

2011

Recognizing Environmental Justice in History: Resistance and Agency in the Cross Bronx Expressway and the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike

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**Recognizing Environmental Justice in History:
Resistance and Agency
in the
Cross Bronx Expressway and the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike**

An Honors Thesis
presented by
Sarah Berkley
to
The Department of History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors in the Major Field
and for
completion of the certificate program of
The Goodwin Niering Center for the Environment

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
May 5, 2011

Abstract

The term environmental justice did not become a part of academic discourse until the 1970s; however, the facts of environmental injustice predate the concept. Minority and low-income communities have historically borne a disproportionate burden of the environmental harm associated with economic progress while reaping few of the benefits. The history of the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway from 1948 to 1972 and the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike of 1968 both involve what today can be labeled an environmental justice struggle in response to environmental injustices. Under the radar of the mainly white environmental movement, African Americans and others made strides to combat the harm to their communities and to the environment they encountered. Environmental injustice has been built into the laws of the federal government, and it has funded projects that perpetuate environmental injustice; therefore, the federal government of the United States has been a perpetrator of environmental injustice. Economic hardship, segregation, suburbanization, the construction of highways, urban renewal, and the desire to achieve growth at any cost have laid the groundwork for the environmental injustices of today. During the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike, the civil rights struggle was seen as entirely separate from the mainstream environmental movement that was active during the same time; however, the two movements share common goals and could have benefitted from working together to achieve these goals. Transparency and community participation in government are essential to environmental justice. In order to achieve environmental justice, a city street needs to be seen as just as important to preserve as a mountaintop.

To my father, who taught me how to think and ask questions.

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Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor David Canton for inspiring me to pursue this thesis, persuading me that I am capable of completing it, and for introducing me to the wonders of reading old newspapers. Professor James Downs has been instrumental in placing my thesis in an even deeper historical perspective and helping me to understand how discrimination and health are related. Professor Maryanne Borrelli's editorial advice has improved my thesis more than I ever thought possible. Her simple suggestions always lead to "Aha! Moments." A huge thank you to Professor Paxton for guiding me through the actual process of writing my thesis, providing me with invaluable feedback and support throughout this journey, and persuading me not to give up when writing was frustrating.

I owe many thanks to all of the history thesis students. Their feedback and support in the writing process have transformed the way I have thought about my thesis and made writing it more fun. I would like to thank Susanna Kavee for letting me stay in her room and write during winter break, Tessa Engel for helping me to process all of these thoughts, helping me stay awake and eating mac and cheese with me at three am, and inspiring me to seek a higher intellectual standard, and Currie Huntington for making me actually sit down and write this, for being there to keep me from going crazy, and for using his English nerd skills to answer all of my questions while writing. All of my friends have been amazingly supportive and encouraging, and I think each and every one of you for all of your love.

I would like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Bartlett for giving me the Barlett Family Scholarship. Without this scholarship, I would not have not been able to attend Connecticut College and would never have written this thesis. All of the faculty and staff of the Goodwin Niering Center have helped me formulate and complete this thesis. Being a part of this center is what initially inspired me to develop this interdisciplinary and culminating project. I would like to the students and staff of the center for their feedback on the presentation of my thesis, because it has been extremely helpful during the rewriting process. The Smart Growth? Environmental and Social Implications Conference on March 4-5, 2011 sponsored by the Goodwin Niering Center was very helpful to my thesis. Personal communication with speakers Dolores Hayden and Owen Gutfreund helped me to better understand the nuanced history of the construction of highways in the United States, and I am very grateful to them for this.

Jim McDonald has spent a lot of time with me in the library helping me pore over the Chicago Manual of Style over the course of this thesis, and I am very grateful to him for his time. Most of my primary sources were obtained through interlibrary loan, and without the services provided by the Interlibrary loan office at Connecticut College, I would never have been able to write this thesis. A special thanks to Emily in the office for advocating for me with lenders and helping me figure out exactly what I wanted to request.

Lisa Arkin of Oregon Toxics Alliance provided me with first hand knowledge of how an environmental justice struggle is waged and inspired me to write this thesis. I would like to extend a very special thanks to Christen Foehring of IslandWood for teaching me everything that I know about environmental education and for always

believing in me. Dan Stevens read my thesis and provided invaluable comments and I am eternally grateful to him and the whole Stevens family for all of their support. Finally, I would like to thank my mother, for going after my excess comas with a vengeance, always listening, and always somehow bringing things into perspective.

Introduction

Environmental Justice: Problems With the Traditional Definition

Looking at the environment from a historical perspective, it becomes clear that environmental degradation is unevenly dispersed across society, and that certain groups have been forced to bear an unfair burden of environmental hazards. Van Jones, an environmental justice activist, explains that the “worst polluters and foulest dumps have been steered into poor black communities.”¹ There has also been blatant discrimination in the way in which the government has dealt with environmental problems. The penalties against polluters are lower in minority areas than in white areas, and the government takes longer to address environmental concerns in minority areas than in white areas.³

The mainstream environmental movement in the United States has traditionally been limited to middle class whites seeking to protect and preserve the natural environment.⁴ The word environment has been associated with only the non-human aspects of our world and has neglected the importance of people and how they interact with the environment in which they live and work. Since the 1970s, there has been a strong push from within the environmental movement to broaden the term “environment”

¹ Jones, *The Green Collar Economy*, 47.

³ Eddie J. Girdner, and Jack Smith, *Killing Me Softly* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), 45; Marianne Lavelle and Marcia A. Coyle, “Unequal Protection,” In *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*, ed. Richard Hofrichter, 153-162. (Salt Lake City: Utah University Press, 2002), 136; Girdner, *Killing Me Softly*, 62.

⁴ Van Jones, *The Green Collar Economy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 47.

to include humans and the urban landscape. This broader definition of the environment is integral to the concept of environmental justice.

In recent years, the environmental movement has taken steps to address these environmental inequalities. The term environmental racism has increasingly appeared in environmental literature and is defined by environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard as, “the denial of human rights, environmental protection, and economic opportunities to the communities where people of color live and work.”⁵ The environmental justice movement has emerged as a prominent grassroots movement that works to reverse environmental racism.

According to the environmental and historical literature, the environmental justice movement began in the 1970s, but in fact, low income and minority people have been suffering from the effects of what could today be defined as environmental racism and protesting against it since the beginning of industrialization. The facts of environmental injustice predate the creation of the concept. Under the radar of the mainly white environmental movement, working-class African Americans and other disadvantaged groups were making strides to combat the harm to their communities and to the environment they encountered. These struggles were not labeled environmental justice struggles because the concept of environmental justice did not yet exist, but looking back one can see that these struggles sought to improve conditions for both people and the environment. Now that the concept of environmental justice exists, it can be applied to struggles that existed before the concept in order to better understand their motivations.

⁵ Robert D. Bullard, “Introduction,” *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*, ed. Robert D. Bullard, 1-15 (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005), 1.

The dominant discourse surrounding environmental justice suggests that it is a product of individual companies committing atrocities against specific disadvantaged communities. What is missing from the environmental justice literature is an identification of the larger forces outside of the individual perpetrators of environmental injustices that have caused disparities in the qualities of environments in which people live and work. By looking at environmental justice from a broader historical perspective, discrimination in housing and in labor become clearly linked to the environmental and social injustices in the United States, and it becomes clear that the federal government is a perpetrator of environmental injustice.

Structure and Scope

This thesis serves as a sort of prehistory of the environmental justice movement. The facts that make up environmental injustice existed long before we began using the term. Chapter 1 examines the forces that perpetuated environmental injustice that will be discussed in the following two chapters including segregation, suburbanization, and urban renewal. Although the term environmental justices did not exist during the time period the historical background spans, it applies because these forces caused harm to both people and the environment. The Great Migration serves as a starting point for this thesis, because it illustrates how segregation in housing and in the workplace created environmental injustices, which were a product of environmental racism. Both suburbanization and urban renewal were intended to improve society; however, their benefits were disproportionately distributed creating inequality. Both suburbanization and urban renewal projects resulted in conditions that would today be considered

environmentally unjust. The construction of highways has displaced huge numbers of people and destroyed natural environments; therefore the construction of highways can be defined as an environmental injustice.

In Chapter 2, I will examine the building of Cross Bronx Expressway and argue that although the terms did not exist in the late 1940s when it was planned, the facts of its construction make the expressway an environmental injustice. It follows that the neighborhood struggle against the expressway can be labeled as an environmental justice struggle. The Cross Bronx Expressway was funded and supported by the local and federal government thereby implicating the government in the perpetration of environmental injustice. I will examine how Robert Moses who spearheaded the building of the expressway has embodied all of the evil of urban renewal in the historical literature devoted to him. I argue that he was following a national trend but that his actions were unjust. He chose the route of the expressway that would cause the most damage because he valued economic growth more than the needs of the Bronx community or the environment. I will conclude that the neighborhood movement against the expressway failed partially because of limited resources at their disposal. More importantly, the local government prevented the struggle from succeeding because of its corruption, lack of transparency, failure to include the community in the decision making process, and the desire to achieve economic growth at any cost. Both actual process of building the expressway and the failure of New York City to relocate residents afterward can be defined as environmental injustices because they negatively impacted both the people living near to the construction area and the natural environment.

In Chapter 3, I will look beyond the involvement and assassination of Martin Luther King to nuances and the actual grievances of the workers in the Memphis Sanitation Worker's Strike of 1968. These grievances would today be considered environmental injustices making the strike and environmental justice struggle. I will argue that the adverse working conditions faced by the workers evolved from segregation in the workplace dating back to the Great Migration. The city saw the workers as expendable, similarly to how white employers viewed African American migrant workers during the Great Migration, and did not provide them even with the most basic protection from toxic substances. Garbage, a substance that can create environmental injustices, as I will argue in Chapters 1 and 3, was used in symbolic ways during the strike making it clear that the goals of the strike would be considered environmental justice goals today. The workers were asking for dignity, to not have to be exposed to conditions that today we would label as environmentally unjust; therefore the Memphis Sanitation Worker's strike was an environmental justice struggle.

Environmental justice is certainly not limited to the urban environment. Rural areas face environmental injustices from industries such as agriculture and forestry; both of these industries have strong ties to the federal government. I have chosen to focus on the urban environment in this thesis; however, there is a need for future research on the history of environmental justice in rural areas. It would be interesting to compare and contrast an environmental justice history of urban and rural areas. Environmental justice is clearly not limited to the United States. People worldwide face environmental injustices and respond to them with environmental justice struggles. While scope of this

thesis is limited to the United States, an international comparative history of environmental justice would be an important future research project.

Chapter 1:

Historical Background

The Great Migration

Environmental racism is not only found in the actions of companies that dump hazardous waste near poor minority areas; it is engrained in our society because of years of racism in housing and the workplace. These inequalities can be traced back to long before the 1970s when the term environmental justice first became prominent in social discourse. The Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North from the turn of the century until 1920 marked a time of great change in our society. African American populations in northern cities increased, and migrants were forced to live in the worst housing units.

The demand for goods created by WWI and the depleted labor force of European immigrants in the North because of immigration policies at this time forced northern companies to hire African Americans and sparked a massive African-American migration to fill these jobs. Before 1914, white employers barred African Americans from working in industry and reserved high paying industrial jobs for native born white men; however, the high demand for labor during the WWI period caused the North to reverse this policy, and large numbers of black men migrated to work in industry.⁶

⁶ Thomas L. Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto: Neighborhood Deterioration and Middle-Class Reform, Chicago 1880-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 115 and 199; Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-30* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 32; "The Horizon," *The Crisis*, December, 1916, 89; "Industries Give Data on Workers: Labor Situation Fully Discussed in Report of Commission," *The Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1922, 14.

African Americans migrated with the hope of improving their lives, but “the great expectations with which migrants left the South from 1916 onward were never matched by the reality of the life they found in the North.”⁷ They found poor working and living conditions that were a product of what would today be defined as environmental racism. Because of the decades of institutionalized racism in place in northern cities, African Americans were forced to live and work in the least desirable places; consequently, these conditions devastated both the environment and the community.

Housing conditions are an important area of concern in the environmental justice movement today, and the roots of the disparities in housing conditions based on race were planted during the Great Migration. When poor African-American migrant laborers arrived in the North, they had a very limited choice of where to live because of segregation. African Americans were forced to live in segregated neighborhoods in which living conditions were invariably worse than those in white areas.⁸ The poor housing conditions of labor migrants were not simply a result of the low economic status of African-American migrants; racism played a huge role in housing conditions in northern and western cities during the Great Migration. The housing market was virtually segregated, and African-American areas were invariably more crowded and unsanitary. These conditions perpetuate environmental injustice.

⁷ Carole Marks, “The Social and Economic Life of Southern Blacks During the Migration,” *Black Exodus: The Great Migration and the American South* ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991): 47.

⁸ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 123; Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 142; Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 123-126.

Poor migrants were not the only group that struggled to find acceptable housing. Wealthy African Americans also had trouble finding a decent place to live, and African Americans of all classes were driven out of white neighborhoods by whites themselves and by racist housing laws.⁹ In *Black Chicago*, Allan H. Spear argues that the poor conditions in African American areas were not only due to class, but that, “The Ghetto was primarily the product of white hostility.”¹⁰ People were forced to live in more adverse environments because of racism; therefore, segregation beginning with the Great Migration can today be defined as an environmental injustice caused by environmental racism.

This environmental racism was heightened when white landlords exacerbated the poor sanitary conditions in African-American housing by refusing to make needed repairs to these buildings. In 1912, Alzada P. Comstock wrote an article concerning this issue in *The American Journal of Sociology* and stated, “It was so hard to find better places in which to live that they were forced either to make the repairs themselves, which they could rarely afford to do, or to endure the conditions as best they might.”¹¹ The poor maintenance of buildings resulted in conditions that were detrimental to both the environment and to the residents.

African American migrants also had to contend with rent inflation. In a 1923 article in *Opportunity*, John T. Clark observed that in Pittsburgh, “There are many old buildings which ordinarily would have been torn down as fire-traps, too unsanitary or

⁹ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 126; Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 23.

¹⁰ Spear, *Black Chicago*, 26.

¹¹ Alzada P. Comstock, “Chicago Housing Conditions; VI: The Problems of the Negro,” *American Journal of Sociology* (September, 1912): 244-255.

dangerous for habitation, that are now bringing tremendous sums for these helpless newcomers.”¹² The entire housing system promoted racist practices, and African Americans paid far more for inferior housing that was detrimental to their health and to the environment. The amount of money paid for housing did not alone determine the quality of housing people lived in; racism was also a factor. The housing problems African American Migrants faced can be labeled as were environmentally unjust without rent inflation, but this phenomenon exacerbated the environmental injustice.

In both sanitation and housing, African American migrants were discriminated against, and because of this discrimination, the public services they received were drastically inferior to the public services whites of the same economic class received.¹³ Sanitation is an environmental justice issue because proper sanitation is necessary in order to maintain good health, and if sanitation is not adequate, it can allow harmful substances to pollute the environment.

Sanitation and public health inspectors in Chicago neglected poor African American areas; in fact, there were only six people in charge of plumbing and sanitary inspection for all of Chicago, and these inspectors focused on white neighborhoods; therefore, most buildings in African American neighborhoods were built without inspection. Racism reduced the quality of sanitation in African American residences.

Unless residents filed official complaints, nothing was done about sanitation problems in these neighborhoods.¹⁴ African American migrants complained to their

¹² John T. Clark, “The Migrant in Pittsburgh,” *Opportunity* 1 (October, 1923): 304.

¹³ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 128.

¹⁴ “Lax Methods of the Chicago Sanitary Bureau,” *Charities* 11 (August 1, 1903): 100; “Sanitary Ills Disclosed by Hull-House Workers,” *Charities* 10 (June 13, 1903): 587-88; “Chicago’s Absurd Sanitary Bureau,” *Charities* 11 (October 17, 1903): 363-54.

landlords about sanitation problems, but the landlords refused to respond because they were not legally bound to do so. These migrants had no way of knowing how to make official complaints because they were new to the city system, and navigating the bureaucracies of northern cities to make a complaint was not an easy task. The sanitation department refused to address the discrimination in sanitation and the problems it caused the African American community.

The sanitary conditions in working class African American neighborhoods would be considered unlivable today. These housing conditions often did not meet city housing requirements, but the municipal sanitation institutions did not enforce these requirements in African-American neighborhoods as they did in white neighborhoods. Sanitary provisions that whites living in northern cities during the Great Migration considered necessary were often lacking from African-American houses and tenements.¹⁵ Poor ventilation, wood heating, broken bathrooms and poor plumbing or the lack thereof, ineffective sewers or no sewers at all, and a lack of garbage collection were all important sanitary problems working-class migrants faced while living in segregated African American neighborhoods. Because these sanitation problems affected poor minority communities disproportionately, and because the conditions they create also have a negative impact on the environment, sanitary problems during the Great Migration can be considered an environmental injustice that was a direct result of environmental racism.

