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Redlining the Green: Environmental Racism and Justice in the Bronx

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Redlining the Green:
Environmental Racism and Justice in the Bronx

By Kelsey Vizzard
Fordham University 2015



Source: John Fekner, *Broken Promises/Falsas Promesas*, Charlotte Street, South Bronx, NY, 1980.

Abstract

Historically, the availability of economic, social, and political opportunities has been almost absent from marginalized communities, such as the Bronx. For reasons like race, ethnicity, and class, these geographic areas have been targeted and named as risk areas in the mid 1900s by banks and other agencies. This historic phenomenon is known as “redlining.” As a result, they received little, if any, economic, social, and political support from the government and other agencies and systems. Instead, any effort to climb the economic and social ladder was initiated by community members and organizations. As a result the community has suffered difficulties financially, socially, and environmentally. The historical profiling of the Bronx created by redlining has had detrimental consequences. There is a lingering belief that the Bronx is not as valuable compared to other boroughs such as Manhattan when it comes to investments, especially environmental investments. This paper investigates the environmental funding for New York City boroughs, and what percentage of that funding comes from the government to the Bronx. The paper describes how the Bronx community, specifically the Northwest Bronx, was able to overcome the failure of the government set-up by redlining through community-based organizations. It compares the history of redlining and its effects on the community to the lack of investment in environmental sustainability in the Bronx that we see today. I use three disciplines to explain my thesis: history, environmental politics, and environmental ethics.

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Introduction: How Are Racism and Environmental Degradation Related in the Bronx?

The Bronx County is among the poorest counties in the United States. In fact, the South Bronx has repeatedly been the poorest congressional district in the United States, according to the United States Census, with 38 percent of South Bronx residents living below the poverty line.¹ If you change the focus of poverty to children living in the South Bronx, that number jumps to almost 50 percent.² However, the Bronx was not always the image of a burning and crumbling urban community that many people have in their minds today. A historical investigation into both the past demographics and ecology of the Bronx will reveal that the Bronx used to be a wealthy farmland with townhouses and a clean environment. It then changed into a wealthy suburban extension of New York City. Only after the 1940s did the Bronx start to change into the Bronx that we see today. How is it that a community with such a strong and rich history can suffer such hardships? How can a community that is geographically located so close to the center of global financial prosperity and liberal opportunity suffer from such great oppression and lack of resources? The answer is redlining, and other political and institutional policies that I will investigate in this thesis.

Redlining is defined as “the denial of mortgage credit on properties located in certain geographic areas even though the market value of the property is sufficient collateral and the applicant is creditworthy, or the approval of mortgage credit on less favorable terms than those granted on properties located in other areas even though the market value of the property and the creditworthiness of the borrower are similar.”³ Redlining is a form of community disinvestment

¹ Sisk, Richard. "South Bronx Is Poorest District in Nation, U.S. Census Bureau Finds: 38% Live below Poverty Line." *Daily News* 29 Sept. 2010. Daily News Washington Bureau. Web.<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/south-bronx-poorest-district-nation-u-s-census-bureau-finds-38-live-poverty-line-article-1.438344>.

² Sisk.

³ Smith, Deborah. "Redlining, Disinvestment and the Role of Mutual Savings Banks: A Survey of Solutions". *Fordham Urban Law Journal*. Vol 9 Is 1 Art 3. 1980. (89).

that discriminates against race, age, and wealth.⁴ The redlining that I will discuss in this thesis will focus on the redlining of low-income neighborhoods of color, such as the Bronx. The history of redlining can be directly connected to the environmental condition of the Bronx. Due to racist policies and practices like redlining, the Bronx environment has suffered in many ways. The physical environment is degraded and neglected by the government, and the people who live in the Bronx suffer negative health conditions caused by the polluted environment. The debilitated environment is caused by the lack of governmental funding and support of policies for environmental improvement and sustainability. If you combine the lack of governmental support with the history of institutionalized racism from redlining, you create a form of oppression that is now commonly identified as environmental racism. Environmental racism is an issue that many low-income communities of color are facing today. Communities are standing up against environmental racism and are demanding environmental justice through community-based organizing.

The trend that we have seen over the last few decades of the government not supporting or even acknowledging environmental issues in low-income communities of color will be identified as environmental racism or environmental discrimination throughout this thesis. The concept of environmental justice will be used to represent possible solutions to these issues. *Noxious New York* author Julie Sze writes that “environmental racism describes the disproportionate effects of environmental pollution on racial minorities, while environmental justice is the name of the movement that emerged in response to this problem.”⁵ It is important to look at environmental issues in the Bronx through a racial lens because many of the issues that the Bronx faces today are rooted in a history of institutionalized racism.

⁴ Smith (89).

⁵ Sze, Julia. *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*. November 22, 2006. (13)

The Bronx is one of the most diverse communities with a history of institutional racism and oppression. The racism that shaped the Bronx that we know today began with the migration of lower-income families out of Manhattan and into the Bronx. Following this relocation of hundreds of thousands of people, banks and corporations racially profiled the Bronx community through a process called redlining. The banks deliberately discouraged investment in the Bronx community by identifying certain areas as risk areas. These areas were inhabited by low to middle income people of color. This became the beginning of a long history of minimum investments from banks and the government in the Bronx. This continues to occur today through environmental preservation and restoration. Institutional environmental racism is responsible for the poor health of the residents of the Bronx, such as the extremely high rates of asthma. Systemic environmental racism can also be held responsible for the high rate of pollution in the Bronx produced by the massive expressways built straight through the community. Other forms of environmental racism, which are common in many of the poor urban communities, are the over abundance of the waste treatment plants and incinerators built in these low-income communities of color. Even though the Bronx has the most amount of green space of any New York City borough, the funding to restore and preserve these spaces is severely lacking. Just like redlining, the lack of funding for beneficial environmental projects that is occurring in the Bronx is detrimental to the lives and future of the people living there. The lack of funding and political support for environmental sustainability can be described as “redlining the green.” I use this as the thesis title because it clearly connects the history or racial practices of redlining with the environmental injustices and degradation that are prevalent in the Bronx today. All of these key concepts and issues will be discussed and outlined in this thesis.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will provide quantitative data about the Bronx, both historic data and current data. This data will mainly focus on public health and environmental facts about the Bronx. It will also include political and economic figures. In the second chapter, I will further explain how and why the Bronx had a downfall after the 1950s and explain the condition that we see in the Bronx today. For this chapter, I will use a historical discipline to explain the trends and issues that the Bronx currently faces. This will involve both an environmental history of the Bronx and the history of redlining in the Bronx. In Chapter Three, I will outline political support and funding for environmental issues through a discipline of environmental politics. I will analyze both current and historical environmental political practices and policies. Chapter Four will focus on environmental racism and environmental justice through a discipline of environmental ethics. I will explain the history of the concepts of environmental racism and justice, and how these concepts emerged in the realm of ethics. Finally, Chapter Five will conclude the thesis with policy recommendations and a look at where to go from here.

Chapter 1. Bronx Borough Statistics: Does the Math Add Up?

The Bronx Borough has the largest amount of parks out of the five New York City Boroughs. It has two of the top three largest New York City parks, with Pelham Bay Park as the largest at 2,765 acres and Van Cortland Park as the third largest at 1,146 acres.⁶ To put that into perspective, compare these parks to Central Park in Manhattan. Central Park is globally speaking the most popular park in New York City. It is commonly thought of as a massive park in the middle of a concrete jungle that needs to be reserved and preserved. However, it is kind of a

⁶ "About Parks." *Frequently Asked Questions*. NYC Department of Parks and Recreation. Web. <http://www.nycgovparks.org/about/faq>.

wimp when you compare it to the massive Bronx parks. It is only 843 acres large.⁷ This is still an impressive park that demands to be respected. However, the Bronx has two parks that are significantly larger than Central Park. In total, the Bronx has 7,000 acres of parkland. This covers about 25 percent of its total area.⁸

With this amount of park space, you would think that the public health conditions of the Bronx would be better than any other borough. The high number of parks should mean that there is a bigger chance for children to play outside, breathe fresh air, and participate in physical activity. However, the horrible environmental conditions of the Bronx from air, water, and waste pollution have severely damaged the public health of residents living in the Bronx. In a survey about environmental health issues in the Bronx completed in 2010, 58.1% of the Bronx residents surveyed said that the environmental condition of the Bronx was either “low” or “very low.”⁹ When asked about the availability of healthy food, 67% replied “low” or “very low.”¹⁰ According to data collected by many organizations in New York State, the Bronx residents’ perceptions of the environmental health of their community are accurate.

