

From Toxic Sites to Parks as (Green) LULUs? New Challenges of Inequity, Privilege, Gentrification, and Exclusion for Urban Environmental Justice

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Abstract

As marginalized neighborhoods benefit from cleanup and environmental amenities often brought by municipal sustainability planning, recent trends of land revaluation, investments, and gentrification are posing a conundrum and paradox for environmental justice (EJ) activists. In this article, I examine the progression of the urban EJ agenda—from fighting contamination to mobilizing for environmental goods and resisting environmental gentrification—and analyze how the EJ scholarship has reflected upon the complexification of this agenda. I argue that locally unwanted land uses can be reconceptualized from contamination sources to new green amenities because of the displacement they seem to trigger or accelerate.

Keywords

community development, neighborhood greening, environment, land use, neighborhood planning, LULUs, recreation and open space, sustainability, urban environmental justice, environmental gentrification

Introduction

The first visible and widely reported environmental justice (EJ) mobilizations in the United States—Love Canal, NY (1978) and Warren County, NC (1982)—had clear targets in mind: environmental contamination and its impacts on human health. Activists' concerns often aimed at locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) with heavy environmental and health impacts such as waste or industrial facilities (Schively 2007). Early EJ fights were not only about stopping or reducing toxics, they were also part of an effort to improve local communities and their long-term livability and environmental quality, even if implicitly. Over time, community mobilization has helped historically distressed neighborhoods gain new green and recreational spaces, urban gardens and farmers' markets, green and healthy housing, and improved waste management (i.e., Anguelovski 2014).

However, EJ in cities is now at a crossroads: as neighborhoods get cleaned up and benefit from new environmental goods, they start to revitalize and become valued again by private investors. After decades of disinvestment and abandonment, developers buy degraded buildings and transform them into high-end residences, and eventually wealthier residents start moving in and enjoying new associated amenities for which long-term residents fought for during decades. In return, low-income residents and people of color are often displaced because it seems that they cannot afford to stay. This process of land revaluation, greening, and displacement illustrates what is now called “green gentrification” or “ecological gentrification” (Dooling 2009; Checker 2011).

In many instances, neighborhood greening is officially sponsored by municipal policy makers and elected officials as it helps them fulfill their sustainability agenda and bring nature back into the city. It is part of new visions to create more sustainable urban forms which incorporate concepts such as compactness, sustainable transport, density, mixed land uses, diversity, passive solar design, and greening (Jabareen 2006). Yet, the caveat in green or ecological gentrification is that under the tenet of an apolitical, technical agenda such as “greening” or “sustainability” (with ecological improvements brought to the urban biophysical environment), municipalities might push for projects that have a potential to be highly inequitable. Today, as critical geographers and political ecologists argue, the planning and advertising of new parks or waterfront restoration seem to give greening some form of moral authority or economic imperative that demotes or conceals any equity issues (i.e., Quastel 2009). In many cases, neighborhood cleanup and ecological enhancement together with new economic development and neighborhood transformation are combined at the expenses of social and racial equity and one's “right to their neighborhood” (Anguelovski 2013a, 2014).

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Already back in the mid-1990s, planning scholars such as Scott Campbell called for the integration of social theory into environmental thinking in order to help planners properly address economic and environmental injustices (Campbell 1996). This call is all the more relevant today as environmental gentrification seems to penetrate many branches of sustainability planning and to pose complex challenges and paradoxes for EJ groups. This article asks the following questions: why might urban green amenities be perceived as LULUs in historically distressed urban neighborhoods? How have urban EJ activism and scholarship evolved as a result of urban economic and spatial restructuring processes and how do they integrate issues of displacement and affordability within a more traditional ecological agenda?