Wood or coal stoves were usually used to heat the buildings poor African American

¹⁵ Robert Gregg, *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression: Philadelphia's African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890-1940* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 30; Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way*, 66; Comstock, "Chicago Housing Conditions", 248; Abraham Epstein, *The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 12; Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 152.

migrants lived in.¹⁶ Without proper ventilation, the inhalation of fumes from these methods of heating could result in negative health effects including respiratory problems. The burning of wood and coal for heat also has negative impacts on the environment and is considered an environmental justice issue today. Poor ventilation exacerbated sanitation problems. Bathroom facilities did not function properly or were non-existent. Many toilets in the homes of working-class African Americans were either broken or leaked.¹⁷ Thomas L. Philpott, author of *The Slum and the Ghetto*, reported that toilets “froze shut in the winter, and they could clog, back up, or spew vapors at any time.”¹⁸ Fifty-two percent of the buildings in African-American areas of Chicago did not have adequate plumbing.¹⁹

Many houses did not have indoor bathrooms at all, but instead had privies outside of their houses.²⁰ Privies provide some of the most disgusting examples of sanitation problems that would be considered environmental injustices today. These privies were filthy, allowed for the spread of fecal bacteria, and were breeding grounds for disease carrying insects. In Chicago, it was illegal to have privies instead of bathrooms, but the sanitation inspectors did not enforce this law in African-American areas.²¹

People living in the basements of buildings bore the brunt of the effects of privies because “The privy vaults oozed into the soil, seeped through the thin walls and floorboards, and left a layer of scum inside the flats.”²² Many African American

¹⁶ Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro In Chicago*, 152.

¹⁷ Spear, *Black Chicago*, 148.

¹⁸ Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 39.

¹⁹ “Sanitary Ills,” 587.

²⁰ A privy is bathroom not connected to a dwelling or to a sewer system.

²¹ Comstock, “Chicago Housing Conditions,” 248-249.

²² Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 39.

neighborhoods in northern and western cities did not have sewers, were not hooked up to the sewers that did exist, or were connected to sewers that frequently backed up.²³ In 1900, in parts of South Chicago, the houses “stood in stagnant pools of sewage.”²⁴ Poor sewage systems allowed pollutants to seep into the soil and created dangerous living conditions.

The disposal of garbage was a huge health hazard in low-income African-American areas. The garbage was not collected regularly as it is today; therefore, it piled up around residences leaving poor African American migrants susceptible to the germs that thrive in garbage. Philpott provides a vivid description of the problems lack of garbage collection created in poor African American neighborhoods:

People dumped their garbage in 1203 alley garbage bins, mostly uncovered, and when these overflowed, the yards, gangways, and alleys filled up until the rear buildings were surrounded with rubbish. The smell from the toilets and trash was enough to drive people indoors. Sometimes they had to shut the windows to ward off the odors. The cruelty of the situation was that the stench was most overwhelming on the hottest days, when the atmosphere of the crowded houses was stifling and people were desperate for air.²⁵

In this way, the garbage and sewage problems made ventilation problems even worse. The conditions in northern cities during the Great Migration negatively affected the environment and the people living in them setting the stage for future environmental injustice. Poor ventilation of toxic fumes, inadequate sewers, and improper garbage disposal are environmentally unjust in the context of the Great Migration; all of these factors negatively impact both the environment and humans.

²³ Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 39; Charles S. Johnson, “How the Negro Fits in Northern Industry,” *Industrial Psychology* 1 (June, 1926): 409.

²⁴ Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 27.

²⁵ Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 33.

Segregation of housing forced African Americans to continue living in these terrible housing conditions; therefore, housing during the Great Migration can be labeled an environmental justice problem. After the Great Migration, African-American communities were located near polluting factories and garbage dumps because whites did not want to live in these areas. Racism and the economic status of many migrants forced them to live near these polluting entities. The African American community of Richmond, California was located near a garbage dump, and the “South Side Black Belt” in Chicago was located between railroad yards and industrial plants.”²⁶ In Pittsburgh, de facto segregation forced black migrants to live near the mills, and it was referred to as the “smoky city” because of the smoke from factories. In 1912, *The Chicago Defender* reported that the smoke in Pittsburgh was causing negative health effects among the African American community; “In many of the industrial callings it is so harmful that even with the best and most up-to-date protective devices those who work in them are short lived and usually dies from the disease peculiar to the trades in which they work.”²⁷ Peter Gottlieb, a Great Migration historian, wrote, “the laden atmosphere at times made Pittsburgh living conditions practically unbearable.”²⁸ The proximity of African-American migrants to polluting entities during the Great Migration proves that conditions that can be defined as environmentally unjust existed long before the 1970s. The

²⁶ Shirley Ann Moore, “Getting There, Being There: African-American Migration to Richmond California, 1910-1922,” *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Joe William Trotter Jr (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 111; Spear, *Black Chicago*, 12.

²⁷ Peter Gottlieb, “Rethinking the Great Migration.” *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 75; “Dust and Smoke A Menace: Carries Germs of Tuberculosis, Pneumonia, Diphtheria, and other Dreaded Diseases,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 24, 1923, quotation on 13.

²⁸ Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way*: 5.

conditions in northern cities after the Great Migration set the stage for future environmental justice struggles.

Another common setting for environmental injustices is the workplace. Segregation in the labor market did not begin with the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike; it was engrained in the societal fabric by processes set in motion by the Great Migration.²⁹ Before 1914, African Americans were only employed in the domestic services. The Great Migration caused a massive shift to industrial jobs, among African Americans already living in the North and migrants from the South, because the need for workers forced white industrial companies to hire African Americans.³⁰ Spear argues, "Negros entered occupations that were not desirable enough to be contested by whites."³¹ The industrial jobs that were available to African Americans carried with them a much higher risk of exposure to toxics, particularly from air pollution, than any other job sector.

White employers viewed African American migrants as expendable; therefore, they were assigned to dangerous and toxic jobs that whites did not want. Robert H. Zieger, a labor historian, writes that, "In the steel mills of Pittsburgh and Gary, hot, dangerous, and physically punishing work involving the handling of hot metal and close proximity to the superheated blast furnaces was reserved for blacks, whose African origins were thought to make them uniquely able to endure high temperatures."³² Racism caused white employers to expose African-Americans to conditions that would today be

²⁹ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 181.

³⁰ "Industries Gives Data on Workers," 14.

³¹ Spear, *Black Chicago*, 31.

³² Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 73.

considered environmentally unjust. Horace B. Davis, author of *Labor and Steel*, argues, “Under the menace of unemployment workers cannot risk their jobs by laying off.”³³

These migrants needed the scarce jobs that were available to them, and did not have the option of refusing to perform duties that exposed them to toxic substances. Because migrants had to take these dirty jobs in order to make a living and survive in a new place, and whites denied them better job opportunities, the segregation of the labor market during the Great Migration can be defined as an environmental injustice.

Poor ventilation was a chronic problem in these industrial jobs. Without proper ventilation, workers were forced to breathe in toxic fumes with no relief. According to James R. Grossman, a historian of the Great Migration, workers were forced to breathe “foul air.”³⁴ People working in mills routinely suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning, which can be easily prevented by using proper ventilation. Mortality from respiratory diseases was much higher among steel workers than among other men.³⁵ Industrial workers could not avoid breathing in massive quantities of dust that may have contained toxic particles.³⁶ Poor African-American migrants were forced to work in conditions that were hazardous to their health, conditions that were also harmful to the environment. Segregation in the workplace did not improve quickly, and African-American workers continued to be disproportionately exposed to toxics at work, as I will argue in the discussion of the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike in Chapter 3.

³³ Horace B. Davis, *Labor and Steel* (New York: International Publishers, 1933), 53. By laying off, Davis means taking a break from work to avoid hazardous and potentially toxic situations.

³⁴ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 181 and 188, quotation on 188.

³⁵ Horace B. Davis, *Labor and Steel*, 53 and 57.

³⁶ “Dust and Smoke,” 6.

The Dream of Suburbia

By the beginning of the 1950s, suburbanization had emerged as a goal for all, and moving to the suburbs was seen as the step that had to be taken to achieve the American Dream. Suburbanization and the sprawl that resulted from it are harmful to the environment because they increase pollution and destroy natural land. It displaced non-suburban communities to make way for the suburbs. In Chapter 2, I will use the case study of the Cross Bronx Expressway, a highway that was built through and destroyed a thriving working-class multicultural community and the natural environment, to argue that suburbanization has produced environmental injustice. The environmental injustices of suburbanization were not apparent at the time, and exodus to the suburbs was seen as the only solution to the problems in the slums, partially because of advertising campaigns by developers such as the one that follows.

An advertisement placed in the *New York Amsterdam News*, a prominent African American newspaper, for a suburban community called Ronek Park entitled “How One Family Escaped the Slum of Harlem for a Suburban Community,” illustrates the strong pull of the suburbs, even among the African American community. The advertisement tells the story of a family who moved from Harlem to Ronek Park. It describes the slum the family left behind in a very negative light: “John hated it more than ever. He despised the squalid, dirty – streets. He was sickened by the run-down rows of dilapidated, neglected tenements.” John describes the community in which he lived as though he was never a part of it.

The family’s life in the suburban community is portrayed with an entirely different tone. The suburb is a clean, safe neighborhood in which, “Doris and Thomas

play in country lanes instead of unsanitary traffic packed streets.” The welcoming atmosphere of the suburbs is portrayed in contrast to the dismal conditions in the slum they left behind. This advertisement presents moving to the suburbs as the only solution that could have saved the family from despair: “This is but one of the 565 families Ronek Park rescued from social oblivion. You can make this your story.” The advertisement encourages readers of the *New York Amsterdam News* to save themselves and make the move to the suburbs as well. It offers the suburbs as the only possible solution to the problems in the slums, instead of suggesting any way that conditions within the slums could be improved. Although suburbs and the highways needed to support them destroyed slum communities, developers presented a narrative of the suburbs as a process that could improve the lives of people living in the slums.

This dream of the suburbs was in part a response to the dominant view of slums as a breeding ground for all of society’s ills. While improving the slums was important to the government at this time, they viewed this goal as unachievable.³⁷ Dolores Hayden, a scholar of suburban architecture, describes the pull of the suburbs as, “a landscape of the imagination where Americans situate ambitions for upward mobility and economic security, ideals about freedom and private property, and longings for social harmony and spiritual uplift.”³⁸ As a part of this American idealization of the suburbs, people increasingly began to desire to live in single-family homes in suburbs instead of in metropolitan areas. Single-family homes are generally more harmful to the environment than multi-family homes because more resources are needed per person. As will be

³⁷ “How One Family Escaped the Slum of Harlem for a Suburban Community,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, November 28, 1953, 13, an advertisement for Ronek Park.

³⁸ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 3.

discussed in Chapter 2, segregation prohibited a large portion of the population from living in the suburbs, creating a large gap between the quality of housing of whites and non-whites. The highways and other infrastructure needed to support suburbanization destroyed low-income communities. Wasted resources, segregation, and destruction of communities combined allow suburbanization to be defined as a force that perpetuates environmental injustice.

The Explosion of Expressway Construction

As I will illustrate in Chapter 2, the construction of highways to support suburbanization can be labeled as an environmental injustice because the pollution and loss of land caused by the building of highways and the displacement of people to make way for highways hurt both the environment and the community. The construction of highways displaced thousands of people and devastated natural environment. During the 1950s, suburbanization caused a massive increase in highway construction. In 1956, the federal government passed the Interstate Highway Act, and this bill initiated the rapid construction of vast amounts of new roadway. The federal government paid for ninety percent of the costs of these new roads; therefore, the building of highways and consequently aiding the rise of suburbia became a part of our national policy of the United States.

Kenneth Jackson, a suburban historian, argues that the, “The interstate system helped continue the downward spiral of public transportation and virtually guaranteed

that future urban growth would perpetuate a centerless sprawl.”³⁹ The construction of highways was valued over public transportation; the mode of transportation favored by wealthy suburbanites was favored over the transportation used by poor city dwellers. According to Owen D. Gutfreund, a transportation historian, suburbanization “fueled a chronic need for capital expenditures of highways unmitigated by considerations of expense, efficiency, affordability, or equity.”⁴⁰ The federal government funded a system that created what can today be recognized as environmental injustice. The Interstate Highway laws passed in the 1950s made it much more convenient for people to live in suburbs. The auto industry and the resulting road gang capitalized on this shift and lobbied for legislation that supported the construction of highways. Hayden asserts, “In every state, road gangs enriched automobile, truck, oil, construction, and real estate interests by providing infrastructure worth billions of dollars to open up new suburban land for speculation and development.”⁴¹ As a result, people, goods, and services were relocated to the suburbs.

Suburbanization forced people living in the suburbs to drive long distances into the city for work. Most suburbanites in New York still worked in Manhattan. Gutfreund argues that the “Interstate Highway grants would make it easier for Americans to get from their homes to an urban workplace, marketplace, or cultural attractions, but only if

³⁹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 249.

⁴⁰ Owen D. Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

⁴¹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 165, quotation on 167. The road gang is a slang term for a select group of people related to the automobile industry who lobbied for automobile interests.

they lived outside of the city and owned a car.”⁴² Highways replaced the public transportation that preceded them, making transportation more inconvenient for people who did not live in the suburbs.

Expressways further perpetuated suburbanization by allowing people, goods, and money to move back and forth more quickly between the suburbs and the city. This cycle caused people and money to continually move to the suburbs, a shift was perpetuated by the financial support of the federal government.⁴³ It is important to remember that the federal government financed ninety percent of the Interstate Highway System in what Hayden refers to as “the largest federal pork barrel Americans had ever seen”.⁴⁴ Suburbanization and highway construction did not occur only because of a shift in living preferences; it was allowed to flourish because of the continued financial support of the federal government and the federal policies that promoted development. The support of the federal government for the creation of the Interstate Highway System illustrates how the federal government has historically been a perpetuator of what we today refer to as environmental injustice.

The environmental injustice of the displacement of people for the building of highways can be recognized today. The central goal of the city planners who designed expressways was to transport suburbanites from the suburbs to the cities and back again as fast as possible. No thought was given to the wellbeing of any of the people who were displaced, any school districts that were separated, or any natural areas that highway construction destroyed. Helen Leavitt, a scholar who studies the creation of the

⁴² Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl*, 57.

⁴³ Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 121.

⁴⁴ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 166.

“superhighway”, states, “Between 1967 and 1970, highway construction in the United States will displace 168,519 individuals, families, businesses, farmers, and nonprofit organizations.”⁴⁵ Highways took a heavy toll on the communities that they were built through.⁴⁶

Environmental Impacts of Expressways and Suburbanization

The wellbeing of urban communities and the environment were not taken into consideration in the building of the highway system of the United States. Hayden points out that the “vast American suburbs of the post-World War II era were shaped by legislative processes reflecting the power of the real estate, banking, and construction sectors, and the relative weakness of the planning and design sectors.” In the building of suburbia, the needs of the large corporations fueling this growth were valued over all other concerns. Vastly more land has been developed each decade than the decade before up to the present. Many of our natural habitats, fields, meadows, and woods, have been replaced or intercepted by roadways.⁴⁷ John Robinson, an environmental scholar who studies impact of highways on the environment, argues, “When selection of a highway route is based primarily on economics... the chosen route is perforce the shortest between

⁴⁵ Helen Leavitt, *Superhighway – Superhoax* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1970, 195.

⁴⁶ Much has been made of the idea that highway construction arose out of the need to mobilize the military during World War II. This theory is no long popular among historians. Many of the overpasses built during this time only had a fourteen-foot clearance, meaning that they were not intended for military vehicles. Helen Levitt, Dolores Hayden, and Owen D. Gutfreund agree that the highway system in the United States was not primarily motivated by military needs.

⁴⁷ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 4 and 151, quotation on 151.

two points.”⁴⁸ Economic growth was the most important factor in the citing of highways built after the interstate highway act; therefore, the shortest routes were taken and the needs of people and the environment were not valued.

Before World War II and the Federal Housing Act, most people built their own houses; contrastingly, after World War II, large developers designed and built the majority of houses. Large developers generally have less regard for preserving the natural environment than individual homeowners because their main goal is to make a profit; they do not have to live in the homes they build.⁴⁹ Larger developers are perpetrators of environmental injustice because they value profit over the needs of people and the environment. Suburbs are less densely built than metropolitan areas; therefore, the building of suburbs requires the destruction of more natural land and habitat than is necessary.⁵⁰ In 1965, environmental groups tried to pass the Highway Beautification Act in an attempt to give our roadways a better natural aesthetic, but it had no hope of passing because of the strong lobbies against it.⁵¹

Today, transportation accounts for nearly a third of the energy used in the United States.⁵² Jackson asserts, “The United States now has the world’s best road system, and very nearly its worst public transportation system.”⁵³ This disparity encourages the use of personal vehicles, which emit more greenhouse gases into the air per person than

⁴⁸ John Robinson, *Highways and Our Environment* (Columbus: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 110.

⁴⁹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 132; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 233.

⁵⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 239.

⁵¹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 164.

⁵² Daniel B. Botkin with Diana Perez, *Powering the Future: A Scientist’s Guide to Energy Independence* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc., 2010), 212.