The Bronx is the least healthy county in New York State. It has high rates of diabetes, obesity, and asthma.¹¹ According to a study completed by the NYC Department of Health, one in four adults living in the Bronx is obese, or 25%. Diabetes, which is influenced by obesity, is

⁷ “About Parks”

⁸ Diaz, Jr., Ruben. “Environment and Open Space”. Planning and Development. <http://bronxboropres.nyc.gov/planning/environment.html>

⁹ Casado, Joann., Lederer, Robert. "A Survey on Environmental Health Issues in the Bronx." *Bronx Health Link* (2010). TBHL. Web. http://www.bronxhealthlink.org/tbhl/research/tbhl_environmental_survey_report_pdf:en-us.pdf. (11).

¹⁰ Casado and Lederer (12).

¹¹ University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. County Health Rankings 2014. http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/sites/default/files/state/downloads/CHR2014_NY_v2.pdf. (5).

found in 12% of adults living in the Bronx.¹² The percentage of adults with asthma is consistently higher in the Bronx than any other county in New York State. This includes the rate of asthma prevalence in adults, the rate of emergency hospital visits, and asthma death rates.¹³ Figure 1 below shows the disparity with both asthma emergency department visit rates and also asthma related deaths in the Bronx compared to other areas of New York State. The rate of asthma, obesity, and diabetes is now in a cycle. There is a double-edged sword now in play. The *New York County Health Rankings 2014 Report* Identifies that the Bronx comes in last place for the health outcomes of the county, but it is also last when it comes to the health factors. The health outcome is identified as “how healthy a county is” versus the health factor which is identified as “what influences the health of the county.”¹⁴ The fact that the Bronx ranks the worst in terms of health factors means that even if residents tried to improve their health conditions on their own, factors from their location like access to healthy food or safe space for physical activity limits their health outcomes.

¹² Take Care Southeast Bronx. "Community Health Profiles." 2 (2006). *NYC Gov-Health*. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Web. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2006chp-104.pdf>. (7).

¹³ Public Health Information Group. "New York State Asthma Surveillance Summary Report." (2013). New York City Department of Health. Web. https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/ny_asthma/pdf/2013_asthma_surveillance_summary_report.pdf. (16-20).

¹⁴ University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (5).

Age-Adjusted* Asthma Emergency Department Visit Rate per 10,000 Residents by County, New York State, 2009-2011

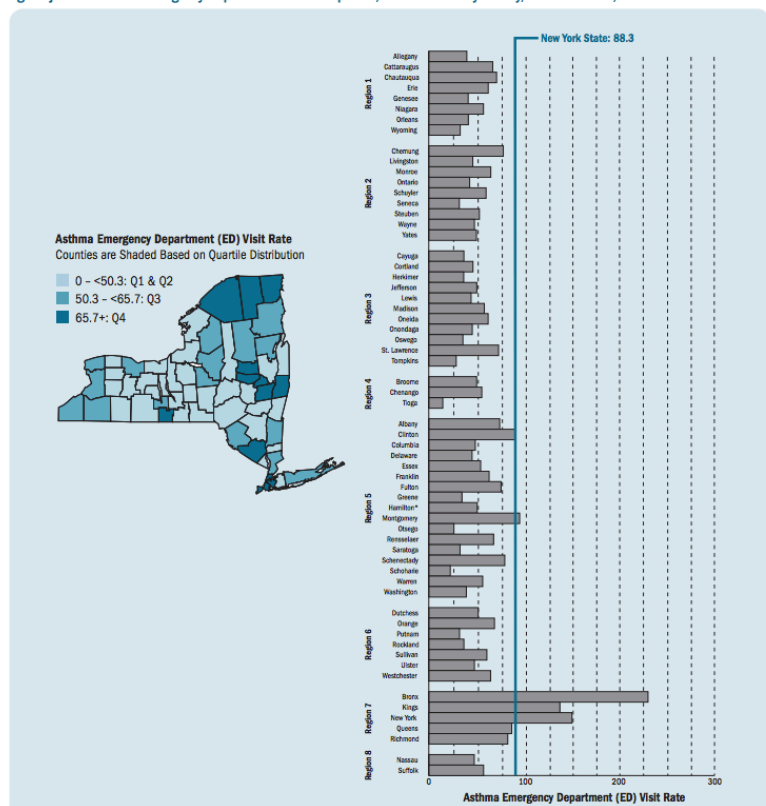
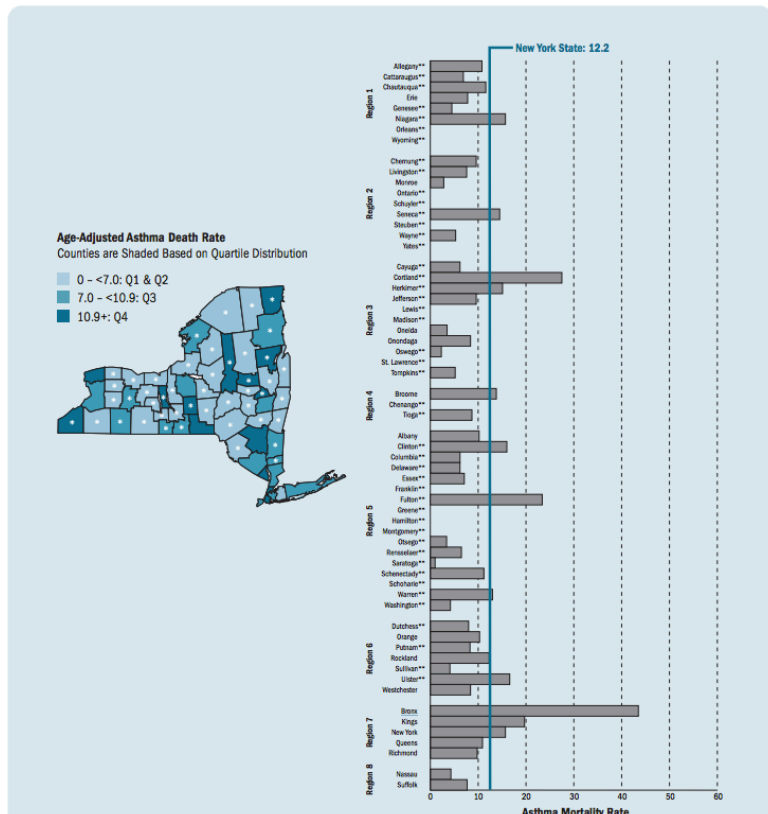


Figure 1 shows the rates of both the asthma emergency departments visit rates for regions in the state of New York (top) and the rates of asthma related deaths for regions in the State of New York (bottom). The longest bar shown in each graph represents the Bronx, which is high above any other region in New York and also far above the New York State average (blue line).¹⁵

Age-Adjusted* Asthma Death Rate per One Million Residents, New York State, 2009-2011



¹⁵ Public Health Information Group (145-153).

Health factors are important in order to explain why the Bronx has the worst environmental and public health. By observing the health factors that influence the health outcomes, we can see the problem on an institutional level. The poor quality of the air in the Bronx, especially the South Bronx, is the main factor. The number of waste transfer stations, sewage treatment plants, massive highways, and wholesale markets and warehouses are responsible for the horrible air pollution. In 2006, NYU completed a study on the environmental health and policy in the South Bronx. The NYU researchers found a direct link between the air quality in the Bronx and the asthma rate in children. They concluded that there was a strong correlation between asthma rates, poverty, the percentage of residents of color, and the number of industrial facilities in the Bronx.¹⁶

A map in the study completed by NYU indicates that there were over a dozen waste transfer stations just in the South Bronx in 2006.¹⁷ Also shown is a spaghetti bowl of massive highway systems that cut through the Bronx. Hundreds of thousands of tons of air pollution comes into the Bronx daily due to the heavy concentration of vehicles and large trucks on the highways. Interstates 87, 95, 278, and 895 are just a few examples of the penetrating highway system that has taken over the Bronx. There is also a heavy concentration of industry on the map.¹⁸ The study reports that a fifth of all elementary and middle school students in the South Bronx attend schools within 150 meters (500 feet or less than two city blocks) of major highways. To compare, this means that 25% of elementary and middle school students attend a school that was located within two city blocks of a highway, whereas in New York City as a

¹⁶ ICIS. "South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study." *Institute for Civil Infrastructure Systems (ICIS) NYU*. Web. Apr. 2009. http://www.icisnyu.org/south_bronx/admin/files/NYU_WagnerPhaseVIreport.pdf. (12).

¹⁷ ICIS (14).

¹⁸ ICIS (14).

whole, that number is far less at 10%.¹⁹ The air quality in these areas were so bad in 2006 that the Environmental Protection Agency actually considered it as a “non-attainment area” due to the amount of particulate matter in the air. The particulate matter in this area well exceeded the annual standard of the Environmental Protection Agency.²⁰ The study found that “if you live in the South Bronx your child is twice as likely to attend a school near a highway as other children in the City.”²¹

In addition to having the worst health statistics out of counties of New York State, and almost the country, the Bronx also has the highest amount of people living below the poverty line. The United States Census reports that between 2009-2013, about 30% of the people living in the Bronx lived below the poverty level. This percentage increases when looking at the South Bronx. Compare that to the New York State percentage of 15.3%, and the United States percentage of 15.4%.²² The Census also reports that a majority of the people living in the Bronx are people of color, mostly black and Latino.