In this theoretical and review article, I examine changes in EJ activism and document the progression from activists fighting toxics to mobilizing for environmental goods, and to more recently resisting processes of perceived urban environmental gentrification and environmental privilege. Environmental privilege is defined as the disproportionate access to green space, fresh food, healthy housing, playgrounds, and waste management services from which upper income classes and whites benefit while excluding more marginalized groups (Park and Pellow 2011). As I track the evolution of EJ activism and examine how EJ scholarship has simultaneously evolved and reflected on the complexification of EJ agendas, I argue that LULUs can often be reconceptualized from toxic waste sites and contamination sources to parks, playgrounds, or healthy food stores because municipal neighborhood greening and its accompanying discourses create new conditions for reinvestment and often new profit, exclusion, and displacement of vulnerable residents.

I respond here to the need to dig further into the dynamics that generate environmental inequalities, consider new spaces and spatialities in which research has recently been conducted, and examine how such scholarship engages critically with questions of justice and injustice in the environment (Holifield, Porter, and Walker 2009). Cities are places where, through the urbanization of nature, uneven and often debilitating and damaging socio-natural relations of power work together at the detriment of socially vulnerable groups (Heynen 2014). The analysis of the spatialization of (environmental) inequality is critical so that planners are able to apprehend the evolution of the spatial distribution of neighborhood distress and the various structural and systematic processes that have created and recreated such distress over time (Jennings 2012).

This article is not meant to be a review of the literature on NIMBYs (Not in My Back Yard) and LULUs. I construct my argument to demonstrate how green amenities as part of urban sustainability or greening plans seem to be increasingly considered as a LULU from the perspective of historically marginalized neighborhoods, residents, and EJ activists because of their paradoxical impact in distressed communities. My intent is to examine the unequal distribution of environmental exposure to toxics and environmental access to environmental amenities and to situate such inequalities (and the EJ movement

that arose as a result of such inequalities) within a broader understanding of what LULUs were traditionally perceived as and what they might now be identified as—green amenities in distressed neighborhoods presented by planners or officials as win-win benefits for all, even if they are starting to have documented impacts in terms of social or racial displacement. Such a paradoxical evolution of what LULUs are complicates the task of planners and EJ groups to make cities both green and equitable.

Fighting LULUs as Toxic Waste Sites and Sources of Contamination

Unequal exposure, risk, and burden. Much of the extensive early literature on EJ examined inequities in exposure to contamination and health risks, highlighting which groups lived close to toxic pollution (Holifield, Porter, and Walker 2009). Statistical research was performed at different levels—from national studies at larger levels of population spatial segregation to studies in particular states or more frequently metropolitan regions at more local spatial scales (i.e., census tract; See Schweitzer and Stephenson 2007). Those studies revealed that minorities and low-income populations suffered from greater environmental harm from waste sites, disposal facilities, transfer storage, incinerators, refineries, and other contaminating industries—that is what is traditionally known as LULUs (Bryant and Mohai 1992; Bullard 1990; Downey and Hawkins 2008; Lerner 2005; Sze 2007; Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009; United States General Accounting Office 1983; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice 1987)—than white and rich communities.

In addition, scholars found that environmental inequities were exacerbated by the fact that residents of communities of color and low-income neighborhoods traditionally received less environmental protection than privileged groups, who tended to live in more desirable and less polluted areas. Governmental regulating capacity and oversight ability vis-à-vis contaminating industries were found as traditionally weak (Pellow 2001), with historically marginalized groups suffering from the unequal enforcement of environmental protection laws and other regulatory policies such as the Clean Air Act or the Clean Water Act (Checker 2008; Morello-Frosch 2002; Taylor 2014).

In the EJ literature, zoning is also portrayed as strong contributor to spatial environmental inequalities through the urban segregation of communities by race and class and through the concentration of noxious facilities in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods (Schively 2007; Maantay 2002; Taylor 2014)—even in the context of sustainability planning (Checker 2011). Recent studies further find that, as reactive zoning creates buffering zones around polluting industries, minority residents tend to suffer from lower environmental quality (Campbell, Kim, and Eckerd 2014). For instance, zoning in New York City has been particularly pervasive for black neighborhoods. As the municipality has historically classified some areas—which happened to be lower income and black—as unrestricted, the growth of the city has transformed many

of them into “hosts” of contaminating industries and poorer residents. Despite zoning changes in New York in 1961, the new regulations did not require buffer zones between industrial land and residential areas and eventually allowed for the expansion of manufacturing areas into distressed residential neighborhoods (Sze 2007).