⁵³ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 250.

public transportation does.⁵⁴ The Environmental Protection Agency has opposed the building of new interstates because of the air pollution impact that they have.⁵⁵ In 1978 in Denver, tolls were free at times other than rush hour because carbon monoxide levels were so high, and there was a brown cloud of smog hanging over the city.⁵⁶ The pollution during rush hour was so obnoxious that the city tried to discourage driving during this time period. During the winter of 1999, one out of three days received the highest pollution advisory rating possible.⁵⁷ Because expressways negatively impacted both the environment and the communities they are built through, the construction of highways to speed suburbanization can be defined as an environmental injustice.

Slum Clearance and Urban Renewal

Highways were not the only force that displaced large groups of people beginning in the 1950s. The displacement of people by highways occurred at a time when the theory of urban renewal dominated the urban planning atmosphere. Urban renewal programs displaced huge numbers of people. During the postwar period, slums were seen as something other, something scary and dirty, something that was beyond repair and needed to be removed. Historian John C. Teaford, argues, “The ultimate dream of planners, public officials, and civic leaders was the eradication of the slums.”⁵⁸ Slums

⁵⁴ Greenhouse gases are gases that are contributing to climate change. Climate change itself is creating more environmental injustices in the world. Carbon Dioxide is the most prevalent greenhouse gas associated with transportation.

⁵⁵ Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl*, 102.

⁵⁶ Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl*, 123.

⁵⁷ Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl*, 126.

⁵⁸ Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 105

were seen as contagious and as a threat to the fabric of modern society.⁵⁹ Environmental injustices were allowed to take place in these areas without a large public outcry because the public bought into the philosophy of urban renewal. The period following World War II was seen as a period of the decline of cities, and many people viewed Urban Renewal as a possible way to reverse this decline. Urban renewal was in theory a social justice policy that would improve the slums; however, in reality, it perpetuated injustice, and slum conditions only worsened as a result.

Bringing a bulldozer into a slum, demolishing everything in sight, and then theoretically rebuilding was the only solution to the problems in slums that city planners were willing to listen to. Anthony Flint, a scholar of Robert Moses, argues, “The urban renewal manual made it plain that leaving any part of the slum intact would amount to slum preservation.”⁶⁰ Because the government was advocating for slums to be demolished, an act that harms both people and the environment, the government is again shown to be a perpetrator of environmental injustice. Before the 1960s, public housing was seen as something that could help hardworking people who needed somewhere to stay. By the 1960s, public housing was stigmatized, and this stigmatization justified clearance; the destruction of public housing was not viewed as a loss. The policy of slum clearance developed out of the strong push to move to the suburbs. White city planners feared that if the slums were not improved, people and businesses would relocate to the

⁵⁹ Scott Greer, *Urban Renewal and American Cities: The Dilemma of Democratic Intervention* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1965), 14.

⁶⁰ Anthony Flint, *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York's Master Builder and Transformed the American City* (New York: Random House, 2009), 22-23, and 53, quotation on 22.

suburbs and take their tax dollars with them. City officials had a strong desire to make sure that such a massive tax shift did not occur.

After World War II, cities began to grow at a faster rate than the previous decade. This growth was not planned or regulated, but rather occurred at the behest of large developers who saw the opportunity to profit. Jeanne Lowe, a Robert Moses historian, asserts, “The absence of a generally agreed-upon concept of where the city was to go or not to go made it easy for Moses to go anywhere - and he often did.”⁶¹ The Housing Act of 1949 made demolishing slums a part of national policy. Title I of the Act allowed the federal government to purchase slum properties for a third of the cost. The government then redeveloped the land and in theory relocated people who were displaced by slum clearance.⁶² In carrying out this law, the federal government was perpetuating environmental justice.

By 1960, Title I had supported 838 slum clearance projects and displaced 100,000 people from Manhattan and Brooklyn alone. Under the guidance of Robert Moses, a New York City planner who I will discuss in depth in Chapter 2, New York completed more Title I projects than all other cities combined.⁶³ Few public housing projects were funded without the use of Title I. Because of this law, most of the public housing that was built, first destroyed previously existing housing.⁶⁴ Hilary Ballon, a Robert Moses

⁶¹ Jeanne R. Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time: Progress and Poverty in America's Renewing Cities* (New York: Random House, 1967), 63.

⁶² Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 272; John C. Teaford, *Metropolitan Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press 2006), 59.

⁶³ Jeanne R. Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 48.

⁶⁴ Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 295 and 301.

Scholar, writes that “Title I provided deep federal subsidies for clearance of slum areas in order to stimulate their reconstruction by private developers.” The act also cut funding for low-income housing; consequently, it created housing shortages for people living in slum areas.⁶⁵ Slum clearance did not merely destroy houses; it destroyed businesses, parks, and all the spaces that form the fabric of a community. Today, slum clearance can be considered a force that perpetuates environmental injustice.

Slum clearance is an integral part of urban renewal programs.⁶⁷ These policies were designed to improve the quality of life for people living in the slums. In reality, only cosmetic changes were made to slums because urban renewal failed to eliminate the conditions that had caused poverty in these areas, and often did not even succeed in their aesthetic goals. Richard Plunz, author of *A History of Housing in New York City*, states, “The effect was a policy that ensured that one ghetto was replaced by another.”⁶⁸ Already trying conditions in slums only worsened with urban renewal programs.⁶⁹ Schwartz argues, “Sponsors never questioned the morality of their projects or paused to consider how their relocations would add to the growing load on public housing.”⁷⁰ Communities had absolutely no say in whether or not they wanted urban renewal projects in their neighborhoods. Some level of community control is necessary for a project to be environmentally just, but urban renewal projects lacked any avenue for community

⁶⁵ Hilary Ballon, “Robert Moses and Urban Renewal: The Title I Program,” in *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, ed. Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 94 and 97, quotation on 94.

⁶⁷ Slum clearance programs are often referred to as urban renewal because it has a much more positive connotation.

⁶⁸ Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, 273.

⁶⁹ “City Orders Study of Tenant Dislocation,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, March 7, 1953, 16.

⁷⁰ Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, 174.

participation. Urban planners such as Robert Moses wielded all of the power in the decision making process.⁷¹ Developers remained focused on economic growth and never stopped to realize that their politics were having the opposite of the intended effect.

Jane Jacobs was an activist who has fought to improve communities and against slum clearance policies. She argues that although urban renewal sometimes simply replaces one ghetto with another, “At worst, it destroys neighborhoods where constructive and improving communities exist and where the situation calls for encouragement rather than destruction.”⁷² Instead of working within the context of the slums and trying to improve conditions, slums were merely knocked down.

The most significant problem with urban renewal programs was that the slums were simply demolished rather than rebuilt. The government provided housing for the people who were displaced at an upsettingly slow rate or not at all. The displacement of people is the main reason that urban renewal can be defined as unjust. Title I required that people displaced by its projects be given support in finding new and affordable housing; however, the federal government relied on local agencies to run the relocation programs, and most of these local agencies exaggerated their successes.⁷³ By March 31, 1961, twelve years after the passage of Title 1, only twenty-five urban renewal projects had been completed in the entire country, while many projects were left unfinished, and families waited to be relocated.⁷⁴ No real progress was made because conditions in the slums of New York, for example, were getting worse much faster than could be

⁷¹ Flint, *Wrestling With Moses*, 23.

⁷² Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Random House Inc. 1961), 270-271.

⁷³ Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 82.

⁷⁴ Teaford, *Metropolitan Revolution*, 121.

countered by the construction of public housing to relocate displaced people during slum clearance.⁷⁵ The amount of new housing built simply could not keep pace with the rate of slum clearance. Scott Greer, author of *Urban Renewal and American Cities* argues, “the Urban Renewal Agency... has succeeded in materially reducing the supply of low-cost housing in American cities.”⁷⁶ Urban renewal projects did not only fail to accomplish their goals; they succeeded in creating the opposite result.

In New York, no one was responsible for making sure that the new developments were better than what they had replaced.⁷⁷ Other cities took direct responsibility for those people who were displaced during their urban renewal programs, but New York allowed this responsibility to fall to the developers. Developers do not have to worry about being reelected; therefore, because of this shift in responsibility fewer families actually received assistance in relocating.⁷⁸ The failure of the New York government to regulate the relocation of displaced persons further implicated them as a perpetrator of environmental injustice. An article in *The New York Amsterdam News*, “Reveal City’s Failure in Housing Allocation,” reported on the failure of urban renewal programs in New York City. New York had consistently failed to provide housing for the people displaced by slum clearance; in fact, no relocation program was in place. Slum clearance had displaced 45,000 people in the eight years preceding the article. This huge number illustrates the scale of the environmental injustice inflicted on communities by the New York government.

⁷⁵ “Jury Finds City Housing Deteriorating,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, February 7, 1953, 19.

⁷⁶ Scott Greer, *Urban Renewal*, 3.

⁷⁷ Flint, *Wrestling With Moses*, 23.

⁷⁸ Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 70.

Even when new housing was provided, it was too expensive for the majority of displaced persons to afford to live in. Many people were not even aware that they were eligible for assistance with relocation, because they were not properly informed of this legal right.⁷⁹ Displacing people failed to improve the slums because forty percent of displaced persons moved to areas that were marked for slum clearance, making those areas even more crowded.⁸⁰ Slum clearance did nothing to address the larger societal problems that were responsible for creating negative conditions in slums. The discriminatory practices of segregation in housing and labor previously explained in the historical background were not addressed. Instead of using its funding to help improve older working class neighborhoods, the government choose fund their demolition.⁸¹

Slum clearance programs disproportionately affected African Americans. In January of 1953, *The New York Amsterdam News* reported, “Some 27 per cent of non-farm homes of non-whites were dilapidated as compared to 5.4 per cent for whites.”⁸² This discrepancy indicates that slum clearance is a form of environmental racism. Greer argues that by 1965 almost seventy percent of neighborhoods destroyed by urban renewal were predominantly African American.⁸³ Non-whites continued to live in these slum areas that were cleared, while whites and African Americans with higher incomes moved to the suburbs to escape the poor living conditions in the city.⁸⁴ Sammie Abdullah Abott,

⁷⁹ Lowe, *Cities in a Race with Time*, 82.

⁸⁰ “Reveal City’s Failure in Housing Allocation,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, December 19, 1953, 2.

⁸¹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 227.

⁸² “See Race Suffering if Housing Program is Dropped by Ike,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, January 10, 1953, 4.

⁸³ Greer, *Urban Renewal*, 151.

⁸⁴ Suburbs at this time were highly segregated and only whites were able to move out of the slums and into these areas. Levittown is the prime example of this phenomenon

publicity director of the Emergency Committee on the Transportation Crisis, makes an important point about race and slum clearance programs:

If an individual white racist, bigot, destroyed an individual Negro's home by dynamite, he would be universally condemned by the officials, the press, and the public, but when a governing body, be it Congress or a city council, promulgates a policy of urban freeway or urban renewal and unleashed a set of bulldozers to drive thousands of families from their homes, demolishing established integrated communities, then only victims object.⁸⁵

It is important to implicate society, as well as individuals, in the racist and environmentally unjust policy of urban renewal.

known as "white flight." There were African American suburbs, but it was generally not as easy for blacks to move to these areas as it was for whites. Mortgages were much more expensive in African American suburbs than white suburbs.

⁸⁵ Helen Leavitt, *Superhighway*, 104.

Chapter 2: Suburbanization and the Cross Bronx Expressway

The Planning of the Expressway

The Cross Bronx Expressway is the most expensive highway that has ever been built in United States history, and all of the money that paid for the it, much of it coming from the federal government, funded a project that today can be defined as environmentally unjust.⁸⁶ The highway was first proposed as a way to transport people to and from the suburbs in 1948, and construction was not completed until 1972. Arthur S. Hodgkiss reported for the *New York Times* in 1952, “The Cross-Bronx Expressway... provides a direct route across the Bronx from [the George] Washington Bridge to The Hutchinson River Parkway at Eastern Boulevard.”⁸⁷ The highway ran directly through Crotona Park, an important gathering place for the Bronx community, and it displaced 1400 families. This was not the only path for the highway that the city considered; an alternate route was proposed to the city that would have avoided destroying such a highly populated area, but this alternate route was rejected.⁸⁸ One has to speculate that if there had been a purely white middle class population living in path of the highway, the city would have chosen the alternate route; therefore the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway can be referred to as an act of environmental racism.

⁸⁶ Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Rise and Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 886.

⁸⁷ Arthur S. Hodgkiss, “Parkways for the City,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 1952, 3.

⁸⁸ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 850; Flint, *Wrestling with Moses*, 22.

Robert Moses

Robert Moses was an extremely powerful man who played an important role in orchestrating the development of New York City. Moses is integral to New York's history and has been studied by countless scholars. In the historical literature, Moses seems to embody all of the evils of urban renewal. Jeanne R. Lowe argues, "No single person contributed more through his works and his methods to New York City's problems."⁸⁹ Robert Moses designed for the famous displays of the 1939 New York World's Fair. The future depicted in these displays is one full of expansive highways and bridges, but lacking public transportation in any form.⁹⁰ This is the sort of future Moses worked to create. He was an idealist, and believed that by sweeping the city clean and rebuilding the city he was making important improvements.⁹¹ Historians seeking to defend Moses point out that Moses's world's fair exhibits represented national trends toward growth and towards replacing public transportation with highways; however, the World's Fair had a huge impact in setting the trend for the goals of the nation's development.

The Cross-Bronx Expressway was the brainchild of Robert Moses. Moses commanded a huge amount of power within New York City. Hilary Ballon asserts, "Moses had more concentrated power over the physical development of New York than any man had ever had or is ever likely to have again."⁹² He was chairman of the committee on Slum Clearance until 1960.⁹³ Jeanne Lowe argues, "elected officials had been giving him chunks of the city for years," and by

⁸⁹ Jeanne R. Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 48.

⁹⁰ Owen D. Gutfreund, "Rebuilding New York in the Auto Age: Robert Moses and His Highways," in *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, ed. Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 89; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 248.

⁹¹ Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, 294.

⁹² Ballon, "Robert Moses," 97.

⁹³ Ballon, "Robert Moses," 94.

1948 he had no less than seven public titles, many of which were permanent positions.⁹⁴ This concentration of power in the hands of one person makes it easier for environmental injustices to occur, because one person is able to act in their own self-interests without taking into account the needs of the communities facing the injustices.

Moses's self-interests were aligned with the goal of progress. His actions did not indicate a deep respect for the people whose lives and property stood in the way of the completion of his goals. Kenneth T. Jackson, a scholar who studies Robert Moses, argues, "Moses was notoriously fond of bulldozers and ever anxious to clear away 'slums' and to replace them with new buildings."⁹⁵ Moses trivialized the protests organized by the local people. His commitment to progress blinded him to the harm that he contributed to, harm that would today be considered environmental injustice.

Moses was overtly racist. He vehemently opposed all civil rights legislation, was nervous about the possibility of a civil rights movement in New York City, did not hire black people to work on his construction projects, and supported segregated housing. As scholars have argued, his racism was certainly typical of the time, but this does not excuse his racist actions. According to historian Martha Biondi, "part of Moses' abuse of power was his ability to project his personal biases onto the metropolitan landscape."⁹⁷ Moses believed that the theories and practices of Urban Renewal would help him create a better city. Hilary Ballon summarizes

⁹⁴ Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 52.

⁹⁵ Kenneth T. Jackson, "Robert Moses and the Rise of New York: The Power Broker in Perspective," in *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, ed. Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 69.

⁹⁷ Martha Biondi, "Robert Moses, Race, and the Limits of an Activist State," in *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, ed. Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 116-117, quotation on 117.

Moses' extreme views on the subject by stating, "For Moses, the slums were like war-torn Dresden – dead structures to be demolished before new life could flourish."⁹⁸ His strong belief in this theory and his racist attitudes allowed him to justify his actions in the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway.

Moses had the power to advance these policies. Joel Schwartz, a Moses historian, argues that Robert Moses offered private investors, "Virtually every public subsidy his legal draftsmen could lay their hands on" in support of Urban Renewal projects.⁹⁹ In other cities, a panel of citizens ran the Slum Clearance Committees, but Moses prohibited citizen participation on his panel.¹⁰⁰ Citizen participation in decision-making is a necessary component of environmental justice. In 1961, the *New York Times* reported that Moses was fed up with "the folly and ultimate cost of interminable official delays, postponements and evasion which continue to bedevil the building of the Lower Manhattan and Mid-Manhattan expressways."¹⁰¹ One of the main reasons for these delays was that the people whose houses were being demolished by these highways were trying to block the building of the roads, but Moses did not take the time to even consider or respond to the demands of the protestors. Any time that politics interfered with a project of Moses', he expressed his anger and did not deal directly with any of the problems with his proposals.¹⁰² As will be discussed in the following section, when he was told that there was a possible alternate route for the Cross-Bronx Expressway, he dismissed it as a ploy to anger the residents, and he did not evaluate it as a possible option.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Ballon, "Robert Moses," 108.

⁹⁹ Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, 300.

¹⁰⁰ Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 73.

¹⁰¹ "City to Complete Road Begun in '39," *The New York Times*, January 16, 1961, 29.

¹⁰² "Moses Threatens to Halt Bronx Job," *New York Times*, March 12, 1953), 29.

¹⁰³ Charles G. Bennet, "Lyons Give Reply to 'Pooh-Bah' Moses," *The New York Times*, March 13, 1953, 29.