If you combine all of the data mentioned so far, it creates a bleak picture of the environmental, health, and economic conditions of the Bronx. How can the Bronx have such a high risk of asthma, diabetes, obesity and also a record high number of people living below poverty, while also having the largest number of parkland? The math just does not add up. Ideally speaking, Bronx residents should have plenty of options to go outside and participate in physical activity in the abundance of park space in their community. However, a dirty and polluted air and environment restricts healthy physical activity. In addition to this constraint, the actual condition of the parks themselves is not as ideal as residents would hope.

¹⁹ ICIS (15).

²⁰ ICIS (15).

²¹ ICIS (15).

²² "State and County QuickFacts." *United States Census Bureau*. U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014. Web. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/36005.html>.

Bronx parks and the Bronx environment have suffered neglect and mistreatment from the government for decades. A classic example is the Bronx River. The Bronx River was one of the most “pure and wholesome” waterways round New York in the 1800s.²³ However, as industrialization occurred in the Bronx, the river turned into an “open sewer”, only to be polluted more and more throughout the 1900s. Instead of preserving the Bronx River and all of the ecosystems that it supported, the city continued to develop and urbanize, building highways across the community and damaging the river even more. The government did not support the preservation of the river, but instead made matters worse. This was the policy for many other parks, too.²⁴

More of the Bronx River’s history will be provided in the next chapter of this thesis. The history given in this section is just to highlight the government’s lack of focus on the Bronx environment. Community based organizations and volunteers cleaned the river, while the borough and city governments supported the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway, and three other major highways. This historic treatment of the Bronx has carried over to today’s environmental policy towards the Bronx. The city government allocates the least amount of money for environmental projects to the Bronx. Figure 2 below shows the capital funding for parks from the years 200-2007. The chart shows that the Bronx is funded significantly less than any other borough (Wisniewski).²⁵

²³ "Natural and Social History." *About the River*. Bronx River Alliance. Web.<http://bronxriver.org/?pg=content&p=abouttheriver&m1=9>.

²⁴ "Natural and Social History."

²⁵ Wisniewski, Adam. “Bronx Parks Cheated Out of Promised Funds?”. The Riverdale Press. Stories. December 21, 2011. <http://riverdalepress.com/stories/Bronx-parks-cheated-out-of-promised-funds,49651>

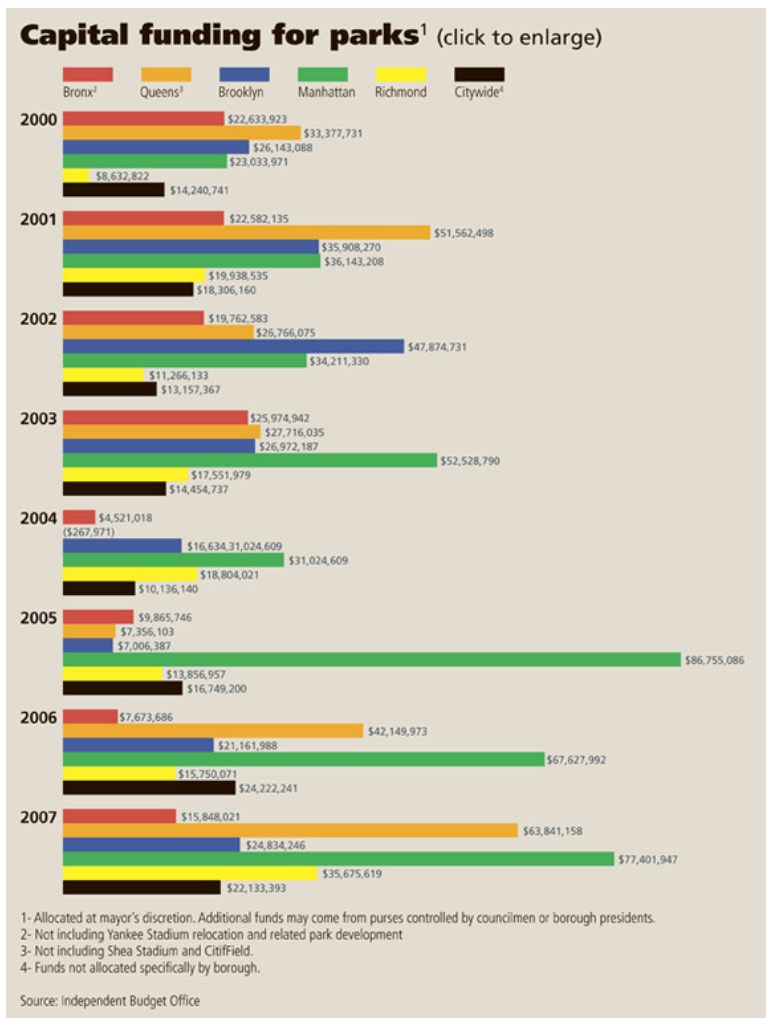


Figure 2 shows the capital funding for parks in the New York City Boroughs. The red bar is the Bronx, which is consistently lower than the other boroughs.²⁶

Governmental funding and support will be explained further in Chapter Three of this thesis. For this section, though, it is important to state that governmental funding for environmental sustainability and justice was not available to the Bronx until the community pushed for it. Only recently are we starting to see an increase in the amount of money and grants being given to the Bronx area. One example is the PlaNYC initiative started by the Mayor Michael Bloomberg administration in 2007. The PlaNYC effort is composed of over 130 initiatives that are aimed at preparing New York City for a growing population while improving

²⁶ Wisnieski.

the quality of life.²⁷ Between one fifth and one quarter of the initiatives explicitly state that they are designed for the Bronx or for environmental justice communities.²⁸ When PlaNYC was first imagined, it came from the city level, not the community level. It was “never envisioned as a broad-based planning process that engaged area residents.”²⁹ Therefore, the plan focused on infrastructure needs and other metrics like lowering the carbon footprint. There was only one main environmental justice community organization involved in the discussion and planning for PlaNYC: WE ACT. They had the responsibility of representing environmental justice community needs, and they fought to keep the environmental justice “principles, initiative, and perspectives alive.”³⁰ In the years following the beginning of PlaNYC, many more environmental justice communities demanded their voices be heard, and the community has positively affected the vision of PlaNYC. Especially in the Bronx, residents request that each section of the plan focus on environmental justice.³¹ The discussion around PlaNYC has created more governmental involvement in addressing environmental justice in recent years.

In addition to PlaNYC initiatives, organizations like the Bronx River Alliance and New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC EJA) have received more support from the government in recent years for their projects. In 2013, The Bronx River Alliance reported that it received “a total of \$12,250,000 in capital funds for the river and the greenway: \$12,000,000 for Phase 2 of Starlight Park from mayoral funds and \$250,000 for fish passage at the twin dams in

²⁷ "About PlaNYC." *PlaNYC*. The City of New York, 2015. Web.<http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc/html/about/about.shtml>.

²⁸ "PlaNYC Progress Report 2014." The City of New York. (2014). *NYC*. Web. http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc/2030/downloads/pdf/140422_PlaNYC-Report_FINAL_Web.pdf.

²⁹ Shepard, Peggy, Stephanie Tyree, and Cecil Corbin-Mark. "PlaNYC: EJ Group Takes the Inside Track to Advocate Sustainability." *Reimagine*.2007. <http://reimaginepe.org/node/1828>.

³⁰ Shepard, Peggy, Stephanie Tyree, and Cecil Corbin-Mark.

³¹ Kazis, Noah. "Bronx Residents Demand a Greater, Greener, Fairer PlaNYC." *Streetsblog NYC*. October 27, 2010. <http://www.streetsblog.org/2010/10/27/bronx-residents-demand-a-greater-greener-fairer-planyc/>

the Bronx Zoo from Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr.”³² NYC EJA has received funding for many initiatives they are pursuing, like the Solid Waste Management Plan in 2006 and the Waterfront Justice Project in 2010, just to name a couple.³³ This funding is impressive, especially because it is going towards environmental justice communities in the Bronx. Finally we are starting to see the government answer the demand for environmental protection and restoration in the Bronx. Community based organizations are responsible for this environmental justice movement. Chapter Four will explain how the community was able to demand justice in more detail. The quantitative take-away from this chapter is that the Bronx is a community that has suffered great losses and needs support. The Bronx needs the government to intentionally promote environmental justice if it is to move towards a healthier environment and lifestyle.