The rise of community voices against environmental bads. Residents of distressed communities have not remained silent vis-à-vis environmental inequalities and toxic LULUs. Early EJ coalitions in the 1970s and 1980s organized against the negative health impacts of contaminating facilities or highway construction in urban residential areas (Chambers 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; McGurty 2007; Bullard 2005). EJ activists had close ties to the civil rights movement (Pellow and Brulle 2005; McGurty 2007) and much emphasis was on cases of environmental racism. Practices of environmental racism translated into the intentional or unintentional harm suffered by populations of color because of projects or policies negatively affecting their environment and health (Bryant and Mohai 1992; Checker 2008). Environmental racism remains a powerful activist and scholarly framework today which put emphasis on the fact that even when residents have a higher socioeconomic status, they on average still tend to face disproportionate exposure to contaminating facilities—either because they are targeted by industries or because of the lower rents their neighborhood tends to offer (Bullard et al. 2007; Collins et al. 2011; Lerner 2010; Cutter 1995; Taylor 2014). The literature on process equity points to both market dynamics and siting decisions as underlying causes of environmental inequities (Freudenberg, Pastor, and Israel 2011; Shrader-Frechette 2002; Schlosberg 2007).

Thirty years later, despite significant and emblematic local victories and changes in federal policies with the passing of the 1994 Executive Order (rewritten several times), statistics are still daunting. The well-known study “Toxic Waste and Race at Twenty” (Bullard et al. 2007), which marked the twentieth anniversary of the landmark United Church of Christ study on the disproportionate presence of toxics in minority communities, shows that statistics have in some ways worsened. As a recent study in Charleston, SC reveals, race and ethnicity continue to be significant predictors of disparities in the distribution of toxic facilities, in that case Toxic Release Inventory facilities (Wilson et al. 2012). Similar results are found for cancer risks—not only *exposure* to toxics: in Tampa, FL, a 10 percent increase in Hispanic residents tends to increase lifetime cancer risk from major point sources by 10.2 percent (Chakraborty 2012). In sum, epistemology studies using spatial regression and multivariate regression methods as well as cumulative risk assessment are essential to pinpoint the remaining challenges and disparities in environmental inequalities created or exacerbated by toxic sites and facilities (Ash et al. 2009; Brown 2013; Chakraborty 2012).

Additionally, much research in sociology and environmental politics has shown that residents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or from ethnic minorities face procedural obstacles and lower capacity to participate in environmental

decisions and they are often excluded from the policy decisions that affect risk distribution (Freudenberg, Pastor, and Israel 2011; Shrader-Frechette 2002; Schlosberg 2007). Existing power differentials between African American or Latinos and whites often drive decisions over where to allow the siting of freeways, incinerators, or waste sites in and around cities (Pulido 2000).

Additionally, lower income or minority groups cannot always organize against the siting of polluting facilities or industries. This is where the work of sociologists such as David Pellow has been particularly illuminating, as Pellow exposed residents and workers’ different needs, priorities, and capacities, and their difficulty to mobilize them and force decision makers to take them into consideration. Poor workers are structurally less able to oppose contaminating facilities because they are often lured into new jobs, income, and other economic benefits for the community (Pellow 2002). In addition, procedural justice issues prevent marginalized groups from having a true voice in decisions that affect their territory and health (Schlosberg 2007; Walker 2009) and from being able to address issues of distributive justice (Dobson 1998; Foster 1998; Schlosberg 2007). Partial definitions of who are “affected communities,” coupled with an inequitable access to decision making, highlight the need to find new, more pluralistic, and imaginative interventions to address procedural limitations in cases of environmental injustice (Holifield, Porter, and Walker 2009). Additionally, environmental injustices in contaminated areas are worsened by connected conflicts between knowledge and power related to definitions and representations of EJ and of the scale of affected areas (Sze et al. 2009).