Moses avoided dealing with objections by leaving very little room for transparency or outside opinions in his dealings. Helen Leavitt writes of Moses, “he warned the urban areas with their tacky land acquisition problems would be the biggest headache, and he suggested securing right-of-way years in advance to assure that plenty of roads could be constructed free from legal entanglements of removing property owners.”¹⁰⁴ The public was only informed about Moses’ projects at the very last minute after many stages of planning had already been completed.¹⁰⁵ At no point, even when many people were suffering from the loss of their homes, did Moses admit that there was a downside to his policies. He never expressed sympathy to the people he made victims. He also refused to listen to the complaints of those who objected to his policies.¹⁰⁶ Even after the destruction that Moses’ projects had caused came to fruition, Moses still maintained the ruse that he had not caused harm to anyone. Moses is quoted as saying, “The city... has treated every family involved in a considerate, humane manner.”¹⁰⁷ Even if the term had existed, Moses would not have acknowledged the environmental injustice of his policies.

The Neighborhood Fights Back

Although the struggle against the Cross-Bronx Expressway was primarily a struggle against displacement, it can be defined as an environmental justice struggle today. From the moment the idea of the Cross-Bronx Expressway was known to the community in the Bronx, people had protested against it.¹⁰⁸ The Jewish community living in the Bronx was central to the movement to block the highway. Lillian Edelstein

¹⁰⁴ Leavitt, *Superhighway-Superhoax*, 48.

¹⁰⁵ Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 71.

¹⁰⁶ Gutfreund, “Rebuilding New York,” 93.

¹⁰⁷ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 861.

¹⁰⁸ “Bronx Residents Lose Road Fight,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 1954, 24.

was a Jewish housewife who was outraged at the possibility of being displaced from her home. She threw herself into the cause and printed handbills, wrote to officials, and spoke out against the expressway on the radio. Edelstein helped the East Tremont Neighborhood Association, an organization of homeowners in the area, to represent the community in the struggle against the expressway and became the leader of it.

The housewives in the community led the protest as has been common in environmental justice struggles such as Love Canal. Many of their husbands worked during the day and did not have time to go to city hall and protest, and some had government jobs that did not allow them to protest. The women were not inhibited in this way and led the movement against the expressway. Socialists and Zionists joined the housewives in fighting the expressway because the struggle fit in well with their philosophical beliefs.¹⁰⁹

The protest against the expressway continued until the bitter end. When the residents lost the battle the *New York Times* reported, “By its action the board overrode vociferous and sustained efforts by opposing property owners to persuade the city to shift the route of the section.”¹¹⁰ The efforts of the residents proved not to be enough to alter the opinions of the power and progress hungry city officials.

The central goal of the protesters was to convince the city to build the expressway along an alternate route that did not run through their community. This alternate route went through the Third Avenue Transit Depot. The transit company asked Robert Moses to build the highway through the Bronx community because they did not want to take the economic hit that would result from the loss of the transit depot. The transit company had more sway with Robert Moses

¹⁰⁹ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 863-878.

¹¹⁰ “Bronx Residents Lose Road Fight,” 24.

than the community in the Bronx, because the transit company had financial power in the city that the neighborhood association lacked. The protesters were entirely of the sway the transit depot had with the local government, and the alternative route seemed like common sense. The protestors believed that a community where people lived would be considered more important than a transit depot, and the protesters were confident that they could convince the city to pursue the alternate route. Today, their cause would be labeled a typical environmental justice struggle, but during the time that the philosophy of urban renewal was dominant, they were seen as a radical group making unreasonable demands.

The *New York Times* reported in 1954, “Their chief argument has been that they would be unable to obtain new homes and that the city would not assist them in getting replacement homes equal to the old ones.”¹¹¹ The expressway seemed to be violating the third part of the right to life, liberty, and property, and although they would not call it such, the expressway was exposing them to environmental injustice. The city promised replacement housing but was not held to any standard for that housing. As will be shown in future sections, the fears of the residents turned into a sad reality. In 1955, Joseph C. Ingraham reported for the *New York Times* on the fears of the residents: “The groups charged that the reconstruction would drive business from the East Bronx, the elevated highway would be an ‘eyesore,’ and the project would make a blighted area of one of the few city sections earmarked for modern industrial use.”¹¹² The fears of the residents were entirely justified.

¹¹¹ “Bronx Residents Lose Road Fight,” 24.

¹¹² Josphey C. Ingraham, “East Bronx to get an Elevated Road,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 1955, 25.

Why Robert Moses Won the Battle

The Cross Bronx Expressway is one of the iconic examples in history of a politician completely disregarding the needs of a community. It was made possible because of eminent domain, “the power of the government to take private property for some public use.” This principle was upheld with the 2005 Supreme Court Case *Kelo v. City of New London*. Through its support of this principle, the government has historically favored the desire for economic development over the right of displaced peoples.¹¹³ Anthony Flint, a Moses scholar, explains, “the Cross Bronx Expressway represented Moses’s dominance over neighborhood objections in that period, and the project is remembered to this day as a case study in brutally overriding citizen participation in roadway planning.”¹¹⁴ The concerns of the residents were ignored, and the expressway was built.

One central reason that the East Tremont Neighborhood Association did not succeed is that the residents of the Bronx who were waging this battle were working-class people. The campaign was entirely based on “woman-power” and did not have the capital to wage a successful campaign. They were unable to pay the legal fees needed to challenge the decision of the city in court, so they were forced accept their defeat.¹¹⁵ This struggle was very localized and did not generate support from those who would not be directly affected by the Cross-Bronx Expressway, even among those dealing with similar issues. Outside support, especially of an economic nature, can be very helpful in an environmental justice campaign as will be seen in the discussion of the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ David Schutz, *Evicted!: Property Rights and Eminent Domain in America* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009), 1-2, quotation on 1.

¹¹⁴ Flint, “Wrestling With Moses,” 142.

¹¹⁵ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 868.

¹¹⁶ See the Chapter 2 case study on the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike.

Government corruption prevented the residents from achieving their goal, which today can be seen as achieving basic environmental justices. The Cross-Bronx Expressway was the pet project of Robert Moses. Moses was involved in corrupt dealings with other city officials to sway them to vote against the alternate route for the expressway. Another city official had a relative who owned property on the alternative route, and Moses valued his personal connections over the lives and property of the working class people living in the Bronx. Robert Caro argues in *The Power Broker*, “Neighborhood feelings, urban planning considerations, cost, aesthetics, common humanity, common sense – none of these mattered in laying out the routes of New York’s great roads. The only consideration that mattered was Robert Moses’ will.” This corruption meant that the residents fighting what would be considered an environmental justice struggle were not working within a fair system and did not have much of a chance of succeeding to begin with.¹¹⁷

The resident group had very limited access to the decision making process, which greatly hindered their environmental justice struggle. They were never able to set up a meeting with Robert Moses himself in order to express their views to the person with the real power.¹¹⁹ The mayor allowed the residents to attend the meetings dealing with the Cross-Bronx Expressway, but they did not receive any further support.¹²⁰ Hilary Ballon points out that, “there was no transparent bidding process of established procedure to submit redevelopment proposals.”¹²¹ Government corruption kept the group from receiving adequate press coverage of the planning of the expressway. The city would not allow a reporter the residents had brought into the hearing

¹¹⁷ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 871-878, quotation on 878.

¹¹⁹ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 863.

¹²⁰ Charles G. Bennet, “Bronx Expressway Dispute has Estimate Board Fuming,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1953, 1.

¹²¹ Ballon, “Robert Moses,” 103.

on the expressway.¹²² Robert Moses did everything in his power to maintain control over the press coverage of his projects.¹²³ The white press tended to avoid the human issues associated with the expressway, and the black press ignored it altogether.¹²⁴ The residents would have needed to have access to the decision making process and the media in order to have their voice heard. Eminent domain, localization of the strike, government corruption, an atmosphere of growth frenzy, lack of access to the decision-making process, and lack of press support all contributed to the failure of what today can be considered an environmental justice struggle.

The Building of the Cross Bronx Expressway

The physical destruction of buildings to make room for the expressway created myriad problems for the South Bronx. The Cross-Bronx Expressway left two and a half miles of “desolation and destruction” in its path when it passed through the community.¹²⁶ Bernard Stengren described how the destruction took place in *The New York Times*: “A steel pendulum suspended by a wire cable from the boom of a crane is swung, and pieces of brick fall in a shower of dust.”¹²⁷ This description makes it clear that the building of the expressway can be labeled as an environmental injustice because the demolition caused harm to people and to the environment.

The most obvious effect of the demolition was large piles of rubble. The debris from the demolished houses was not removed from the area; it was left wherever it

¹²² Caro, *The Power Broker*, 874.

¹²³ Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 90.

¹²⁴ See Appendix II for a full discussion of the newspaper coverage of the planning and building of the Cross Bronx Expressway.

¹²⁶ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 860.

¹²⁷ Bernard Stengren, “Houses Giving Way for Roads to the George Washington Bridge,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 1958, 35.

landed after falling from a building. The foundation of a large industrial chimney was burned to make way for the expressway. Patrick A. Burns reported for *The New York Times*, “When it hit the ground a moment later it became a jumble of tan-colored bricks.”¹²⁸ As can be seen by the *New York Times* coverage, the scale of the destruction was great.

The demolition caused air pollution, mainly in the form of dust. Today, air pollution is a major environmental justice issue because minority and lower income groups suffer from disproportionate rates of respiratory disease. Eventually, everything near the construction was covered in dust. Robert Caro states, “A thick layer of gritty soot made the very air feel dirty.” Dust can contain particles that are harmful to the body and to the atmosphere. There were also worse forms of air pollution. In one place, carbon monoxide was found coming up through a gap in the ground.

With the demolition of buildings, services also left the area, and garbage collection ceased. Caro gives a graphic description of the garbage problem: “Where once apartment buildings of private homes had stood were now hills of rubble, decorated with ripped-open bags of rotting garbage that had been flung atop them.” In addition to all of the previous negative conditions, there was also horrible noise pollution from both the demolition and from the highway itself.¹²⁹ The South Bronx was unrecognizable.

During the demolition process there were various accidents that caused conditions to go from bad to worse. In addition to buildings that were deliberately destroyed, excavation work caused structural damage to a five-story apartment house, and fifteen

¹²⁸ Patrick A. Burns, “Chimney in Bronx Eased to Fall by Burning Out its Foundation,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 1956, 29.

¹²⁹ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 860 and 889, quotations on 860.

apartments had to be evacuated.¹³⁰ In a separate incident, *The New York Times* reported, “Rocks hurled by a dynamite explosion smashed windows in a five story apartment building in the Bronx yesterday morning, injuring four persons, two of them small children.”¹³¹ Construction workers were also harmed in accidents. In August of 1959, *The New York Times* reported, “A construction worker was killed yesterday when a retaining wall collapsed at the Cross Bronx Expressway Project. Six other men were trapped and injured when tons of steel, rock, wood and dirt showered down.”¹³² In November of 1958, construction workers ruptured a gas main, and Public School 70, fifty feet away, had to be evacuated. According to *The New York Times*, “Nearby stores were ordered shut, residents were told to close their windows, and smoking in the area was forbidden.”¹³³ The city’s negligence clearly showed when construction workers left dynamite unattended at a construction site, and several neighborhood kids found it and began blowing things up leading to the article title, “Dynamite Terror Spread by 8 Boys”.¹³⁴ The *New York Times* coverage of the Cross Bronx Expressway suggests that neither human lives nor the health of the natural environmental were given high priority in the building of the expressway.

¹³⁰ “105,000 Won in Suit Against the State,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 1968, 74.

¹³¹ “4 Hurt in Bronx Blast,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 1961, 7.

¹³² “Worker Killed, 6 Hurt as Wall Caves in a Bronx Road,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 1959, 45.

¹³³ “Bronx Pupil Flee Leaking Gas Main,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 1958, 21.

¹³⁴ “Dynamite Terror Spread by 8 Boys,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 1956, 32.

Assessing the Impacts of the Cross Bronx Expressway

A Functioning Community Disrupted

Slum clearance, because of highway construction or urban renewal, destroys much more than buildings. It can destroy places where a community gathers, split a community apart, and cause more affluent residents to move. Jane Jacobs sums up the detrimental effect slum clearance can have on a community by arguing,

When slum clearance enters an area... it does not merely rip out slatternly houses. It uproots the people. It tears out the churches. It destroys the local businessman. It sends the neighborhood lawyer to new offices downtown and it mangles the tight skein of community friendships and group relationships beyond repair.¹³⁵

Anthony Flint describes urban renewal by stating, “It was like a bloodletting... the planners were draining all the life from these neighborhoods.”¹³⁶ These projects were designed primarily to make huge profits for the developers involved; communities that were not dysfunctional qualified for the program because the possibility of profits was seen as much more important than the wellbeing of the neighborhoods involved or the natural environment. Some of the areas that were cleared could not be considered slums by any account.¹³⁷

Before the Cross Bronx Expressway, the Bronx did have its share of problems, mainly economic in nature; however, it was a functioning integrated community with a diverse population. Rent was affordable, apartments were nice, and there was a strong sense of community in the area. There were plenty of open spaces and parks, notably

¹³⁵ Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 137.

¹³⁶ Flint, *Wrestling With Moses*, 23.

¹³⁷ Greer, *Urban Renewal*, 153.

Crotona Park, which was clean and safe.¹³⁸ The Bronx that existed during and after the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway bore little resemblance to the Bronx that existed beforehand.

With transportation laws, “affluent citizens, people who owned houses and cars – got the benefits of federal subsidies, rather than poorer citizens without shelter and transportation.”¹³⁹ Necessities for poorer people such as public housing and transportation were not viewed as important by the federal government and did not receive the financial support that highways did. People with a lower socio-economic status had to deal with the degradation associated with suburbanization while reaping none of the benefits.

Highways destroyed the communities they went through and the natural environment. Highway builders destroyed the physical and social networks of cities while large real estate interests simultaneously directed their efforts away from cities and toward developing the suburbs. It is apparent that the federal government perpetuated this environmental injustice because highway legislation did nothing to support the building or improvement of transportation in cities; it concentrated all its support on improving transportation networks to and from the suburbs. The transportation measures of the 1950s, “undercharged motorists by a wide margin, penalizing the non-motoring majority while simultaneously inducing more and more Americans to adopt the automobile as the preferred mode of transport.”¹⁴⁰ People were not charged for the real expenses of driving their cars, and all taxpayers, even those who could not drive, were

¹³⁸ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 852-867; Evelyn Gonzalez, *The Bronx*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 1 and 109.

¹³⁹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 167.

¹⁴⁰ Gutfreund, *Twentieth-Century Sprawl*, 58.

forced to help fund these disproportionate benefits. The federal government, through the way it distributed its tax dollars, favored the building of new highways over the construction and even maintenance of public transportation, which today we realize is a more environmentally just transportation option.

The Cross Bronx Expressway destroyed the community of the South Bronx, wreaking havoc in its path. Evalyn Gonzalez, author of *The Bronx*, states, “The expressway sliced through a dozen solid, settled, densely populated neighborhoods in the borough’s western portion, destroying blocks of apartment buildings at a time when every apartment was needed.”¹⁴¹ Slum clearance destroyed many communities that were already in shambles, but the South Bronx was a functioning community, making its destruction all the more upsetting.

The loss of housing exacerbated the economic problems that already existed in these areas. 1400 families lost their homes and were left without a place to live.¹⁴² A synagogue with 3000 congregants and a Hebrew school with 500 students were razed by the Cross Bronx Expressway.¹⁴³ Voting registration dropped significantly in the Bronx while rising in the rest of the city. The displacement caused a loss of political power for the South Bronx.¹⁴⁴ Today, Kenneth Jackson refers to the Bronx as “the poster child of the depressed metropolis.” The Bronx, after the building of the expressway, is known mainly for its poverty and crime¹⁴⁵ Richard Plunz puts the construction of the highway in

¹⁴¹ Gonzalez, *The Bronx*, 116.

¹⁴² Joseph C. Ingraham, “Cross Bronx Road is Merely Two Ends,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 1954, 29; “Bronx Residents Lose Road Fight,” 24.

¹⁴³ “Yeshiva Gets \$85,000,” *The New York Times*, (August 6, 1956) 20.

¹⁴⁴ Leo Egan, “Record Vote Due in State on Nov. 8,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 1960, 1.

¹⁴⁵ Jackson, “Robert Moses,” 68.

perspective by asserting, “The entire community of Crotona Park was wiped out in order that the suburbs might be better reached by automobile.”¹⁴⁶ The building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway harmed both the natural environment and the human environment that the expressway passed through.

Crotona Park and the Loss of Green Space

One of the reasons people move to the suburbs is out of a desire for more space, specifically, more natural space. This dream rarely turned into a reality. Hayden is aware of this irony and states, “Once a suburban area is established, growth promoters usually seek greater and greater levels of density. The residents’ hope of unspoiled nature fails because open land vanishes with increased development.”¹⁴⁷ A significant result of the Cross-Bronx Expressway was the loss of green space. Green space allows a place for people to gather, a place for kids to play safely, and the trees and plants sequester carbon, improving air quality.¹⁴⁸ All of these factors promote environmental justice. Before suburbanization, streets were places where people gathered. After suburbanization, streets became a place that was designed only for the purpose of moving automobiles.¹⁴⁹ The building of the Cross Bronx Expressway destroyed many playgrounds, and they were rebuilt in areas that were unsafe because of continued

¹⁴⁶ Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, 287.