Chapter 2. A Bronx Tale of The History of Redlining

In order to understand the effects of environmental racism that we see in the Bronx today, we must first know the environmental history of the Bronx, as well as its socio-economic history. Much like many of the cities in our world today, the Bronx has changed drastically over the past few centuries. From colonialism to industrialization, each decade brought new people, cultures, and development to the Bronx. Before Europeans arrived in the Bronx, Mohegan Indian villages along the Bronx River first inhabited the land.³⁴ The Bronx was a heavily wooded area that was full of wildlife and biodiversity. The Bronx River was one of the main areas for this rich biodiversity. This biodiversity has suffered great loss over the last century due to the

³² “Annual Report 2013”. Bronx River Alliance. 2013. http://bronxriver.org/puma/images/usersubmitted/file/BRA%20Annual%20Report%202013_final_sm.pdf

³³ NYC EJA. “Camiagns.” New York City Environmental Justice Alliance. http://www.nyc-eja.dreamhosters.com/?page_id=315

³⁴ “Natural and Social History”

transformation of the Bronx to an urban area. After decades of environmental degradation through development, construction, and urbanization, the Bronx River and the Bronx environment has become a top priority for many environmental justice activists. The Bronx Zoo and the New York Botanical Gardens, which both created in the late 19th century, are the main preserves of Bronx environmental history. These two areas have maintained some aspect of how the Bronx environment used to appear in history.³⁵

The Bronx River attracted European fur traders in the early 1600s, and by 1639 the first European bought land from the Mohegan Indians and settled in the Bronx along the Bronx River. Swedish developer Jonas Bronck bought the five-acre tract for “two guns, two kettles, two coats, two adzes, two shirts, one barrel of cider and six bits of money.”³⁶ After dying on his farm in 1643, “his contemporaries name the nearby stream the Bronck River, and today the entire borough is named after its first European settler.”³⁷

Bronck had servants from Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark. Many historians, including Lloyd Ultan, say that Bronck’s legacy was “a multiethnic settlement of people from different cultures [which] presaged the following 350 years when throngs of English, Irish, African-American, Italian, Hispanic, and Asian people would come to the Bronx, live side by side, and work together...”³⁸ Bronck’s servants could be considered as the first wave of immigrants who brought the diversity to the Bronx that it is known for today.

In 1828, Jordan Mott bought land and settled in the South Bronx in an area he named Mott Haven. There he built the "first iron foundry in the Bronx" where he manufactured coal-

³⁵ “Natural and Social History”.

³⁶ Rooney, Jim. *Organizing the South Bronx*. Albany: State U of New York, 1995. (22).

³⁷ Rooney (22).

³⁸ Rooney (22).

burning stoves.³⁹ Mott's factory "spurred other industrial growth and attracted workers to talk Bronx."⁴⁰ In 1841, the New York and Harlem River Railroad was built through the Bronx River Valley. The rail stations encouraged development in the Bronx, and population shifts began to occur. Irish immigrant laborers were mainly given the task of building railroads. Author Jim Rooney writes in *Organizing the South Bronx*, "it is worth for calling that, like the black migrants and Hispanic immigrants who saturated the Bronx after World War II, these Irish newcomers were viewed with hostility and dread."⁴¹ Author Jill Jonnes, in her book *We're Still Her*, writes "the impoverished Irish inundated almshouses, courts, and jails. Although by the 1850s the Irish were one-third of the populace, they accounted for 55 percent of the arrests and two-thirds of the paupers...Native-born Americans reviled the Irish as lazy, filthy, drunken brawlers who bonded into young gangs and terrorized the streets."⁴² This poor treatment of the Irish immigrants would continue through every wave of new immigrants or migrants to follow.

In the mid-1800s the Bronx was regarded as a wealthy country getaway for the Manhattan elites.⁴³ Poet Joseph Robert Drake described the thick forests and pure water along the Bronx River in his 1817 poem "Bronx." It was a pristine open land with clean air and water. Many people moved into the Bronx to enjoy cleaner air and a healthier lifestyle. Edgar Allan Poe moved to the Bronx in 1844 because his wife was ill and he hoped the cleaner air would save her. Nearing the 1900s, many more people were moving out of Manhattan and into the Bronx.⁴⁴ Because of the improved transportation, more people were retreating to the Bronx and in 1874 the South Bronx was annexed to New York City. Year after year, more and more of the Bronx

³⁹ Rooney (25)

⁴⁰ Rooney (25)

⁴¹ Rooney (25)

⁴² Jonnes, Jill. *We're Still Here: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of the South Bronx*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1986. (18).

⁴³ Rooney (26)

⁴⁴ "Natural and Social History"

became part of New York City until 1898 when New York City became the full five boroughs.⁴⁵ In the end of the 19th century, The Bronx Zoo and the New York Botanical Gardens opened, bringing more visitors and work opportunities to the Bronx area. This, combined with the growing industry, called for even more transportation options to the Bronx, thus the Third Avenue Elevated (El) rail line extended to the Bronx. The El train brought mass immigration to the Bronx.⁴⁶ The Irish and German immigrants were by this time prosperous, and new immigrant groups took their place on the low end of society.

The cycle of industry growth and population growth in the Bronx continued rapidly into the 1900s. Between 1900-1925, the South Bronx population rose from 200,000 to over a million. This called for more subways and more industry. The Bronx was becoming a completely new community, both environmentally and socioeconomically.⁴⁷ The pre-existing community tried to fight the construction of tenements and the demolition of townhouses in the Bronx, however tenements were constructed in the Bronx to keep up with the influx of new residents. These tenements were quickly and cheaply built; they were “built to hold as many families as possible, giving no consideration to light, ventilation, or such amenities as water or garbage removal.”⁴⁸ In 1929, much of the construction and development slowed or halted due to the Great Depression. The South Bronx, however, was able to stay on its feet. By 1935, construction resumed and the South Bronx built more private residential buildings than any other city in the United States. Many residents proudly proclaimed that the Bronx was “the city without a slum.”⁴⁹ Rooney writes, “By the end of the decade the South Bronx was a secure, hardworking area...home to

⁴⁵ Rooney (28)

⁴⁶ Rooney (27)

⁴⁷ Rooney (28)

⁴⁸ Jonnes (18)

⁴⁹ Rooney (31)

laborers and the emerging middle class, and ordinary life was firmly rooted in distinct, stable neighborhoods.”⁵⁰

What happened to this wealthy, healthy, “city without a slum” where so many Americans were able to create firm financial lifestyles for themselves? World War II began in the 1940s, pulling many of the men out of the factories and out of the Bronx. Rooney writes that the factories in the Bronx were repurposed to make munitions day in and day out, and that many more factory workers were needed to keep production moving.⁵¹ Also during the 1940s, American agriculture in the south was becoming mechanized, forcing many poor black agricultural workers out of a job. In Puerto Rico, economic conditions were very similar. So both groups, poor Southern Blacks and Puerto Ricans, migrated to the North in hopes of finding better work. The influx of southern black workers to the Bronx and other northern urban areas was one of the largest internal migrations ever in this country.⁵² The Bronx had always been a “reception zone for newly arrived immigrants, a place for newcomers to get their bearings and slowly adjust to mainstream American society.”⁵³ But the migration of black people from the South and immigration of Latino people from Puerto Rico to the Bronx was drastically different than any other immigration wave the Bronx has experienced in its history. Former immigrants, including the Irish, German, Italian, and Jews, integrated into the Bronx by adapting to the local economy and working their way up the social ladder. However this upward mobility did not happen for the black and Latino newcomers.⁵⁴ In fact, post World War II era was a turning point for the Bronx. This history is very complex and still relatively unknown by many. However, this history

⁵⁰ Rooney (31)

⁵¹ Rooney (31)

⁵² Rooney (31)

⁵³ Rooney (42)

⁵⁴ Rooney (42)

illuminates why the Bronx collapsed and declined throughout the last half of the twentieth century.

