prison-building project, then the oil-pipeline, and then the incinerator. As noted, they engaged in “everything-ist” politics to protect their communities from the state and corporations alike. My hope is that MELA’s approach to organizing pushes us further away from defeatist attitudes about what can be accomplished when we know our neighbors and work with our communities.

In conducting this archival research, I am left with several questions about future directions. Community organizing is far from perfect, so what can social movements like MELA teach us about how to stay grounded in our communities, how to self-determine? In what ways do we employ radical love today? Is it possible to engage and similarly employ the radical love MELA drew from in our work? And what activist archives have yet to be unearthed?

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