¹⁴⁷ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 9.

¹⁴⁸ Plants are autotrophs meaning that they can produce their own energy. Plants take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen during photosynthesis. Plants ability to take in carbon dioxide improves air quality and helps prevent the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere where it exacerbates climate change.

¹⁴⁹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 168.

demolition.¹⁵⁰ *The New York Times* vividly described a scene of rubble near construction for the Cross-Bronx Expressway: “The lot is in a densely occupied tenement area in a district that swarms with children now on Easter vacation. It is all but hidden in rubble, most of it rocks dug out for the base for the Cross-Bronx Expressway.”¹⁵¹ During their vacation, the kids did not have anywhere to play that was not covered in rubble.

Crotona Park was an important spot from the South Bronx community before the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. The expressway went directly through this park splitting it in two, and during construction, people were unable to access the park.¹⁵² Construction crews dug up rows of oak trees, disrupting carbon sequestration, and they left large piles of sod near construction sites supposedly for use on future city parks.¹⁵³

In April, 1961, L.O. Rothchild, a New York resident, expressed his anger about the destruction of Crotona Park and other city parks in a letter to the editor he wrote to *The New York Times*: “If this trend continues, New York will wake up some fine day to find that we have sacrificed a major part of our parks to the speed machines.”¹⁵⁴ Rothchild is obviously opposed to the proliferation of cars and realized what the building of highways was destroying. His view was far ahead of his time. The Cross Bronx Expressway not only destroyed green spaces, spaces with trees that were involved in carbon sequestration, it destroyed a gathering place that was valuable to the community and contributed to its strength.

¹⁵⁰ “Bronx Play Site Rebuilt,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 1954, 53.

¹⁵¹ “Boy, 7, Questioned, Freed in Fatal Fire,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 1956, 1.

¹⁵² L.O. Rothchild, “Diminishing Park Areas Opposed,” *The New York Times*, April 18, 1961, 36. This document is a letter to the editor written on April 10th. L.O. Rothchild is a New York resident; Caro, *The Power Broker*, 888.

¹⁵³ Stengren, “Houses Give Way,” 35.

¹⁵⁴ Rothchild, “Diminishing Park Areas Opposed,” 36.

Homelessness in the Bronx after the Building of the Expressway

It is easy to see how the conditions outlined above could lead to an atmosphere of despair. The demolition of these buildings was accompanied by a promise by the city to relocate the people that the Cross-Bronx Expressway displaced. This promise turned out to be nearly empty. The city failed to adequately relocate the people living in the Bronx thereby increasing the environmental injustice of its creation, because in addition to having to face the conditions of the construction of the expressway, people had to adjust to conditions of homelessness. John C. Teaford points out, “Adding to the indignation was the realization that much of the cleared land would remain vacant for years.”¹⁵⁵ Very little assistance was given to the residents to help them relocate, particularly to those who did not own but rented the housing they lived in.¹⁵⁶

Even the housing that was considered affordable by the city in areas affected by slum clearance was too expensive for many of the people living in these areas. It was impossible for the people living here to jump through all of the bureaucratic hoops that they would have needed to in order to obtain new housing.¹⁵⁷ The offices of Nassau Management, the company responsible for demolition and relocation, were located very far away from the Bronx, and these offices were never open when residents inquired about finding new housing.¹⁵⁸ The management staff did not have the resources needed to provide housing for all of the displaced people; even if residents had been able to reach Nassau Management, they would not have been able to receive a positive response.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Teaford, *Metropolitan Revolution*, 119.

¹⁵⁶ Flint, *Wrestling with Moses*, 143.

¹⁵⁷ Flint, *Wrestling with Moses*, 55.

¹⁵⁸ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 179.

¹⁵⁹ Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, 273.

The Cross-Bronx Expressway created a large population of homeless people who were very angry with their government for forcing them from their homes. These conditions created an atmosphere in which drugs, gangs, and prostitution flourished. Many people had nowhere else to live and no means to find housing. These people had no choice but to live with the horrendous conditions created by the expressway. In January of 1954, an editorial in the *The New York Amsterdam News* discussed the impact of slum clearance: “Speculators can sell tumbling down buildings for three and four times their value because people need places in which to live and they are desperate in their efforts to find shelter.”¹⁶⁰ The poorest of the poor gave up on trying to find affordable housing and moved into abandoned buildings where living conditions were horrendous.

Many of the white people who became homeless in the Bronx fled to the suburbs after the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway; however, this option was not available to most African Americans. Suburbs such as Levittown specifically prohibited blacks from moving there.¹⁶¹ Suburban realtors refused to show African Americans houses in the nicest areas, which they wanted to preserve as all white communities. Even though African Americans made up ten percent of the population, only one percent of government subsidized housing went to non-white people, making it very difficult for these people to move to the suburbs or buy any sort of new home.¹⁶² Jeanne B. Lowe argued in 1967, “the typical non-white family receives less for its rental dollar than the white family, whatever its income level or social position.” Although the quality of housing improved for both whites and non-whites, the gap between the qualities of

¹⁶⁰ “Behind the Housing Racket,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, January 2, 1954, 12, editorial.

¹⁶¹ Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 135.

¹⁶² Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 239.

housing of the two groups remained the same.¹⁶³ Hillary Ballon argues, “The discrimination in the housing market and the limited options available to blacks landed them in other slums, but Moses did not recognize this problem.”¹⁶⁴ Zoning laws placed limits on what sort of people could live in certain areas.¹⁶⁵ The people were remained in the Bronx were forced to live in undesirable conditions.

Living Conditions in the Housing that was Made Available

Many of the displaced persons were relocated to abandoned buildings. Landlords charged twice as much to live in these buildings as the residents had paid for their former apartments. Jewish, Irish, African-American, and Puerto Rican families crowded into these buildings together. In some buildings, thieves had torn the plumbing out of the walls in order to make money selling the metal. Housing with no plumbing leads to situations that are harmful for the environment and for the people living in them; therefore, living in abandoned buildings can be considered environmentally unjust. These buildings had no plumbing, causing human waste to accumulate. Human waste with no plumbing, in addition to being very unpleasant to live with, also can eventually leach into the soil and the groundwater and cause health problems for the people living near it.

The government abandoned the area, and services such as garbage collection ceased. The garbage piled up causing problems similar to the problems associated with human waste. In previously nice apartments,

¹⁶³ Lowe, *Cities in a Race With Time*, 237.

¹⁶⁴ Ballon, “Robert Moses,” 102.

¹⁶⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 242.

Raw garbage spilled out of broken bags across the floor. The stench of stale urine and vomit filled the nostrils. One tried to look down only enough to avoid stepping on the piles of feces, whether mercifully dried or reeking fresh – animal and human.

The people forced to live in these conditions could not find anyone to complain to. As mentioned above, Nassau management was unreachable. As is to be expected, all those with the means to leave the Bronx did so at this time, only exacerbating the move to suburbia.¹⁶⁶ Jane Jacobs comments on the injustice of the realities of slum clearance: “look what we have built with the first several billions: Low-income projects that become worse centers of delinquency, vandalism, and general social hopelessness than the slums they were supposed to replace.”¹⁶⁷ The results of the Cross-Bronx Expressway for the community of the Bronx can be referred to as environmentally unjust.

Conclusion

The building of the Cross Bronx Expressway occurred at a time when the federal government funded and promoted growth regardless of environmental justice concerns. The expressway was built during the time that the philosophies of urban renewal and slum clearance were dominant in the discourse of development. Robert Moses fits into this national trend; however, he used the immense amount of power that he had to advocate for policies that resulted in what can today be defined as environmental injustice. The Cross Bronx Expressway can be considered a form of slum clearance. There was an alternate route for the roadway that would not go through the area of the South Bronx, but the option that did displace disadvantaged communities was favored.

¹⁶⁶ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 860-861, and 880-883, quotation on 893.

¹⁶⁷ Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 4.

In the reality of slum clearance and urban renewal programs, all that was really accomplished was the creation of new slums in different locations. The people who were displaced had to live somewhere, and without help from the government they had no choice but to create new slums. All urban renewal and the slum clearance policies that accompanied it can be considered environmentally unjust because they harmed both people and the environment. Bureaucracy and governmental forces hindered the environmental justice movement against the expressway that had no hope of succeeding in the pro-growth atmosphere. The discrimination already set in place by the conditions outlined in the historical background section exacerbated what can be recognized as environmental justice problems in the Bronx in sanitation and housing.

The city showed a clear lack of regard for the people living in these areas in their actions during the building of the expressway; these actions can be labeled as environmentally unjust. The expressway destroyed the human community in the Bronx and also destroyed important green space. Segregation of the suburbs, which were viewed as the only hope to escape negative living situations, prevented African Americans from relocating after the building of the expressway. Urban renewal philosophy, combined with segregation, meant that low income and minority people were forced to bear a disproportionate burden of the negative effects of suburbanization while reaping none of the benefits. The pollution emitted during the building of the expressway, the loss of green space, and the adverse conditions that the homeless displaced people were forced to live in were harmful to both the environment and to the people living in the Bronx; therefore, the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway should be defined as an environmental injustice.

Chapter 3:

The Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike: An Environmental Justice Struggle

The Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike is best remembered for the involvement and assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The struggle originated with African American sanitation workers protesting against the horrible working conditions they faced, conditions that were based on a long history of segregation. This justification for the strike rarely included in its historical discourse. The environmental justice movement has worked to alter our concept of "environment" to include the workplace in addition to the natural environment. People spend much of their lives at work; therefore, it is important to insure that work environments are safe. The environmental justice movement has brought to light the fact that environmental racism exists in the workplace today.

African Americans have a thirty-seven percent greater chance of suffering from an occupational injury and a twenty percent greater chance of dying from one, but it can be hard to prove that environmental exposure occurred at work. For example, if a worker is exposed to carcinogens and develops lung cancer, employers will often argue that the worker must have been smoking.¹⁶⁸ Often, workers will not connect illnesses with exposure to toxics at work. The Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike is not usually

¹⁶⁸ Beverly H. Wright, and Robert D. Bullard, "The Effects of Occupational Injury, Illness, and Disease on the Health Status of Black Americans," in *Toxic Struggle The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*, ed. by Richard Hofrichter. (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah P, 2002), 154-157.

considered an environmental struggle; however, in retrospect, it can be defined as such. Environmental concerns were central to the strike, and its outcomes were beneficial to both the workers involved and to the environment; therefore, the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike can be considered a part of the environmental justice movement.

The What, the When, and the Who of the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike

Before exploring the environmental motivations and consequences of the strike, it is necessary to provide a brief synopsis of its events. The negotiations were legally complicated, and there was a complex relationship between the different groups involved in the movement, so even a brief synopsis will need to be lengthy. The strike was initiated in 1968 when two men were brutally crushed like garbage by an out-of-date garbage truck.¹⁶⁹ The Local Chapter 1733 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees with the support of the international union initially organized the strike.¹⁷⁰

900 out of the 1100 sanitation workers joined in the strike, and 2500 tons of garbage was left uncollected each day resulting in the sanitation problems that were indicative of what I have labeled as environmental injustice during the Great Migration and the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway. The garbage was left uncollected because the city provided no just way of collecting and disposing of it during the

¹⁶⁹ Joan Turner Beifuss, *At the River I Stand* (New York: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1989), 30.

¹⁷⁰ Douglas E. Kneeland, "Memphis Facing a Negro Boycott," *The New York Times*, February 26, 1968, 27.

strike.¹⁷¹ City officials declared that the strike was illegal, because public workers did not have the right to strike. The city had the right to deny workers benefits during the strike.¹⁷² The city began its own garbage collection program that had to be enforced by the police because of resistance from the strikers.¹⁷³

The daily activities of the strike included picketing, marches, and mass meetings. In her history of the strike, Joan Turner Beifuss asserted that throughout the strike, the city council was so divided that it “found itself moving forward on one foot and backward on the other.”¹⁷⁴ The political power struggles preexisting in the city made it very difficult for the two sides to come to any sort of agreement and for any kind of environmental justice struggle to succeed. The mayor had the strong support of the majority of the white community, and “the strike... polarized the city along racial lines.”¹⁷⁵ The strike was both a labor struggle and a struggle for racial equality. The strike became confrontational on February 24, when the police met a peaceful march by the strikers and their supporters using force and mace.¹⁷⁶ This event marked a turning point in the strike in which the black community mobilized further, and the white community became more nervous and fearful.¹⁷⁷

The most memorable event of the strike was a huge march down the main streets of Memphis led by Martin Luther King Jr. on March 28, 1968. The strikers called for

¹⁷¹ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 20; Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc.), 105.

¹⁷² “A Garbage Strike Plagues Memphis,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1968, 34.

¹⁷³ Sylvan Fox, “Labor and Rights Race Enters a Garbage Dispute.” *New York Times*, March 24, 1968, E10.

¹⁷⁴ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 143.

¹⁷⁵ Sylvan Fox, “Memphis is Beset by Racial Tension,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1968, 28; Fox, “Labor and Rights Race Enters a Garbage Dispute,” E10.

¹⁷⁶ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 202.

¹⁷⁷ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 99.

everyone to walk out of work to show support.¹⁷⁸ Civil rights activists traveled great distances to Memphis to participate in the march, and there could have been up to 25,000 people present.¹⁷⁹ There were some white in attendance, mainly union representatives, the clergy, and students.¹⁸⁰ The march quickly became chaotic; students rioted and some participants took advantage of the situation and looted and vandalized the area.¹⁸¹ The police responded by spraying mace, beating participants, and even shooting into the crowd. King was forced to flee for his life.¹⁸²

In April of the strike, the ministers' association tried a new economic tactic: a boycott. Minister Jesse L. Jackson was involved in the boycott and stated, "The purpose of this is to make the white community realize it too has a stake in seeing that justice is done here."¹⁸³ Unfortunately, the white community shifted their business to the suburbs; therefore, the lack of black consumers during the boycott did not present a severe

¹⁷⁸ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 127.

¹⁷⁹ James Evans, "King to Ignore Memphis March Injunction," *Daily Defender*, Chicago April 4, 1968, 6; Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 292.

¹⁸⁰ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 213.

¹⁸¹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 347.

¹⁸² McCann L. Reid, "New Kind of Militancy In Memphis," *Daily Defender*, Chicago March 25, 1968, 5. The chaos at the strike was a result of the tensions that had evolved between the groups planning the strike. COME failed to facilitate productive communication between the older black leaders and the militant youth movement that formed soon after the strike began. Sixty-four people were treated for injuries after the march, and merchants in downtown Memphis suffered from \$400,000 worth of damage. Police shot large numbers of strikes in the back. This evidence indicates that the police shootings were not entirely in self-defense. 4000 men came from the National Guard to help restore order, martial law was declared, and a curfew was put in place. 16-year-old Larry Payne was the only casualty of the march. A policeman shot him because he was allegedly carrying a knife, but evidence suggests that he was unarmed. For more information on this march see Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 245-347; Evans, "King to Ignore," 6; Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 383; "U.S. to Probe Cop Killing of Memphis Youth," *Daily Defender* (Chicago April 1, 1968): 1.

¹⁸³ "Local Minister to Lead Planned Memphis Boycott," *Daily Defender*, April 2, 1968, 1.

economic challenge.¹⁸⁴ As in was seen in the previous chapter, suburbanization allowed people living in the suburbs to feel disconnected from urban issues. The strategic planning of the march to coincide with Easter shopping improved the effectiveness of the boycott.¹⁸⁵ The strikers did not have enough economic pull in the community to wage an effective environmental justice struggle in this way. After the destruction of property during the march, the boycott began to have more of an effect, and the downtown businesses began supporting the strikers.¹⁸⁶

Of course the moment in the strike that everyone remember, but may not associate with the strike is the assassination of Martin Luther King. The assassination had a profound effect on the strike, but in the historical literature it tends to overwhelm the actual concerns of the workers and the nuances of the strike. Some participants remained committed to King's theories of non-violence, but others turned to more demonstrative tactics and rioted in the streets. Some strike supporters staged a hunger strike at the city council building and vowed not to leave until the strike had been resolved. A memorial was organized entitled "Memphis Cares" that became the successful peaceful march that King had been working towards.¹⁸⁷ After King's death, the Governor of Tennessee finally intervened in the strike, and President Johnson sent a representative from the department of labor to mediate. Finally, after four strenuous months, a resolution was reached that included the strikers' core demands.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Fox, "Memphis is Beset by Racial Tension," 28.

¹⁸⁵ "NAACP to Picket Garbage Trucks." *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 16, 1968, 1.

¹⁸⁶ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 284.

¹⁸⁷ Beifuss, *At The River I Stand*, 304, 323, and 343.

¹⁸⁸ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 468 and 489.