Jim Rooney identifies two causes for the collapse of the Bronx after World War II. The first was the disappearance of jobs in the area.⁵⁵ The Bronx had been a “preeminent manufacturing and port city, absorbing the unskilled millions who flocked there from Europe and yielded great fortunes for the astute and daring.”⁵⁶ However, after World War II, the economy shifted dramatically and the low-skilled manufacturing jobs that were once available to all newcomers were now moving out of the Bronx. All of the new residents were now left out of employment because the few jobs that were left required additional skills these workers did not have. Rooney writes that the loss of low-skill jobs was a “key difference between the arrivals who came here after World War II and those who had been successfully assimilated into America society before the War.” This meant that black and Latino people were unable to work their way up the economic and social ladder like former immigrant arrivals did. The impact that this loss of economic opportunity had on the community was long lasting and set back many generations of people of color in the Bronx.⁵⁷

The second cause of the collapse of the Bronx identified by Rooney was the problematic governmental policies that impacted communities of color.⁵⁸ Redlining of communities of color on the policy level led to “white flight” from the Bronx like other urban cities across the country. To protect banks and private sector businesses from the potential impact of another Great Depression, the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) along with the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC) were created under the New Deal. HOLC assisted homeowners in

⁵⁵ Rooney (42)

⁵⁶ Jonnes (91)

⁵⁷ Rooney (42)

⁵⁸ Rooney (43)

preventing foreclosure and the FHA insured loans from private sector businesses and banks.⁵⁹ Much like the expansion out of Manhattan into the Bronx a century earlier, HOLC and FHA facilitated the white flight of families—those who were eligible for these programs—out of the Bronx and into suburban communities. Developers, financially supported by the government, sought out wide-open spaces in the suburbs with cheap property value to build single-family units. These areas were largely located outside of the city in New Jersey and Long Island. Jonnes writes, “Any family with the money to buy a car could drive out to these new settlements, pay nothing down, sign a mortgage, and become the proud owner of a brand new home and yard.”⁶⁰ It was actually cheaper for a family to buy a home in the suburbs with many amenities not available in the city than rent an apartment in the Bronx. Because of this, many people were moving out of the Bronx and established a new financial investment for themselves, achieving the American Dream.⁶¹ Instead of reinvesting in the Bronx, suburban homes became the focus of government funding. In fact, the FHA and other New Deal Programs were focusing on strictly funding single-family homes, not multifamily units.⁶² While these programs were a significant opportunity for many families to gain upward mobility, families of color were systematically excluded from these opportunities through racist practices like redlining within these programs, leaving urban communities like the Bronx with residents who had very little access to credit, employment and any form of social and economic opportunities.

Just as the black and Latino population entered the Bronx in hopes of a better life, jobs disappeared from their communities. White families who were established in the Bronx for generations now left and their investment followed them to the suburbs. The South Bronx, in

⁵⁹ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. *The Color of Wealth: The Story behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide*. New York: New York. 2006. (95).

⁶⁰ Jonnes (95)

⁶¹ Rooney (49)

⁶² Rooney (49)

particular, suffered greatly because of the systematic exclusion of communities of color to sustainable employment, safe and affordable housing, and other basic needs that help communities flourish—all directly tied to the institutional racism that was evident within the systems during this time. In fact, HOLC lent nearly one million loans to families to move into the suburbs, but not a single loan went to a black person.⁶³ It was nearly impossible for people of color to achieve home ownership because of the FHA and HOLC racist practices. Other federal mortgage companies were following the same practices of divesting from the Bronx. For example, the Federal National Mortgage Association and the Government National Mortgage Agency required Bronx banks to invest only 10 percent of their funds within the borough.⁶⁴ This became a common practice for all local banks and loan companies. The federal policies allowed for banks and loan companies to pick and choose where they invested and this resulted in the racist practice of redlining. While the private investments were going to white families out of the city, inside of the Bronx the New York City Housing Authority focused on building public housing in the Bronx. The government also invested significant funding into massive highway construction that helped facilitate transportation to and from the suburbs while tearing through communities like the Bronx. This investment in highway infrastructure led to many environmental and socio-economic changes in the Bronx.⁶⁵

As already mentioned, redlining—the practice of classifying geographic areas as risky or hazardous based on race—as a practice was used widely within the Bronx. The HOLC, who is cited as originating the practice, “outlined neighborhoods on a color-coded, alphabetically rated map. Blue, or ‘A’ neighborhoods were most desirable, yellow ‘B’ neighborhoods were not as affluent, green ‘C’ neighborhoods bordered black neighborhoods, and red ‘D’ neighborhoods

⁶³ Lui, et. al. (95)

⁶⁴ Rooney (50)

⁶⁵ Jonnes (118)

were black areas.”⁶⁶ These programs kept people of color from buying homes, or renovating their homes and instead promoted black tenancy in the Bronx and white home ownership outside of the Bronx. Areas in the Bronx that were literally colored in red because they were “black neighborhoods” were considered risk areas for investment by banks and funders, and therefore received no investment. Even landlords who owned apartment buildings in these areas began to disinvest in their communities. It was a top down, institutional oppression of the Bronx that was caused by discrimination and resulted in the degradation of the Bronx.

Landlords in redlined areas found it nearly impossible to meet their mortgage every month, let alone make a profit. Redlining made their buildings the least desirable apartments in the least desirable neighborhoods, all because as little as one black family lived nearby. White, middle class families would not rent or buy in the redlined neighborhoods, so the only demand for housing was coming from poor black families. Rents were low because that was all that the people in the redlined neighborhoods could afford. The aging housing stock of the Bronx was already deteriorating and the poor housing conditions were exacerbated with the lack of access landlords had to credit to renovate their buildings. Landlords were left with deteriorating buildings and no profits. The Bronx was left with no systemic support to uphold the community. The only reconstruction of the Bronx that did occur was the development of public housing and major highways, and these only negatively impacted residents of the Bronx.⁶⁷

With no access to credit because of redlining, landlords could not sell their buildings as a way of recuperating at least part of their investment. Because their buildings were now characterized as undesirable by investors, the buildings that were sold went to ‘slumlords’ that

⁶⁶ Lui, et. al. (95)

⁶⁷ Rooney (51)

were “content to ride the sinking ship until it capsized.”⁶⁸ After a couple decades of poor maintenance by the slumlords, most buildings in the Bronx lost all value and the housing stock declined drastically. The old, overcrowded buildings became the victims of fires that would plague the Bronx for many years.⁶⁹ The fires, starting in the South Bronx and working their way Northward, were mainly due to overcrowding and lack of maintenance. Author Joe Flood writes in his book *The Fires*, “Aging electrical wiring and outlets, as well as leaky oil- and gas-burning furnaces and water heaters, sparked thousands of blazes.”⁷⁰ Space heaters, cigarettes, and other substance abuses also started fires. Some of the fires were the result of arson, done by the landlords themselves as a way to acquire insurance money from the building.⁷¹

No one seemed to care that the Bronx was burning at a rapid rate. Fires were everywhere, but at the same time fire departments were being closed down.⁷² The residents of the Bronx who were neglected and considered a ‘risk’ had little faith in their community. Violence ensued, and for years, the Bronx continued into a downward spiral.⁷³ The government invested little in the collapsing community. The widely held view that the Bronx was less desirable implemented through redlining was now cemented in the violence and deterioration that followed. The health of the residents, economics of the community, and the environment of the Bronx all suffered until the community organized against the discrimination and unfair conditions. In Chapter Four, I will discuss further how the community demanded to be seen, heard, and treated as valuable and given justice.

⁶⁸ Flood, Joe. *The Fires: How a Computer Formula Burned down New York City--and Determined the Future of American Cities*. New York: Riverhead, 2010. (158).

⁶⁹ Flood (158)

⁷⁰ Flood (160)

⁷¹ Flood (160)

⁷² Flood (217)

⁷³ Jonnes (235)

Chapter 3. Political Support and Funding for Environmental Projects and Sustainability

Over the last few decades, environmental politics and policy have become major concerns on the national political agenda. From a global crisis to a local concern, environmental issues have become significant topics in many political circles. Especially for Americans, issues such as preserving nature, preventing pollution, and sustainable consumption of natural resources have become the main concerns for environmental activism. These concerns have brought about many policies, regulations, and sustainable initiatives in our government and also private sector.⁷⁴ Environmental politics has three key actors: “individual and groups motivated to protect and improve the environment, the environmental opposition, and the institutions of policy development and implementation.”⁷⁵ Chapter Four of this thesis will focus more on the first key actor, those motivated to protect and improve the environment. This chapter will focus more on the institutions in the New York City government who develop and implement environmental policies.

While observing the political support and funding for environmental sustainability and justice, it is important to keep in mind that the government is responding to much of the community activism social movement regarding environmental justice. In order to have an ecological society that is promoting environmental health, the government must allow public participation in policy making, or participatory democracy. The people who know the community and the environment in an area the most should have the power through participation to create and implement public policy.⁷⁶ This is the best method to promote environmental

⁷⁴ Hays, Samuel. *A History of Environmental Politics Since 1945*. Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000. (1).

⁷⁵ Hays (2)

⁷⁶ Coleman, Daniel. *Ecopolitics: Building a Green Society*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994. (141)

justice. The community is therefore very influential to the government and other institutions. The community is the motivation behind much of the policies and funding I will review in this chapter. In this chapter, I will review only the governmental and institutional component of environmental politics.