The Major Actors in the Strike and Their Goals

The most obvious player in the strike was the union, both the local union of the sanitation workers and the international union. Both union movements and environmental justice movements want better working conditions for their workers; therefore, it makes sense that it was the local union that was integral in organizing the strike. The first pamphlets of the strike merely called for better treatment at work and did not mention race. Given how racially divided the town was over the strike, and the racial identity of the workers, the strike inevitably became racialized.

The next group to become involved in the strike was the Memphis chapter of the NAACP with 11,502 members.¹⁸⁹ The chapter had already built up a strong network before the strike began. The NAACP has played such a significant role in Memphis that historians consider it an “NAACP town”¹⁹⁰ This chapter advocated non-violence but was not opposed to direct action tactics. On February 24th, after the police had maced protesters, 150 black ministers came together and formed COME, Community on the Move for Racial Equality headed by Reverend James Lawson.¹⁹¹ The ministers took over the organizing role from the NAACP, continued the policy of non-violence, and supported the involvement of Martin Luther King.

There was a fourth group that was struggling for racial equality at this time that was incorporated into the strike: the youth. At the end of February, the strike organizers realized that they needed to incorporate the youth if they were going to build an effective

¹⁸⁹ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 48-49.

¹⁹⁰ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge American in the King Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 706.

¹⁹¹ Steve Estes, *I am a Man* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 138.

movement. Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith started the Black Organizing Project (BOP) more commonly known as the Invaders.¹⁹² The Invaders were not opposed to the use of violence. They frequently came into conflict with the other groups involved in the strike. These groups had such different tactics and goals that trying to create something that resembled a unified movement proved incredibly difficult. More recent examples have shown that it is very difficult to conduct an environmental justice struggle without unity within the movement.

The Why

Conditions Facing the Sanitation Workers in 1968

Sanitation worker was one of the least sought after occupations in Memphis in the 1960s, partially because of the conditions that can today be labeled as environmental injustices that they faced at work. Ninety percent of the city's sanitation workers were African American.¹⁹³ Sanitation jobs were dead end jobs; they offered no hope for advancement that allowed workers to move up the socioeconomic ladder.¹⁹⁴ In the 1960s, the job market in Memphis was still highly segregated. African Americans were unable to find high paying jobs and were forced to work at degrading, low paying, and dangerous jobs such as sanitation work.¹⁹⁵ There were only three African Americans on the city council, and whites were the heads of all thirty-four of the city departments, leaving this demographic very little influence over city politics and polices.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 237 and 251.

¹⁹³ Fox, "Memphis is Best by Racial Tension," 28.

¹⁹⁴ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 25.

¹⁹⁵ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 3.

¹⁹⁶ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 57; Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 143.

Michael K. Honey, author of a history of the strike, argued, “The sanitation workers existed in a netherworld between the plantation and the modern urban economy.”¹⁹⁷ Economic and social conditions made it impossible for the workers to fully incorporate themselves into modern society. With the mechanization of agriculture at the turn of the century, former sharecroppers moved to Memphis in search of employment. The city benefited from this cheap labor, and many “dirty” jobs became “black” jobs. Steve Estes, author of *I am a Man*, argues, “Low wages and poor working conditions were a direct result of racial divisions in the workplace.”¹⁹⁸ The negative treatment of workers evolved out of a plantation-based caste system of employment that was very much constructed along racial lines. Segregation in the workplace in Memphis can be considered an environmental injustice because African Americans were forced to work in “dirty” jobs since they had no other options for employment. This segregation was the continuation of a trend set in place by the Great Migration. These conditions were not limited to Memphis, and the sanitation strike became a symbol of the quest for dignified employment for African Americans all over the United States.

The working conditions the Sanitation workers endured can only be described as environmentally unjust. Sanitation work was dirty, dangerous, and degrading. Garbage collection was very different in the 1960s in Memphis than it is in integrated cities today. Residents were not required to bring their garbage to the curb; this was the responsibility of the sanitation workers. Honey describes, “Garbage lay in cans without any covering, rotting in the Memphis sun.”¹⁹⁹ There is no evidence that the workers had to deal with

¹⁹⁷ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 53.

¹⁹⁸ Estes, *I am a Man*, 133.

¹⁹⁹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 58.

anything toxic, but adequate laws governing toxic waste disposal did not exist in 1968. The workers were forced to come into direct contact with the garbage, which caused them to be associated with all things dirty in the eyes of society.

This close contact with the garbage posed a serious health risk. One sanitation worker, Taylor Rogers, recalled, “those tubs had holes in them, and that stuff would leak all over you.”²⁰⁰ Up until the mid-1960s, there were no trucks involved in garbage collection, and the sanitation workers transported the garbage on their shoulders.²⁰¹ Thereafter, garbage was transported in trucks, but the sanitation workers still had to transport the garbage to the trucks.²⁰² The conditions that can today be defined as environmental injustices that the sanitation workers faced were overt and resulted from the segregation of labor.

The city refused to provide the workers with anything that protected them from potential toxics in the garbage.²⁰³ They were not given even basic things such as gloves to protect their hands, uniforms, which are now considered standard for garbage collectors, or even a place to shower after exposure.²⁰⁴ White workers would have faced similar conditions in earlier decades, but by 1968 there this kind of neglect of workers would have been considered unacceptable by white workers. Given this close exposure, it can be assumed that the workers came into direct contact with toxic substances at some point in their careers. The workers may not have realized that they had been exposed. As a result of these conditions, the concept of safety became central to the grievances of

²⁰⁰ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 277.

²⁰¹ Estes, *I am a Man*, 133.

²⁰² Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 1.

²⁰³ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 224.

²⁰⁴ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 1.

the workers. These safety problems presented what we would today consider an environmental justice concern.

In addition to the less obvious environmental concerns, there were some very obvious safety concerns that were also environmentally unjust. The death of two sanitation workers because of outdated safety equipment ignited the strike. They were crushed by the garbage crushing mechanism, because the stop button was located outside of the truck. This kind of technology was being phased out in other cities because of safety concerns.²⁰⁵ The city was not willing to invest in modernizing the “ancient equipment” that the workers had to use, because they did not view the sanitation workers as an important part of society.²⁰⁶ Grievances had piled up about this terrible equipment long before the sanitation strike began. Historians tend to view the strike as an isolated incident, but it is important to realize that concerns over working conditions had been building in Memphis for years. There was another strike in 1966 that failed because of an injunction.²⁰⁷ At the beginning of the 1968 strike, the sanitation workers had an existing network of labor activism that served as a valuable asset to the strike.²⁰⁸

The desire for a safe working environment and respect for the work that they do was at the core of the demands of the striking workers. In the newspaper articles at the time, and in the literature written after, the desire for recognition of the union and better wages is emphasized. Safety demands of the workers are often not included in the historical literature; however demands that relate to environmental justice were present from the beginning of the struggle. It was a safety issue that resulted in the death of the

²⁰⁵ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 30.

²⁰⁶ Estes, *I am a Man*, 133.

²⁰⁷ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 73 and 102.

²⁰⁸ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 706.

workers that sparked the strike. The workers called for better equipment and adequate safety provisions.²⁰⁹ In the early negotiations, the sanitation workers emphasized the need for an official safety program. These demands faded into the background as the strike became politicized and labor and racial groups vied for control; however, environmental concerns are important to both of these interests.

These two groups were fighting for the same thing; however, the way in which they framed the movement and the tactics they used were drastically different. Despite the internal differences in the movement, safety issues remained a part of the strike until the end even though they were talked about less frequently than racial issues. One demand that did remain with the strikers until the end of the strike is the settlement of grievances.²¹⁰ Then as now, having a fair procedure of grievance settlement is very important because it gives victims of environmental harm an outlet to obtain justice. In this way, the strike was successful in improving environmental conditions for the sanitation workers.

Garbage as a Symbol in the Sanitation Strike

The garbage itself played a symbolic role in the strike. The most telling sign of what side of the strike someone was on came from whether or not they took their garbage can to the curb. Whites took their garbage out to the curb to help the city, and African Americans who supported the striking workers left their garbage in piles as a symbol of

²⁰⁹ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 102.

²¹⁰ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 33 and 83.

support or disposed of it in other ways.²¹¹ There is something inherently symbolic about garbage. It is immediately associated with filth and grime, making it a prime symbol for environmental injustices. Garbage poses real health concerns, which became disproportionately dumped on the African American community during the strike when the garbage was only collected from white neighborhoods.

The symbol of garbage provided a justification for the strike. Chiapa, a union representative, said at a city council meeting, “They are saying they don’t want to pick up stinking garbage for starvation wages. Is that a crime?”²¹² The injustice of having to deal with garbage was prevalent in the rhetoric of the strike. King said in one of his speeches in Memphis, “We don’t have wall-to-wall carpets but so often we do end up with wall-to-wall rats and roaches.”²¹³ King emphasized the economic and environmental injustice facing the black community in Memphis, and garbage became a symbol of this injustice.

For many middle and upper class African Americans in Memphis, “the sanitation workers had always been ubiquitous symbols of racial servitude from whom they sharply distinguished themselves.”²¹⁴ They saw the work of collecting garbage as degrading job. These African Americans believed that they had struggled to reach their higher position so that they would no longer need to deal with issues such as the ones facing the striking

²¹¹ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 193. White people began to serve as their own garbage collectors, and although short in supply they were able to pick up most of the garbage because they ignored the needs of African Americans for garbage disposal. People who supported the mayor in the strike donated their personal trucks to be used for the purpose of collecting garbage. It is important to remember that the Mayor declared the strike illegal when judging the actions of the whites in Memphis.

²¹² “Bargaining is Denied to Labor,” *The Memphis Press Scimitar* (February 13, 1968):

1.

²¹³ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 300.

²¹⁴ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 208.

workers; consequently, they sought to distance themselves from the strike. Despite the feelings of these individual wealthy blacks, the community empathized with the garbage men because of their occupational hazards, which were clearly inhumane and environmentally unjust. The strikers even gained some empathy and support from the white community.²¹⁵

The strikers incorporated garbage and its symbolic nature into their tactics of their environmental justice struggle. When the strike began, the sanitation workers traveled their normal collection routes, but instead of collecting garbage, they distributed pamphlets explaining the strike.²¹⁶ They used the garbage route as a symbol to organize support at the grassroots level. This tactic is similar to grassroots mobilization tactics used by the modern day environmental justice movement. The strikers also used garbage as a direct action tactic. Striking workers threatened to bring buckets of garbage to city hall and dump them during negotiations on February 22.²¹⁷ This action was highly symbolic, because in addition to emphasizing the role of garbage in the strike, it also described how the strike supporters felt about the city councils' negotiations. A common act of civil disobedience was to take the garbage from white homes or businesses that had brought out to the curb and dump it.²¹⁸ This action made it more difficult for the city to collect the garbage and maintain order, but it also had a symbolic element.

Taking the symbol of garbage to a higher level, some people set fire to their trash not only dispose of it, but also as a sign of protest. During the strike, it was not unusual

²¹⁵ Kneeland, "Memphis Facing a Negro Boycott," 27.

²¹⁶ Joseph Sweat, "Loeb Ultimatum Hurlled in Strike," *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis February 13, 1968, 1.

²¹⁷ "A Bucket of Garbage," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 23, 1968, 6; Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 195.

²¹⁸ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 313.

for there to be between fifty and seventy calls a night reporting fires.²¹⁹ There were also more extreme expressions of direct action. During a march on February 25, a striker ran up and down the lines of marchers asking them to grab garbage from the side of the road and throw it into the streets.²²⁰ The most extreme use of garbage as a symbol came when Reverend Samuel Kyles of the NAACP called for people who supported the strike to lie down in front of the garbage trucks that the city still operated.²²¹ He wanted people to literally lay down their lives in order to make a symbolic point.

The symbol of garbage played out in the white community in Memphis. There was a very intense fear of disease and filth that filled the newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor.²²² The white community had an idealistic image of Memphis before the strike as a very clean place.²²³ They believed that the strike was going to defile their beautiful city. The coverage of the strike focused much more on what the city was going to do with the garbage than on the environmental justice details of the strike itself.²²⁴ White Memphians were particularly horrified by the idea of strike supporters dumping garbage in city hall.²²⁵ This fear quickly translated itself into action.

The fact that garbage was so symbolically prevalent in the campaign emphasizes how important the idea of garbage was to the strike. There is something different about a sanitation workers' strike from a teachers' strike or striking factory workers. Garbage is

²¹⁹ Walter Rugaber, "Dr. King to March in Memphis Again," *The New York Times*, March 30, 1968, 31.

²²⁰ "Orderly March is Made by Strike Sympathizers," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 26, 1968, 1.

²²¹ Honey, *At the River I Stand*, 143.

²²² See Appendix II for a complete discussion of the coverage of the strike.

²²³ "Call off the Strike," *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, February 13, 1968, 6, editorial.

²²⁴ Brown Alan Flynn, "County Plan on Garbage is Favored," *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 9, 1968), 1.

²²⁵ "A Bucket of Garbage," 6.

something that we do not want to have to deal with, but it must be removed in order to maintain a clean city. People were certainly concerned about the effect that garbage was going to have on their health, even though they were not able to make the connection that this was an environmental justice issue.

A Quest for Dignity and Manhood

Echol Cole and Robert Walker died as a result of what can today be defined as environmental injustice and sparked the sanitation strike. Their names are not remembered the same way that the names of other prominent victims of racial hate are because “their fate was perhaps too lowly and pathetic.”²²⁶ In the spirit of environmental justice, it is important to remember those who have lost their lives in environmental injustices and to give their death dignity by placing them in the context of working towards environmental justice. The search for dignity, respect, and manhood was central to the sanitation workers’ campaign. Dignity in the workplace is a major goal of the environmental justice movement. At work, employees should be safe from environmental hazards and treated with dignity. The sanitation workers’ quest for dignity fits clearly within the environmental justice model. Sanitation workers lacked dignity in the physical sense, because their work was exhausting and dangerous and in the symbolic sense because the sanitation workers were constantly associated with garbage. Laurie B. Green, author of *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, observed that, “workers also detested aspects of their work that they felt made other people place them outside of humanity,

²²⁶ Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 685.

connecting them to garbage and filth.”²²⁷ The negative way in which sanitation workers were viewed helped to motivate the strikers, and the desire to reverse this perception was an important part of the strike.

The quest for dignity was central to the campaign. A sign that was commonly held at marches read “Dignity and Decency for our Sanitation Workers.”²²⁸ If the strike were run by an environmental justice organization today, the signs that they would use would be exactly the same. The concept of dignity was prevalent in Martin Luther King’s rhetoric throughout the strike. King proclaimed that “one day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage is as important as the physician. For if he doesn’t do his job, disease is rampant.”²²⁹ By equating sanitation workers to physicians, King highlighted their importance and raised their symbolic significance while also clearly linking garbage to health concerns.

King understood the importance of sanitation work. King told the sanitation workers, “You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor.”²³⁰ King understood the importance of the workplace in the civil rights movement and the need to fight for dignity and equality in that arena. King summarized the needs of the sanitation workers when he told James Lawson, the leader of CORE; “Workers...need good work, and decency and living wages, while they work.”²³¹ King understood the horrors of their working conditions and told the strike supporters, “You are here tonight to demand that

²²⁷ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 277.

²²⁸ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 344.

²²⁹ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 194.

²³⁰ Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 719.

²³¹ Eric Michael Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), DVD.

Memphis do something about the conditions our brothers face as they work day in and day out for the good of the community.”²³² When King called for dignity in the workplace, he was unconsciously calling for environmental justice in Memphis.

Out of the struggle for dignity came a struggle for manhood. “I AM A MAN” became the slogan for the strike, and the workers marched down the streets of Memphis carrying signs with that slogan. This was based on a gendered construction of manhood, and in this case, men were thought of as all of humanity. The theme of manhood was prominent throughout the civil rights movement. Being treated like second-class citizens was very difficult for African American men, and there was often concern that they would not be able to protect and provide for their families.²³³ Due to the neglect of and lack of respect of the city for the sanitation workers, the strikers felt they were not being treating them like men, which in this instance meant that they were not treating them as human beings, and was closely tied to the issue of lack of dignity.²³⁴ The strike was a patriarchal movement in this respect; women were not mentioned in the rhetoric of the strike. This patriarchal notion stemmed from the fact that all of the sanitation workers were men, and also from the patriarchal society that existed in Memphis in 1968.

The desire to affirm their manhood was present from the very beginning of the union organizing in Memphis. The men who had organized the union a decade before the strike were World War II veterans who risked their lives for their country only to return to the United States and work as sanitation workers, and be treated as less than men. Sanitation work was inherently degrading, but the low wages made it very difficult for

²³² Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 358.

²³³ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 224.

²³⁴ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 258.

the sanitation workers to sufficiently provide for their families. These workers often were forced to rely on federal support to survive which made them feel like less than men. Environmental justice in the workplace requires that workers have jobs that are safe, pay well enough for the workers to be able to support themselves and their dependents, do not cause them to feel less than human or discriminated against.

The conditions that the sanitation workers faced do not meet this criterion. The “I Am a Man” slogan was working against two forces: whites who acted like plantation bosses and did not approve grievance procedures, protective equipment, or up to date machinery, and the African Americans who were not willing to take the risk to stand up to their employers.²³⁵ Jerry Wurf tried to explain to the city council that, “they were tired, beaten men, making a struggle that before they died they would stand up and be men.”²³⁶ They were not asking for anything radical; they were only asking to be treated as men, by which they meant to be treated equally, and to be treated with respect.

The need to be treated like men was exacerbated by Mayor Loeb’s treatment of the workers. Loeb was a product of the racist south and had a paternalistic view of the sanitation workers; through his actions as mayor, he treated them as lesser beings, not as men. He was reminiscent of Robert Moses in that he allowed his racial biases to color his political actions. He believed that the workers would come to him if they needed help with their problems, and could not understand why they would go behind his back and declare a strike.²³⁷ Loeb did not believe that the workers were capable of thinking for themselves, and he thought that the union officials had manipulated them. He felt he had

²³⁵ Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 252 and 276.

²³⁶ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 86.

²³⁷ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 110.

“a moral obligation” to protect the strikers from these officials.²³⁸ Loeb refused to deal one on one with the union officials as men and instead focused on the illegality of the strike.²³⁹ Similarly to the environmental justice battle against the Cross Bronx Expressway, the strikers had no hope of achieving their goals without access to the decision making process. Loeb was quoted in the newspaper as saying, “You are in effect breaking the law. Your work is essential to the health of the city, and not doing your work constitutes a health menace.”²⁴⁰ He at least recognized the value of the sanitation workers, but was not willing to grant any of their demands or even view them as legitimate.

His treatment of the workers did not deter them but rather motivated them to increase their demands for manhood. Steve Estes, author of *I am a Man* argues, “Strike leaders focused much of their rhetoric on Loeb’s paternalism and denial of the strikers’ manhoods.”²⁴¹ Loeb became a symbol of the oppression of black workers by institutional structures in the literature of the strike. Loeb’s stated position and his actions as mayor hindered the achievement of what can today be referred to as environmental justice.

The Participation of Martin Luther King and the Fight for Environmental Justice

In the late 1960s, Martin Luther King shifted the center of his philosophy from civil rights to economic justice. King began to deal with the working class issues that he did not touch during his early civil rights campaigns, and he began advocating for

²³⁸ Estes, *I am a Man*, 135.

²³⁹ Joseph Sweat, “Load Issues Order to Stop Garbage Strike,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis February 13, 1968, 1.

²⁴⁰ Joseph Sweat, “Garbage Dispute Drones On; Loeb Hints Pickups Anyway,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis February 14, 1968, 1.

²⁴¹ Estes, *I am a Man*, 141.

socioeconomic change.²⁴² Economic justice and environmental justice go hand in hand. The term economic justice implies fair employment practices which promote environmentally friendly work practices. Because King fought for the civil rights and for the needs of the environment, he can be considered an environmental justice activist.

This new emphasis on the workingman in King's campaign supported the environmental justice cause. Working-class people bear the disproportionate burden of environmental harm. With King's ideological shift, this working class African American demographic was given more resources to deal with the challenges they were facing, because King's support helped them to gain the support of many civil rights organizations. King proclaimed that he wanted "to bring the colored people of the world out of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect."²⁴³ King was not involved in the organizing process of the strike, but he worked wonders in mobilizing the community and gaining national recognition.

King's Poor People's Campaign faced a variety of challenges. The black middle class was worried by King's calls for economic equality, and the Black Power movement was becoming dissatisfied with the tactic of nonviolence.²⁴⁴ This campaign had its test run in Memphis. King struggled to keep the campaign non-violent, lost control on March 28, and finally got the successful non-violent march he wanted after his death. Sylvan Fox reported in the *New York Times* on March 24, 1968, "The negro community rallied to the strikers as symbols of the over-all struggle for better economic conditions, equal

²⁴² Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 174.

²⁴³ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 309.

²⁴⁴ Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 15.

rights and human dignity”²⁴⁵ The sanitation workers became a symbol for all of the working poor who were fighting for economic and what can today be labeled environmental justice.

Epilogue: The Struggle Continues in Memphis in 2000

The year 2000 marked another environmental justice struggle in Memphis. Many environmental and social gains had been made in the city since the sanitation strike, but many of the same challenges remained. The 2000 battle centered around the Memphis Defense Depot, a center of toxic dumping which had been shut down and was going to be used as land for development. The area surrounding the site is 97 percent African American. In this modern day environmental justice struggle, the United States government is more implicitly to blame for this environmental injustice than in either of the historical cases. Community members claim to have been exposed to toxics, but none of the cases can be proven, making the environmental justice case more difficult. Doris Bradshaw, an African American community member, organized a campaign to halt development of this site. Similarly to the struggle against the Cross Bronx Expressway this environmental justice was led by a woman.

The same issue of dignity at work from the sanitation workers’ strike applies to this later struggle, because African American were forced to take these low paying jobs for lack of other opportunities for employment, and they could be exposed to toxics while at work. The high paying jobs that the Depot promised never materialized for the African-American community. All of the high paying jobs at the facility went to white

²⁴⁵ Fox, “Labor and Rights Race,” 10.

workers; African Americans were forced to take the degrading and dangerous minimum wage jobs. African Americans still faced discrimination in employment in 2000 even by the United States military. The campaign against the Depot used many tactics that were similar to those used during the sanitation strike. Bradshaw created a newsletter to inform the community about the details of the campaign, which was reminiscent of the leaflets that the sanitation workers distributed on their garbage routes that explained their position. There was even a protest march against development of the depot site, similar to the March on Memphis in 1968.

There are still many racial and environmental problems facing environmental justice advocates today. One of the major problems that Bradshaw faced in her campaign was a lack of access to the media. This significantly hindered her ability to mobilize. The media today, “denies access to those who lack traditional credentials.”²⁴⁶ As a working class black woman, Bradshaw certainly did not have traditional credentials. Poor media treatment of black women is a problem for the environmental justice movement because black women are often very involved in mobilizing communities around these sorts of issues.

The Commercial Appeal did not recognize Bradshaw’s efforts, showing that the Memphis media still did not provide racially fair coverage in 2000. When the media covered Bradshaw, they portrayed her in a negative light. A photographer asked her and her husband to look “as serious and confrontational as possible” while he was taking their

²⁴⁶ Andrea Simpson, “Who Hears Their Cry?” *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*, ed. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evens, and Rachel Stein, 82-104. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2002): 93.

photo for the newspaper.²⁴⁷ Another challenge to mobilization that Bradshaw faced was the lack of unity between the African American lower and upper classes. The African American middle class and African American leaders in Memphis did not support Bradshaw, because her struggle did not fall under the umbrella of civil rights. This response is similar to the response of the better off African American community during the Sanitation Workers' Strike when they viewed themselves as above the workers and did not want to be associated with the strike.

In 2000, Memphis had “not yet exorcized racism, sexism, and classism, from the local culture.”²⁴⁸ It was still very difficult for an environmental justice struggle to succeed in Memphis. Bradshaw was unable to halt development at the depot site because she could not prove racist intent in the toxic dumping, or even that the dumping posed a serious health risk. Memphis was still not ready to abide by the precautionary principle and assume that a site is toxic until proven clean instead of clean until proven toxic. Communities live in these areas, and they are not willing to accept the health risks of living with toxic substances. Polluters assume that by locating themselves within a poor minority community, they can avoid being targeted. This is proving to no longer be the case.

In addition to these challenges, some things had improved since 1968, which aided Bradshaw in her campaign. Bradshaw formed a coalition with four established organizations. The first two groups, the National Congress of Black Churches and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, were exactly the same allies that the sanitation workers relied on in 1968. She also established new alliances with Greenpeace and the

²⁴⁷ Simpson, “Who Hears Their Cry?” 96.

²⁴⁸ Simpson, “Who Hears Their Cry?” 100.

Military Toxics Project. The environmental movement was finally ready to play its role in the environmental justice struggle in Memphis. With the help of these environmental organizations, Bradshaw succeeded in one of her central goals of making information about the depot site more available to the public. These two movements were completely separate in 1968, but had begun to work together by 2000. Increasingly today the needs of poor minority communities and the environment are being addressed simultaneously through innovative movements such as community-supported agriculture and the green jobs movement. The civil rights movement and the environmental movement need to work together if they want to move closer to reaching their mutual goals.

In “Who Hears Their Cry?” Andrea Simpson does connect the struggle in Memphis to the trend in environmental struggles around the country; however she does not view the struggle against the defense depot as a part of a historical trend of environmental justice. She does not mention the Sanitation Workers’ strike or make any attempt to connect this movement to Memphis’ history of resistance to environmental injustice. In Simpson’s portrayal, it seems as though this struggle in 2000 was the first time that African Americans in Memphis protested against segregation and environmental degradation. Simpson places the blame on the specific defense depot but fails to implicate the United States military that is responsible for this depot. This modern day case study illustrates that the United States is still a perpetrator of environmental justice. The military is an entity that represents the United States, and it has a track record of perpetuating environmental injustice. The history of the treatment of the environment and communities by the United States military is an important area for future research.

Conclusion

In the body of this thesis, I made two conclusions about the prehistory of environmental justice and injustice. The roots of environmental injustice, especially against African Americans, in the United States were laid during episodes like the Great Migration and bore fruit in ones like the building of Cross Bronx Expressway and the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike. Although they did not define themselves as environmental justice activists, communities faced with these environmental injustices fought back against them. Throughout my research I also came to an unexpected conclusion regarding who is to blame for environmental injustice. It is now clear that individual corporations are not the only entities that should be blamed for environmental injustices. Environmental injustice has been built into the laws of the federal government, and it has funded projects that perpetuate environmental injustice; therefore, the federal government of the United States has been a perpetrator of environmental injustice.

Minority and low-income communities have historically born a disproportional burden of environmental degradation while reaping only a small proportion of the benefits of progress because of political and social practices that can be traced back to the Great Migration. Affected communities have responded to these environmental injustices with environmental justice struggles as I have shown through the two case studies. My thesis makes the following conclusions.

Economic hardship results in environmental injustice. Poorer areas have received inadequate sanitation services dating back to the Great Migration. Poor sanitation,

malfunctioning sewer systems, and a lack of garbage collection are harmful to humans living with these conditions and to the natural environment. Homelessness is environmentally unjust. The building of the Cross Bronx Expressway demolished thousands of homes, and people who were made homeless could not even escape and move to the suburbs because segregation prevented them from doing so. People without a home are forced to do something with their human waste and garbage, but no sanitation services are provided to homeless people. Without proper sanitation, people living in abandoned buildings negatively impact the environment because their human waste and garbage have the potential to permeate the soil and groundwater because they cannot be properly managed. Environmental justice does not only occur in extreme circumstances of toxic dumping; it occurs in the everyday experiences of people forced to live in poverty.

Segregation has perpetuated environmental injustice throughout the history of the United States. History has shown that segregation creates conditions that are separate but not equal, and this inequality in living conditions in residences, sanitation, garbage management, and working conditions negatively impacted people living in segregated areas and also negatively impacted the natural environment. The way African American migrants were treated in cities in the course of the Great Migration set the stage for future segregation. Segregation meant that African Americans were unable to remove themselves from the discriminatory housing and workplaces where they were facing environmental injustices. In the Great Migration, the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway, and the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike, segregation in housing and in labor created environmental injustice. Then, as now, low-income and minority

communities faced environmental injustice in housing and the workplace. Both of these areas need to be viewed as a part of the environment that needs to be protected in order for environmental justice to be achieved.

Suburbanization, the construction of highways, and urban renewal perpetuate environmental injustice. The federal government of the United States funded all of these policies; therefore, the government has historically been a perpetrator of environmental injustice. In all of these policies, economic concerns have taken precedence over the needs of disadvantaged communities and the environment. The displacement of the Bronx community by the expressway occurred during a time when the philosophy of urban renewal was dominant. Development needs were seen as more important than the needs of people or the environment, and this view was justified by the philosophy of urban renewal. The building of the Cross Bronx Expressway fit into the paradigm of urban renewal, the public widely supported it, and there was no public uproar against the expressway. It is ironic that urban renewal began as a social justice program designed to eradicate poverty in the slums. The concept of environmental justice did not exist during the building of the expressway and the public was largely unaware of the problems associated with urban renewal policies. Many historians have written critiques of urban renewal, and my contribution to this critique is to recognize that urban renewal created conditions that can today be defined and environmentally unjust.

The desire to achieve growth at any cost has caused environmental injustice. The practice of eminent domain has furthered environmental injustice because it can make the demolition of buildings legal. Eminent domain has allowed growth to occur, even at the cost of the destruction of private property. The desire for growth itself has perpetuated

environmental injustice. Growth has benefitted society unevenly, and it has harmed the elements of society it has not benefited. Growth perpetuates environmental injustice, because it has forced communities to deal with the negative aspects of growth and suburbanization while reaping none of the benefits they provide.

During the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike, the civil rights struggle was seen as entirely separate from the mainstream environmental movement that was active during the same time; however, the two movements share common goals and could have benefitted from working together to achieve these goals. The Sanitation Workers' Strike, although overtly a civil rights struggle, was also an environmental struggle operating under the radar of the mainstream environmental movement. Martin Luther King can be considered an environmental justice advocate because he understood and fought for the demands of the strikers that can today be defined as environmental justice demands. The environmental justice movement today is working to link these two movements, and understanding the history of environmental justice can aid them in this goal.

As has been seen in the two case studies, environmental injustice disrupted the fabric of communities. Environmental injustice did more damage than harm to the natural environment and the health of people. The Cross Bronx Expressway altered the Bronx community, destroying much more than the natural environment and affecting more than the health of residents. The expressway literally broke the community by destroying the infrastructure that knit the community together. The conditions that the Sanitation Workers faced in Memphis in 1968 hurt the individual workers exposed to these conditions. Because of the civil right struggle the strikers became a part of, the

conditions faced by the workers were seen as an affront to the entire working-class African-American community.

Transparency and community participation in government are essential to environmental justice. The reason the protest against the Cross Bronx Expressway failed is that the neighborhood was unaware of the expressway until it was too late and that the community was unable to participate in the decision making process. The strikers in Memphis were barred from participating in the decision making process, and the strike was only able to succeed because outside help increased the strikers' bargaining power. Government corruption means that officials fail to keep the public properly informed about their projects and move forward without input from the public. Government corruption historically perpetuates environmental injustice because corrupt government officials have the power to place their own self-interests above the interests of disadvantaged communities and the natural environment.

A city street needs to be seen as just as important to preserve as a mountaintop. The exclusion of the urban from the environment is extremely problematic. A narrow concept of environmentalism as protecting the natural world disregards the risks placed on disadvantaged communities by environmental injustices. Francis E. Beasley, author of "Environmental Education for Empowerment" argues, "Lower-income, working-class, rural, and urban minority communities are disproportionately placed at risk by the more narrow concept of environmentalism."²⁴⁹ The places in which we live and work need to be seen as a part of the environment and as worthy of our protection. David A.

²⁴⁹ Francis E. Beaseley, Joe E. Heimlich, and Sabhina S. Daudi, "Environmental Education for Empowerment," in *Environmental Education: a Resource Handbook*, ed. Joe E Heimlich. (Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 2002), 31.

Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith make the simple logical argument that “either all places are holy, or none of them are.”²⁵⁰ The urban and the human beings living in urban areas should be seen as a part of the environment that are every bit as important to protect as plants and animals. Humans have altered the natural landscape for as long as we have existed; there are few if any places that could today be considered untouched. Since it is impossible to distinguish between human altered and pristine areas, it makes sense to move away from this dichotomy and see both spheres as part of one environment. Only within this perception of the world can environmental justice be achieved.

²⁵⁰ David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith, “Introduction: Making Room for the Local,” in *Place-Based Education in the Global Age: Local Diversity*, ed. David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith. (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008), xix.

Appendix I:

Environmental Education as a Tool for Environmental Justice

Disadvantaged communities have a rich tradition of fighting not only for their own rights, but also for the rights of the environment. In order for environmental education to function well as an environmental justice tool, environmental educators must learn from this history of environmental justice and incorporate it into their curriculum. Stephen Sterling, author of *Sustainable Education*, argues, “The key to creating a more sustainable and peaceful world is learning. It is the change of mind on which change toward a sustainable future depends.”²⁵¹ Environmental education should serve as a catalyst for this scrutinizing of the past and present of environmental injustice.

As I have argued in my case studies, disadvantaged communities have waged environmental justice struggles without environmental education and without any specific or scientific knowledge about what was happening to the natural environment they lived in. Thus, environmental education can only aid the cause of environmental justice by helping people to understand what is happening to the environment in scientific terms that will strengthen their case. Giving children the knowledge they need to understand their natural environment in such a way that they learn to love it, encourages them to develop an environmental ethic. If environmental education is taught well, children will be able to understand and articulate how social justice and protecting the natural environment are connected. This environmental ethic will inspire children to alter

²⁵¹ Stephen Sterling, *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change* (Foxhole: Green Books Ltd, 2001), 12.

their own lives to include more sustainable practices and to fight for social justice and to protect the earth.

Lindsey Rhoads Kravitz argues in her environmental education honors thesis, “Education can create knowledge through content, through a sense of community, and through individual thinking. These key aspects can cause individual change and more knowledge and self-awareness about the individual, the environment and the community.”²⁵² Allowing students to understand environmental processes in a deep way causes them to care deeply about the environment while simultaneously giving them the tools they need to help protect the environment they learn to love. Outdoor education should encourage students to view the natural environment they learn in as connected to the urban environment in which they live. Teaching students about the environment in the natural environment helps to make the natural processes they are learning about applicable to the environments in which they live.