Based on the data given in Chapter 1, it is clear to see the problems that face New York City and the Bronx. Mainly, there is an issue of proper funding for the physical environment. Recall that the Bronx has the largest parks out of the five boroughs, yet consistently the least amount of funding for those parks. Instead of supporting the environment of the Bronx, the government supported industry that had negative impacts on the environment in the Bronx. This is one major concern. Another issue is that of the social environment and the public health. Bronx residents are suffering from the highest rates of asthma, diabetes, and obesity. More funding to environmental justice communities means healthier and happier citizens. Healthier and happier citizens mean a better physical environment. It can go both ways. It seems that the New York City government has recognized this relationship, and they have been taking actions in communities that need their support. The city government switched its focus from mainly funding housing projects and mass transportation construction to environmental protection and sustainability. This switch was due to several major motivators. Public health and community organizing was one. Public health has been a major concern and talking point for politicians for many decades. In Chapter One, we saw the extremely poor health of the Bronx residents that was caused by environmental factors. This means that when considering public health and environmental health, politicians must recognize the relationship between the two. In the past, it was commonly thought that public health and environmental protection were two separate areas

because there was always a different between the “human” and the “physical environment.”⁷⁷ However, recently there has been a shift in thinking. It is now becoming a popular consensus that the local environment and local health are very connected, and this is resulting in a “greater recognition of the importance and integration of public health, urban planning, and environmental science.”⁷⁸ Because environmental conditions heavily affect public health, pressure can be placed on the government to take environmental action. We have seen this response from the New York City government throughout the last decade or so.

The *main* motivator for political action, though, was the creation of the Millennium Development Goals, and the global social awareness of the threats of climate change. The Millennium Development Goals were created and agreed upon in the early 2000s by the United Nations and its active members. World leaders came together to discuss how they could eradicate poverty, hunger, disease, and promote education, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. This was a major moment for social justice because leaders from around the world were finally committed to working together to help the world’s poor and oppressed. The Millennium Development Goals have a deadline of 2015.⁷⁹ The Goals have inspired cities around the world to be accountable and responsible for their impacts on the environment. New York City considered the goals and what is revealed about the city’s role in climate change. This was when we saw the development of a conscience in the government that was dedicated to environmental issues. In 2007, Mayor Bloomberg supported the release of the PlaNYC Initiative in order to make New York City a greener, more sustainable city. The initial objectives of the plan were “reducing carbon emissions 30% by 2030, achieving the cleanest air quality in the

⁷⁷ Freudenberg, Nicholas, Sandro Galea, and David Vlahov. *Cities and the Health of the Public*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006. (78)

⁷⁸ Freudenberg, Nicholas, Sandro Galea, and David Vlahov. (79)

⁷⁹ United Nations. “Millennium Development Goals and Beyond.” UN. 2015. <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml>

nation, fortifying our waterfronts and waterways, cleaning contaminated land, and ensuring all New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of a park.”⁸⁰ The plan has developed over the years to respond to community concerns about each initiative, and it now has over 130 action plans. However, upon further investigation, are these governmental programs and policies actually being carried out in the way the government planned? In terms of environmental justice and addressing environmental racism, are the political actors making intentional actions to develop policies that benefit the Bronx?

There have been many criticisms written about how the PlaNYC initiatives and other government programs created for the environment. Residents of the Bronx have said that initiatives for the city environment have been executed in a biased way, or have actually damaged the Bronx community. The PlaNYC objectives are meant for all five boroughs; however in practice not many of the initiatives directly confront environmental justice issues in the Bronx. In order to make progress in addressing environmental racism, the politicians supporting PlaNYC need to be intentional about where the planning, funding, and effort goes. For example, in 2010 a community rally in the South Bronx addressed its concerns with PlaNYC’s effects on their community. They demanded a bolder campaign that addressed major issues in their community, rather than the showy projects that PlaNYC had achieved up until that point.⁸¹ At this meeting, a representative from the Mayor’s office tried to explain to the residents all of the benefits that the program had already brought to the Bronx. These benefits were “102,000 new trees planted in the borough, the city’s first Select Bus Service route, or shifts away from the dirty heating oils that have contributed to asthma rates...”⁸² These projects were not enough for the residents, though. They wanted more systemic changes, like addressing the

⁸⁰ "About PlaNYC."

⁸¹ Kazis

⁸² Kazis

mass transit systems built across the Bronx. These systems bring in so much pollution that it makes the planting of trees across the Bronx obsolete. Also, the city government improved the parks in the Bronx, giving funding to places like the Bronx River Alliance as stated in Chapter One. However, the citizens at this meeting argued that it is no easy task to get to these parks. Many routes to the parks are under or alongside major highways.⁸³ These are systemic issues that need to be addressed if the city government truly wishes to create policies for environmental justice and sustainability.

In another example of how the city government attempted to create environmental policies but failed in the execution was with the Croton Water Filtration Plant construction. In an attempt to improve and increase water supply to the Bronx, the city decided to construct the Croton Water Treatment Plant. The community, who was skeptical about the environmental impacts of the project, did not support the construction. However, after offering \$200 million in funding for Bronx parks, the Department of Environmental Protection was able to get the plant approved in 2003. Construction has been delayed year after year, taking more and more money from the community. In addition to this, the money that was promised in 2003 as a bribe to the community acted as a buffer against normal money given to Bronx parks from the city. As you see in Figure 1 in Chapter One above, after the money from the Croton Water Treatment Plant deal was promised to the Bronx, the city cut most of the capital funding for parks in the Bronx. On top of this, most of the money given to the Bronx for parks was used to either replace parks that were destroyed by the new Yankee Stadium or it was used in the construction of Yankee Stadium itself.⁸⁴ In fact, “Only \$107 million of the \$200 million promised by Mayor Bloomberg has been spent on Bronx parks and playgrounds while the new water filtration plant...estimated

⁸³ Kazis

⁸⁴ Wisniewski

to cost \$1.2 billion has ballooned to \$3.5 billion and counting.”⁸⁵ The government had an opportunity to work with the community to support environmental justice and sustainability through this project, but instead it gained a reputation of corruption, mistrust, and broken promises.

In the 2014 PlaNYC progress report, Mayor Bill de Blasio wrote:

“Aging infrastructure, climate change, a fast-changing economy, and the critical need to preserve our environment combine to make urban sustainability and resiliency an urgent priority. Building on recent progress, we will expand and create new pathways to advance environmental and infrastructure initiatives and we will continue to work towards our goals of a sustainable and resilient city for all New Yorkers. We will provide more units of affordable housing for our increasing population. We will further reduce our city’s carbon emissions. We will reduce energy consumption in our largest buildings, and we will continue to provide support to communities most affected by Hurricane Sandy as we will rebuild a stronger, more resilient New York.”⁸⁶

Also, in his “One City: Built To Last” campaign, Mayor de Blasio is “committing to reduce our emissions by 80 percent below 2005 levels by 2050.”⁸⁷ Borough President Diaz Jr. has followed this leadership from Mayor de Blasio and has fought for many environmental development projects for the Bronx. On his website for planning and development, you can see that he has been engaged in many different areas of environmental planning. These areas include:

“Promoting Green and Sustainable Development,” “Cleaning Up the Environment,” “Improving Waterfront Access and Green Spaces,” “Parks,” and “Tree Planting.”⁸⁸ These initiatives are impressive considering the environmental political history of the Bronx leading up to today. This

⁸⁵ Gonzalez, Juan. “Ten years later, Croton Water Filtration Plant deal to invest in parks, playgrounds a mess of broken promises”. NY Daily News. June 25, 2013. <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/bronx/croton-water-filtration-system-deal-mess-broken-promises-article-1.1382460>

⁸⁶ “PlaNYC Progress Report 2014.” (4)

⁸⁷ de Blasio, Bill. “NYC Built To Last.” City of New York. 2014. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/builttolast/pages/home/home.shtml>

⁸⁸ Diaz, Jr.

leadership appears to be much more in touch with the Bronx community and the organizations fighting for environmental justice here.

While the government has worked closely with significant organizations such as the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance and the Bronx River Alliance to promote environmental sustainability and justice, it still continues to allow exploitation of the Bronx community through corporate and industrial interests. Although the government has mandated studies to be conducted on asthma in the Bronx, and although de Blasio committed to 80% by 2050, we are still seeing developments that are counter-productive to these goals. The most recent example of this is the approval of the FreshDirect food manufacturing and distribution operation center moving to the South Bronx. Diaz, Jr. and other supporters believe that the FreshDirect facility will be beneficial to the Bronx because it will bring employment and healthy foods to the Bronx. However, it is also shown that the pollution from the plant and the trucks travelling in and out of the Bronx daily will greatly outweigh any positive impacts the new building could have for the Bronx community.⁸⁹ It is counter-productive of the city and borough governments to claim environmental promises and visions yet carry through with projects like FreshDirect and the Croton plant that hurt the community in the end. Overall, the New York City and Bronx borough political support for environmental sustainability and justice seems to either be focused on short-term, flashy projects that do not address real needs, or the support is a result of a deal that is made at the expense of the community. While progress has been made over the last couple of decades on political support for environmental projects, we need to be clear on what the projects look like when they are actually implemented, and if they actually address

⁸⁹ Hu, Winnie. "FreshDirect Breaks Ground in the South Bronx, Prompting Protests". The New York Times. N.Y. Region. December 22, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/23/nyregion/freshdirect-breaks-ground-in-the-south-bronx-prompting-protests.html>

environmental justice. Currently we see surface level action being taken by the government, not systemic level action. Chapter Four will examine environmental justice through an ethics lens and will provide insight into how the government should provide support for environmental justice in the future.