One institution that embraces this new model of environmental education is IslandWood, an outdoor school located on land previously owned by a logging company on Bainbridge Island near Seattle. During the school year, IslandWood has a graduate program in environmental education that is affiliated with the University of Washington. Graduate students teach groups of fourth through sixth grade students from the Seattle area schools for a week at a time, with the largest proportion of attendees being students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. Unlike some environmental education programs, IslandWood does not teach only about the natural environment, but instead focuses on teaching how humans are connected to the natural environment. IslandWood follows an

²⁵² Lindsey Rhoads Kravitz, *Environmental Education: Cross-Cultural Modeling* (New London: Connecticut College Unpublished Senior Honors Thesis, 2003), 7.

experiential education philosophy of teaching kids about the natural environment through actively exploring and participating in that natural environment. Thus, environmental justice is central to the history of IslandWood. History has shown that it is possible to protect natural processes without first understanding them; however, an understanding of these scientific processes can strengthen an environmental justice cause. Environmental education helps prepare a new generation of environmental justice advocates, each child bringing their own unique contributions.

Environmental education can inspire students to improve their communities environmentally and otherwise. IslandWood strives to include community service components in their curriculum to help students understand how they can make a difference in their community. The traditional educational system is not doing a good job of accomplishing this goal. Gruenewald and Smith agree; “The process of formal education in schools and universities is often totally isolated from the immediate context of community life.”²⁵⁶ Environmental education taught outdoors in places such as IslandWood seeks to connect students with the natural aspects of a particular place. IslandWood teaches the science, history, and culture of Bainbridge Island. When these three things are taught in an interdisciplinary manner instead of separately, students to develop a deeper connection to their community. Once students have the tools they need, and feel like they have the power to create change, they can become influential environmental and social justice advocates, working to make their communities better places for both the natural environment and for the humans living in it.

²⁵⁶ Gruenewald, “Introduction,” xv.

Appendix II:

**A Comparison of the Newspaper Coverage of the Case Studies
in Mainstream and African American Newspapers**

In writing this thesis, I have relied heavily on newspaper coverage of each of my case studies to gain an understanding of how these events were perceived at the time. These newspapers were obtained through interlibrary loan and read on microfilm or obtained online through newspaper databases. I looked at the coverage in *The New York Times*, *The New Amsterdam News*, *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, *The Commercial Appeal*, and *The Chicago Defender* during the time before, during, and after the planning and building of the Cross Bronx Expressway and the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike. While reading these papers, I found a significant difference between the coverage of the events in the mainstream newspapers and the African American newspapers I was reading. These differences will be discussed below.

Coverage of the Cross Bronx Expressway

***New York Times* Coverage Discussed in Depth**

From 1952-1961, the *New York Times* frequently covered the building of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. The coverage began as very pro-development, but as the years went by and the abuses suffered by Bronx residents became clearer, the *Times* also reported on the human suffering caused by the expressway. In March of 1962, reporter Arthur S. Hodgkiss discussed the building of highways in New York City as a source of

pride and hoped that the city would become a leader in the building of new highways.²⁵⁸ Joseph C. Ingraham wrote multiple articles for the *Times* that extolled the benefits of building the Cross Bronx Expressway. In November of 1954, he refers to the tenants' struggle against the city as "an earlier wrangle that blocked the approval of the routes alignment."²⁵⁹ He did not report on the complaints of the tenants whose homes were going to be demolished by the expressway.

In May of 1955, Ingraham finally mentioned the plight of the tenants when he reported, "the crosstown route has been slowed by unusual difficulties in relocating tenants in the path of the highway."²⁶⁰ Ingraham did mention that people needed to be relocated, but he failed to inform the reader that most residents were not relocated or were forced to live in substandard housing. An article published in April 1956 did acknowledge that the highway was displacing large numbers of people: "The work remaining must await the relocation of hundreds of tenants in the path of the highway."²⁶¹ Although the massive displacement was being reported by this time, the New York reporters implied that the suffering of the community was justified by the progress the expressway represented. Bernard Stengen reported on the expressway in September 1958, "This vision of future improvement is obscured by the present phase of demolition."²⁶² This sentence portrays the destruction caused by the expressway as only a temporary force, something that would one day be forgotten when the benefits of the highway were fully realized. In fact, when construction on the highway was nearly completed in

²⁵⁸ Hodgkiss, "Parkways for the City," 3.

²⁵⁹ Ingraham, "Cross Bronx Road," 29.

²⁶⁰ Joseph C. Ingraham, "Highway Building Catching Up," *The New York Times*, May 8, 1955, 3.

²⁶¹ "Expressway Growing," *The New York Times*, April 23, 1956, 29.

²⁶² Bernard Stengen, "Houses Giving Way for Roads," 35.

January 1961, Ingraham reported on it in an entirely positive light, with no mention of the human cost of construction; “being realized now are the first benefits of a long-awaited system of bridges, tunnels, and expressways that is designed to speed the motorist on his way.”²⁶³ He only reports on the ease with which people in cars can get from one place to another with no mention of the damage done to the community in the Bronx.

New Amsterdam News Coverage Discussed in Depth

The *New Amsterdam News* is a weekly African-American newspaper founded in 1909, which had its highest circulation in 1940 at 100,000. It was considered to be one of the best African-American newspapers in the country. The *New Amsterdam News* only reported on the Cross-Bronx Expressway once during its planning phase. This article, “Wagner to Press for More Housing,” was printed on December 26, 1953. It focuses on the reaction of Robert F. Wagner, Manhattan Borough President at the time, to the expressway. This article openly acknowledges that families were going to be displaced in the process of building the road. It also admits that residents protested against the construction and reports that 200 residents came to city hall in resistance. The African American newspaper reported on the Cross-Bronx Expressway far less than the New York Times, but when it did, it reported in a way that much better served the cause of environmental justice. That there was only one article in the New York African-American newspapers which shows that the building of the expressway was not seen as an environmental justice struggle at the time; it was an event that was typical of the time period. It is only from the vantage point of today that the building of the expressway is

²⁶³ Joseph C. Ingraham, “Around the Town,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 1961, 17.

an environmental injustice and the struggle against it as an environmental justice struggle.²⁶⁴

Coverage of the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike

Coverage of the Sanitation Workers' Strike by the White Press

In addition to providing insight into the day-to-day events to the strike, the coverage of the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike by the white press of Memphis provided interesting perspective into how the white population of Memphis processed the strike. The strike was covered frequently in the *Commercial Appeal* and the *Memphis Press Scimitar*, the two major newspapers in Memphis in 1968. The sanitation strike shocked the white community and forced them to deal directly with the issue of race. Honey asserted, "Black workers organizing threatened the subordinate and low wage relationship of blacks to whites."²⁶⁵ This threat challenged the core of white superiority itself. One of the reasons that the white community allied itself so strongly with the city was the fear that if the strike were successful, white people would be forced to perform the sanitation workers' jobs.²⁶⁶ Because of these fears, the white community clung strongly to the illegality of the strike. They realized that public health played a major role in the strike, but were not willing to legitimize these concerns.²⁶⁷

Martin Luther King's arrival in Memphis only exacerbated white anger. The white community called King an outside agitator and blamed him for the violence of

²⁶⁴ "Wagner to Press for More Housing," *The New York Amsterdam News* (December 26, 1953): 1.

²⁶⁵ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 123.

²⁶⁶ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 242.

²⁶⁷ "Garbage Mess – N.Y. and Here," *Memphis Press Scimitar*, February 12, 1968, 6, letter to the editor.

March 28.²⁶⁸ It was much easier to blame King than to recognize that there were real racial issues in Memphis that merited consideration. The fear only intensified with the March 28th march. To the white community, it appeared that utter chaos was imminent. *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, published an editorial predicting that the second march was going to “let loose hoodlum violence on this city.”²⁶⁹ The white community was unable to look beyond the violence of a few individuals to see the dynamics of the struggle.

When King was assassinated, the white community went into a state of shock. The *Press Scimitar* underwent a drastic shift from its previous statements and urged the city to negotiate with the strikers, accept their demands, and end the strike as soon as possible.²⁷⁰ It was not until King’s assassination that the white press portrayed the strikers’ demands as legitimate. The editorials in the white newspapers regarding King’s death illustrated varying perspectives. One editorial argued that King should still be viewed as a troublemaker. According this editorial, the only thing that was upsetting about his death was that it had to happen in Memphis. After stating these facts, the editorial went on to call for non-violence in the aftermath of the assassination, as though ambivalence over a black hero’s death was any way to convince the African-American community to refrain from violence.²⁷¹

A week later, a statement from a group of white and black ministers was printed in the paper that shows a completely opposite response: “We who are white confess our

²⁶⁸ “Wise Advise from Church Leaders,” *The Memphis Pres- Scimitar*, April 1, 1968, 6, editorial.

²⁶⁹ “The Big Challenge on Monday,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 4, 1968, 8, editorial.

²⁷⁰ “Memphis Must Solve Strike Issues,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 6, 1968, 4, editorial.

²⁷¹ “The King Assassination,” Editorial, *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 5, 1968, 6, editorial.

implication in this tragic event by our failure to speak and act, clearly and specifically, with conviction and courage, to the attitude of prejudice and patterns of injustice which produced the society in which this act could occur.”²⁷² It is impressive, given the white community’s reactions throughout the strike, that members of the white community would release that statement, and that the white newspaper was willing to print it. This statement gives hope that the experience of the sanitation strike was a first step towards encouraging a more positive race relationship in Memphis.

In Memphis, the views printed in the major papers only represented the views of the white community. The press was highly segregated and white residents would read the two prominent white newspapers, and the African American residents would read the African American newspaper. The *Commercial Appeal*, one of the major newspapers in Memphis, was pro-slavery, and the conservative and anti-union Scripps Howard owned both it and the other major newspaper, the *Press-Scimitar*. In 1968, the *Commercial Appeal* only employed five African Americans, and none of them had a job as high up on the occupational ladder as reporter.²⁷³

The focus of the press in Memphis at this time was on public interest stories rather than on controversial political issues. In the beginning of February, the front pages of several editions of the *Press-Scimitar* featured stories about the problematic size of Mayor Loeb’s desk.²⁷⁴ In the week after King’s death, the main story in the *Press-*

²⁷² “Memphis Ministers Express Their Deep Sorrow,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 12, 1968, 15.

²⁷³ Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 129.

²⁷⁴ “Finally – Height Right on Desk,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 2, 1968, 1.

Scimitar focused on the cancelation of the Cotton Carnival.²⁷⁵ The media was reluctant to cover any stories pertaining to race and often kept them off of the front page. The newspapers did not do a good job of interviewing all of the participants in the strike fairly. When Mayor Loeb was quoted in an article, it was usually in an interview giving him time to prepare, (they also allowed him to print his own letter on his view of the strike) and when strike supporters were quoted it was usually in the context of a city hall meeting without time to prepare.²⁷⁶ The mainstream media in Memphis failed to provide fair and adequate coverage of the strike.

The coverage of the strike was generally skewed to convince readers to support the city in the struggle. The coverage focused on what the community should do to dispose of their garbage rather than on the strike itself, until King became involved.²⁷⁷ The national coverage of the event was also biased, and the *New York Times* stated that the strike had “led to racial tension and a pervasive fear of violence,” ignoring the reality that the actions of the police also played a very important role.²⁷⁸ The coverage of the initial incident in which two men were killed by a garbage truck was biased. The *Commercial Appeal* made it sound like a common accident and assured the public that all similar trucks would be checked before future use.²⁷⁹ In reality, the city was not willing to invest in updated equipment for the sanitation workers. The coverage of the macing event by the *Press-Scimitar* did not adequately report on the experiences of the

²⁷⁵ “Cotton Carnival Postponed Indefinitely,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 11, 1968, 1.

²⁷⁶ Henry Loeb, “Mayor Loeb’s Letter to Sanitation Employees,” *The Memphis Press Scimitar*, February 29, 1968, 1

²⁷⁷ Flynn, “County Plan on Garbage is Favored,” 1.

²⁷⁸ Fox, “Memphis is Beset by Racial Tension,” 28.

²⁷⁹ Joseph Thompson, “Garbage Truck Kills 2 Crewmen,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, February 2, 1968, 1.

protestors. The article stated that mace was effective in breaking up the crowd and focused on the delay of traffic instead of reporting about the people who were injured.²⁸⁰ The inadequate coverage elicited a response from the African American community, and they organized a boycott of the two white newspapers.²⁸¹ Unfortunately, this boycott only made the coverage worse, because the African American community was no longer willing to cooperate with the press. The lack of a fair portrayal of their actions in the mainstream media hindered the strikers from achieving their goals.

The Chicago Defender's Coverage of the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike

The *Chicago Defender* has historically been one of the most influential African-American newspapers in the United States. It was founded in 1905 and had a national circulation by 1910. By 1915, two thirds of its readers lived outside of Chicago. Today, its website claims that it is the “most influential Black weekly newspaper.”²⁸² It has traditionally supported civil rights causes in its reporting. John H. H. Stengstacke, owner of the *Chicago Defender*, also owned the *Tri-State Defender*, the major African American newspaper in Memphis during the Sanitation Workers' Strike. (The *Tri-State Defender* is not available outside of Memphis and cannot be sent through interlibrary loan, but because the same person owned it also owned the *Chicago Defender* at the time, one can assume it promoted similar views.) How the strike was represented in the *Defender* emphasizes how the strike was represented to the national African American community.

²⁸⁰ Clark Porteous and Charles A. Brown, “City Granted Strike Injunction,” *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 24, 1968, 1.

²⁸¹ Kneeland, “Memphis Facing a Negro Boycott,” 27.

²⁸² “About Us,” *The Chicago Defender*, accessed March 4, 2011, <http://www.chicagodefender.com/article-1369-about-us.html>.

These articles can be used to gauge whether or not and in what manner African Americans outside of Memphis were informed about the environmental justice aspects of the strike. The coverage in this newspaper has also influenced our historical memory of the strike. Major newspapers are more accessible than small local newspapers; therefore, the story told in them is more likely to be the story that is retained in our historical memory.

The Chicago Defender did not cover the strike as often as one would expect based on how important a civil rights battle it is considered today. One can assume that the *Tri-State Defender* would have reported on it more frequently. Nine articles from the *Chicago Defender* are referred to here, written from March 19 to April 27 of 1968. The coverage of the strike was highly centered on the outside actors that participated, particularly Martin Luther King, and failed to discuss any of the nuances of the struggle of the local people. The racial elements of the strike are placed at the forefront while the actual motivations for the strike are lost. In an article entitled “New Kind of Militancy In Memphis,” McCann L. Reid claims, “The strike itself... is simply the catalyst that brought Memphis’ 250,000 Negroes together.”²⁸³ The strike did indeed help unify the black community, but the strike becomes only about race in its media portrayal. The many other factors that contributed to the strike went uncovered.

The articles in the *Defender* also dramatize the violence that occurred during the marches of the strike. This makes sense, because *The Defender* was attempting to gain the support of the rest of the African American population for the movement, but historians have found that there was in fact much less violence at these marches than was

²⁸³ Reid, “New Kind of Militancy,” 5.

portrayed in the newspapers. Our historical memories now see the marches as the only part of the strike, while forgetting that it went on for the better part of the year and that these marches were only one part of a much more complex struggle. The strike only became frequently covered after outside civil rights activists came to Memphis, and the confrontations became violent and the National Guard was called in.

The coverage of the conclusion of the strike is entirely centered on the assassination of Martin Luther King. Again, it makes sense that this would be the case because this was a historical and shocking event that is much more newsworthy than the achievement of the strikers' demands; however, this coverage of only the surface of the aftermath of the strike makes the successful environment justice struggle go unnoticed. In our historical memory, the most important thing that people remember about the strike is the death of Martin Luther King. In the long run this is the more important event, but the newspaper coverage shows how once a local movement was taken over by national interests, the local goals disappeared in the media portrayal.²⁸⁴ Similarly to the case of the Cross Bronx Expressway, the coverage of the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike illustrates that the environmental justice aspects of the case were not realized at the time. The events were simply portrayed through the lens of the time, and this particular lens was civil rights. All of aspects of the strike were not adequately covered at the time, thus the responsibility falls to historians to paint a more complete picture of the strike.

²⁸⁴ William Aucoin, "Memphis Garbage Strike Ends," *The Daily Defender*, Chicago, April 17, 1968, 1; James Evens, "King to Ignore," 6; James Evans, "Sanitation Workers Back on the Job in Memphis, Tenn," *Chicago Defender*, April 20, 1968, 3; "Local Minister to Lead," 1; "MLK Sets Talk to Memphis Striking Sanitation Crews," *The Daily Defender*, Chicago, March 19, 1968, 8; McCann L. Reid, "2 Dead in Memphis March," *Chicago Defender*, March 30, 1968, 1; Reid, "New Kind of Militancy," 5; "U.S.. to Probe," 1.

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