Chapter 4. Environmental Ethics and the “Little Regard for the Moral Consequences”

The discipline that ties together all of the information presented above is ethics and justice. When you apply the layer of ethics to this discussion, you can see why there is a need for environmental justice. Al Gore wrote in *Earth in the Balance*, “Today we enthusiastically participate in what is in essence a massive and unprecedented experiment with the natural systems of the global environment, with little regard for the moral consequences.”⁹⁰ This quote by Al Gore applies to many situations where the United States and other powerful nations have damaged the natural environment and human health. The quote also speaks directly to the moral and ethical crisis that has been happening in the Bronx. In Chapter One, Two and Three of this thesis, we learned that there is a history of institutionalized oppression and racism in the Bronx that has negatively affected the Bronx for several decades. We saw the inequality in governmental policies and discourse towards the Bronx. We have seen the failure of governments to recognize the connections between Bronx environmental degradation and racist and classist politics. Because there is a connection between environmental issues and other forms of oppression like racism and classism, there is a demand for change at a foundational level. There is a need for more than just Band-Aid policies that attempt to patch-up the problems that

⁹⁰ Westra, Laura, and Peter Wenz. *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995. (xv)

continuously arise. The source of the problems, the source of the wounds, needs to be addressed and transformed. Environmental racism and environmental justice address these issues.

Environmental justice is defined in several varying ways. Among all ways, though, is a basic call for social and political change to use resources sustainably in order to meet human needs and create a better quality of life.⁹¹ There are several principles of environmental justice. A main principle is that every human being deserves equal access to natural resources, clean air and water, satisfactory health care, suitable shelter, and a safe workplace.⁹² When humans are denied equal access to these rights, it is a result of institutional biases and prejudices. Most people in our society would believe that an area like the Bronx has a rundown environment because of either chance or resident irresponsibility. As I said in Chapter Two, though, the Bronx and other low-income communities of color are targeted for environmental injustice and other oppressions. Therefore, environmental justice focuses on institutional decisions and policies, market practices, discrimination, and capitalism to explain why some people (the low-income communities of color) are denied equal access to the rights mentioned above.⁹³ For this reason, environmental justice is needed in order to connect and combat environmental issues and social justice issues. Other principles of environmental justice are: securing the right for equal protection of a community's environment, averting environmental damage before it arises, forcing polluters to prove environmental damage instead of forcing those affected by the damage to prove it, eliminating the requirement to prove a discriminatory intent, and righting inequalities that already exist.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Hofrichter, Richard. *Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1993. (4)

⁹² Hofrichter (4)

⁹³ Hofrichter (4)

⁹⁴ Westra, Laura, and Peter Wenz. (9)

Continuing with the topic of institutional racism discussed in Chapter Two, it is important to outline how racism and environmental justice came together over the course of history. There is a direct connection between racial justice and environmental justice, hence the phrase environmental racism. In the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s to the 1960s, many leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X fought against poor housing conditions in urban communities, bad health and healthcare, and unequal workforce situations. Stemming from this racial analysis of poor living and health conditions in urban communities of color came the environmental justice movement. Communities across the country were beginning to protest dangerous corporate environmental practices, like toxic waste and hazardous landfills. Due to large protests across the country, in 1983 the U.S. Government Accountability Office issued a study of the presence of hazardous waste facilities in low-income communities of color.⁹⁵ This led to additional studies, like the “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States (1987)”, which investigated the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. It found that locations based on race were the most significant, with socioeconomic status also playing a large role.⁹⁶ This study enforced the concept of environmental racism. Reverend Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. defined the phrase environmental racism in a speech he gave in Washington D.C. He said that environmental racism is:

“Racial discrimination in environmental policy making, and the unequal enforcement of environmental laws and regulations...the deliberate targeting of people of color communities for toxic waste facilities...the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in people of color

⁹⁵ Figueroa, Robert Melchior. “Environmental Justice.” *The Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan Reference USA. 2008. https://myfiles.fordham.edu/users/evanburen/4302/environmental_justiceencycethicsdel.pdf (342).

⁹⁶ Figueroa, Robert Melchior. (343).

communities for toxic waste facilities...the history of excluding people of color from the leadership of the environmental movement.”⁹⁷

The final line of the definition above is interesting and definitely provides more insight as to why environmental justice is necessary to combat environmental racism, and why environmental justice is such an important aspect of environmental ethics that needs to be given attention.

Usually when we discuss environmental ethics, we discuss environmentalism. That is, we discuss how humans treat the non-human environment and why negative treatment is an ethical issue. Laura Westra and Peter Wenz, though, take a different angle at environmental ethics in their book *Faces of Environmental Racism*. They identify that people who were usually involved in racial justice were “suspicious” of environmentalists. This is because a majority of the leaders of environmentalist organizations were white, and the member participation was dominantly white. We still see this as being true today. At least with the movements that are shown in the media, the main environmentalist movements are dominantly white. Organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society pay little attention to racist environmental practices in communities of color and instead focus on natural and animal conservation and protection. While conservation is extremely important, there needs to be more social change in order to prevent environmental harm in the future. The authors provide a quote that perfectly sums up many of the frustrations with environmentalism, which was “if it does not hoot in the night, or swim upstream, environmentalists are not interested.”⁹⁸

Westra and Wenz called for a combination of environmental ethics with human ethics. They wanted environmentalists to focus on environmental racism and see that there is a fight for justice there. They write that environmentalists need to join the fight against racism. If there is going to be a united effort for environmental improvement, environmentalists need to realize that

⁹⁷ Figueroa, Robert Melchior. (343).

⁹⁸ Westra, Laura, and Peter Wenz. (xvii)

the most people on earth are non-white and that the environmentalist agenda needs to show respect for people of all races, class, and gender.⁹⁹ This echoes the definition from Chavis, which states that there is a need for representation and leadership for people of color in the environmental and justice movement. Being able to participate in environmentalist actions can be seen as a privilege in this case for white people who on average have higher income and better access to resources and political support. Because people of color are being oppressed in many forms (racism, sexism, classism, public health, etc.), they may not have the resources or the time to participate in environmental causes. To put it bluntly, in this country people of color face many more challenges than white people in society. Take the Bronx, for instance, where residents suffer from a history and current reality of racial housing, job, and income discrimination. Because the average Bronx resident is trying to work several jobs just to make months rent, and because they are faced with the affects of redlining and other racist practices, they may not have time to protest or support environmentalist actions. Bronx residents also might not have the support from their political leaders to address environmental actions like suburban white, middle-class Americans have. When you introduce the term racism along with any issue, institutional powers and systems will automatically be apprehensive in funding and supporting that issue. It is still today a difficult reality for our government to face. So instead, funding and support will go to organizations that focus on conservation and preservation. The government will find actions that create visible and speedy results, which certainly have ethical benefits to a degree. We see this in Chapter Three with many of the initiatives in PlaNYC. However as I mentioned before, and as many environmental justice organizations are demanding, the government and the American people need to support institutional change. We need to address the root causes of environmental racism and environmental degradation. There is

⁹⁹ Westra, Laura, and Peter Wenz. (xviii)

an ethical demand for environmental justice that aims to eliminate the causes of environmental discrimination and racism. Certainly there is a demand for improving parks and supplying clean water to urban communities. However if we do not address issues of environmental racism and environmental degradation we will continue to see an increase in environmental issues and face more and more environmental challenges if we just stick to reactionary, quick fix policies. Recently, we are seeing more communities of color taking leadership roles in the environmental justice movement.

Chapter 5. From PlaNYC to PlanBX: Policy Recommendations for Environmental Justice in the Bronx

The main challenge that this thesis presents is that the Bronx changed, somewhere along its historical timeline, from a community that symbolized prosperity, a clean natural environment, and the American Dream to a borough stereotyped today as a dangerous, environmentally and socio-economically degraded, run-down ghetto. The positive perception of the Bronx was forgotten once the racist governmental policies like redlining (and redlining the green) took hold of the Bronx. Outsiders to the Bronx see it as a failed community that requires more and more governmental interference and aid. Most people forget or simply do not know that the negative condition that we see the Bronx in today is due to systems and policies put into place to oppress low-income people of color. The change in the Bronx did not just occur spontaneously; it was institutionally caused. Most white Americans were able to benefit off of governmental policies and programs that were made available through the New Deal, while black and Latino Americans suffered from New Deal programs. In Chapter Two of this thesis, we see how the Bronx was directly targeted for discriminatory policies from the government.

This history carried through to the mass development and industrialization of the Bronx and New York City. Only today are we beginning to see these issues addressed. The community is finally being heard in their justice movement. The unbelievable history of events that occurred in the Bronx in the latter half of the twentieth century has started to become better known in the past several years. This is due to community organizing and activism.

The Bronx community has organized itself many times throughout the past few decades around issues of social justice. However, only recently has the government and society listened. Due to the commitment of the Bronx residents to live the life they deserve, the city government has created massive programs like PlaNYC and One City: Built to Last. These programs have been praised as political achievements initiated by the community. However, much work is to be done. There is a large amount of criticism coming from Bronx organizations saying that PlaNYC does not address the real issues that Bronx residents are facing. Peter Marcuse, Professor of Urban Planning at Columbia University, writes critically about PlaNYC, saying that it is not a plan and it is not for the City. He writes that PlaNYC focuses mainly on infrastructure and physical needs of the city. PlaNYC tries to prepare for a dramatic increase in population by attempting to build a sustainable physical city. What the plan fails to acknowledge is that meeting the socioeconomic needs of New York City is most important. Marcuse says that a quick search for words like “equity” or “justice” or “unemployment” would not turn up much results in the plan. Instead, the plan mainly focuses on downtown Manhattan, with the other boroughs being “feeders” to New York City. He does acknowledge, like I did, that some initiatives are positive, like improving environmental quality. However, his main issue is that calling PlaNYC a “Plan for New York City” “degrades the concept of planning, which should

serve the broad public interest, not a narrow band of interests.”¹⁰⁰ Instead, PlaNYC needs to be direct and intentional about targeting the areas that are most in need of environmental support and justice. Currently, it gives too much attention to areas with higher political and commercial interests. A better plan, like a PlanBX, would focus more specifically on the areas most in need.

Other community activists have denied PlaNYC as a plan that will help the Bronx community. They see it as treating the symptoms of a disease, rather than curing the disease altogether. Just improving park standards will not address the causes of pollution. As stated in Chapter Three, community members were happy for park renewal, but they still had to walk by heavy traffic highways to get to green spaces. Juan Carlos Ruiz, deputy director of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, stated at a community meeting, “We get a lot of the trucks transporting things for all the other parts of the city... There is this mentality that we are the dumpster of the city, and that needs to be addressed.”¹⁰¹

Clearly there is a big push for an increase in institutional change rather than surface level change to address environmental justice. Julie Sze, author of *Noxious New York*, clearly states what this looks like in New York City. She writes that “Environmental justice activism in New York City is about racial, geographic, and local identity at the same time that it is about a specific facility, issue or campaign because particular social identities are produced and reinforced through the politics of race, place, and the urban environment.”¹⁰² The community has been advocating for this change for decades. However, the government is just now beginning to address the environmental concerns of Bronx residents. It could be said that this increase in governmental cooperation is due to an increase international political consciousness of

¹⁰⁰ Marcuse, Peter. “PlaNYC Is not a ‘Plan’ and it is not for ‘NYC’”. Columbia University. <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/ccpd/repository/files/planyc-is-not-a-plan-and-it-is-not-for-nyc.pdf>

¹⁰¹ Kazis

¹⁰² Sze, Julie. (18)

environmental issues. The reason why not much has changed for environmental justice in the Bronx is because the government and political leaders are not listening to community leaders. Community-based approaches are the best way to combat a “disease”. Anyone can see a symptom of an issue, but only community members can truly know what is fostering that issue and what should be done to eliminate the issue. Also, community-based approaches will guarantee that the community benefits from the solutions, not corporations or governments. Here, I am calling for a “fair economy” and policies that reflect this concept.

In the book *The Color of Wealth*, the authors outline five key principles for a fair economy. These principles are the most ideal set for addressing environmental justice in the Bronx. They represent the policy recommendations that I would offer to any government or state body to address environmental racism and justice. Simply, they are:

1. The necessity of a community-based approach.
2. Assets held in common must be acknowledged and preserved by the government.
3. The government should provide asset ownership and growth for those who lack assets.
4. Those who have higher income should be taxed at a higher percentage.
5. Intentional anti-racist planning moving forward with policy development.¹⁰³

More specifically, the first principle is that we must call for a government that is active in investing in communities and people from a bottom-up approach; a community-based approach.¹⁰⁴ The government should bring community members to the table when major decisions are made concerning environmental and socio-economic conditions in the Bronx. The liberal economic view that the government should not intervene in the marketplace but allow it to operate free has proven time and time again to create inequality and inequity. Because of

¹⁰³ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (286-289)

¹⁰⁴ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (286)

institutionalized racism and other oppressions, a free operating marketplace or broad open planning is not ideal for the Bronx and other marginalized communities.¹⁰⁵ The opportunities are not equitable; therefore the results will never be equitable. With that being said, governmental intervention is a very important aspect of the first principle if it can help in assisting communities most in need and allow the community to empower itself through its own voice and solutions.

The second principle that can act as a policy recommendation is that the United States economy must “recognize and preserve assets that we hold in common.”¹⁰⁶ Throughout American history, white European immigrants to the United States have acquired and developed wealth through private land ownership. Whether this land ownership came from taking land from the Native Americans and giving it to Europeans or it came from the FHA and New Deal policies, private land ownership has been at the foundation of socio-economic inequality.¹⁰⁷ Taxes on private land are a major part of this discussion. Scholars have proposed a two-rate tax on land, one high tax on the land itself, and then a lower tax that is based on improvements and development on that land. This will lead to not only wealth distribution, but also to intentional improvements upon land and an increase in the concern for land. If a property in the Bronx is taxed at a base for its physical land, and then also taxed on what is built and improved on it, then landowners will take more initiative to keep the land nicer, cleaner, and protected. There will be more care for what is on the Bronx property because owners are investing more in the land through taxes. The property will have an increase in its total value, and therefore demand more and more attention. This could improve the environment in the Bronx.

The third principle is that the United States needs to create new policies to support the people who lack the ownership of assets. Instead of just providing income assistance (which is

¹⁰⁵ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (286)

¹⁰⁶ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (287)

¹⁰⁷ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (287)

important), the government should aim to help those who cannot save and build assets in their names.¹⁰⁸ As mentioned before, asset ownership leads to the acquisition of wealth and value. New Deal programs and redlining led to the provision of assets to white American families and the exclusion of access to assets for people of color. By assisting and empowering families in marginalized communities to build their assets and wealth, governments can help families move out of poverty. It will help to undo some of the effects of the New Deal policies and redlining practices. This could lead to environmental improvements and investments.

The fourth principle is that new programs to help the community should be paid for by taxing those with more income wealth.¹⁰⁹ Progressive taxation, the taxation of people with a higher income at a higher tax rate, could drastically help marginalized communities who have long suffered from institutional oppression. Governmental policies throughout history have created inequality in society, allowing white American families to build wealth and power and status while taking advantage of communities of color and blocking their access to the same opportunities. It would only make sense, then, that the people who historically had assistance from the government in building wealth should be accountable to that assistance and provide assistance to others.¹¹⁰ Progressive taxation will distribute income fairly, and help to level the ground for opportunity.

The fifth principle is that when we create new policies, we must approach them with a race lens, and we must have multicultural leaders from the community in the discussion.¹¹¹ We know that racism is still an issue in our institutions today, so we must be proactive and intentional going forward to avoid institutionalized racism. This means that in decision-making,

¹⁰⁸ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (288)

¹⁰⁹ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (288)

¹¹⁰ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (288)

¹¹¹ Lui, Meizhu., et. al.(289)

we must have an equal representation and multicultural voices in the process. In *The Color of Wealth*, the authors point out that “using a race lens would mean that ‘government and public bodies would attempt to weave policies of equality of opportunity and non-discrimination into the fabric of decision-making.’”¹¹² The authors said it very powerfully that “A roomful of white men will not be able to foresee the impact of policies they design on people of different races and cultures.”¹¹³ We have seen the effect that a lack of multicultural representation in decision-making has had on the Bronx. The environmental and socio-economic status of the Bronx has suffered because of historical white-dominant planning and decision-making. Through a multicultural, community-based approach, environmental justice can be achieved in the Bronx.

A recent study shows that more and more people are moving into and staying in the Bronx now. These people are being priced out of Manhattan and other expensive areas. In 2012, the census revealed that more people moved to the Bronx than left. Residents stopped abandoning the Bronx. This reveals that more residents are investing in the Bronx.¹¹⁴ It is important now more than ever to make the living conditions in the Bronx better than recent conditions. We should be aiming to make the Bronx affordable, accessible, and respectable. Fair and equitable distribution of resources for environmental justice and restoration should be a major concern for politicians in the Bronx and New York City area. Bronx residents should not have to fight against large corporations and governments for their own health and livelihood. Environmental justice can be achieved through community participation in governmental policy-making.

¹¹² Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (289)

¹¹³ Lui, Meizhu., et. al. (289)

¹¹⁴ Roberts, Sam. “Fewer People Are Abandoning the Bronx, Census Data Show”. The New York Times. N.Y. Region. March 14, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/14/nyregion/more-people-moving-to-bronx-census-shows.html>

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