The Expansion of the Urban EJ Agenda

Access to environmental services and goods in cities. Over the past decade and a half, traditional EJ studies on the inequitable distribution of environmental risk and contamination started to offer a more holistic and comprehensive examination of environmental inequalities in cities. In that sense, they reflected and followed the evolution of urban EJ activism toward a more comprehensive agenda which combined a struggle against unequal environmental contamination with a denunciation of unequal access to environmental goods and amenities—that is, a lower quality of life and living conditions more generally. This evolution was already represented in the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit when the EJ movement broadened its focus on toxics to public health in general, transportation, land use planning, housing issues, and community empowerment through a comprehensive set of EJ principles. Today, one of the core visions of the EJ movement is that every person regardless of race, income, culture, and gender has the right to a decent and safe quality of life (Gauna 2008).

During the 2000s, especially the later part of the decade, EJ Scholars reflected on this evolution by documenting how urban inequalities exist in the territorial allocation of environmental goods and amenities. For instance, they revealed that deprived urban neighborhoods tended (and still tend) to get poor city

services such as street cleaning, public transportation, and waste collection. Concurrently, they showed that access to trees, parks and natural settings, urban public recreation resources, and maintenance of parks differed by ethnic and income groups (Dahmann et al. 2010; Pham et al. 2012), with low income and minority groups having less access to urban vegetation than privileged groups. Urban reforestation programs also tended to benefit owner-occupied (i.e., higher income) neighborhoods (Perkins, Heynen, and Wilson 2004). Wealthier and white communities seemed to enjoy environmental privileges (Park and Pellow 2011)—represented by parks, coasts, open space, or sports centers—often in a racially exclusive way (Landry and Chakraborty 2009; Heynen, Perkins, and Roy 2006; Hastings 2007).

Such inequalities in access to greenery must be placed in their appropriate historical and social context. Neighborhood associations often played an active role in promoting tree planting while also crafting restrictive covenants to reserve local properties for white owners, which has led to a disproportionate share of trees in higher income white neighborhoods (Boone et al. 2010). Such trends were also combined with deindustrialization, white flight, suburbanization, and disinvestment (including environmental disinvestment) in urban core areas.

While such findings on unequal spatial access to environmental goods support local EJ activism and enrich social science and epidemiological inquiry, they tend to only replicate the existing (statistical) findings about urban inequities in regards to housing, school, health care, and employment access (Schweitzer and Stephenson 2007). As a result, planning and sociology scholars at the end of the 2000s started calling for new types of urban research on environmental inequalities (Strife and Downey 2009; Schweitzer and Stephenson 2007) going beyond spatial statistical analysis.

Towards just and sustainable neighborhoods. More recently, EJ research in sociology, geography, and urban planning has offered a more complex analysis of the ways in which the urban EJ agenda has evolved—to not only include demands for greater spatial and distributional equity but also improved recognition of the specific needs and conditions of communities on the ground and of their renewed call for participation in decision making on issues such as transit justice, food justice, or healthy housing.

For instance, the right to healthy, fresh, local, and affordable food for community food security has been at the center of much community advocacy (Alkon and Agyeman 2011a; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Hess 2009). Here, food justice studies have played a key role in highlighting the tensions between *alternative food* and *food justice* discourses and practices. Research has shown that alternative food activists tend to overlook the fact that people of color and low-income residents do not often participate in alternative urban food systems because of their material difficulty to purchase goods from those networks (Allen 2004; Morales 2011; Guthman 2011). Even if many alternative food activists attempt to address the issue of food deserts and of access to healthy and fresh food, they also tend to marginalize vulnerable groups (Alkon and Agyeman

2011b; Slocum 2006; Reynolds 2014) through discourses and demands that often stem from a position of social privilege (Alkon 2012) and from white cultural consumption practices (Guthman 2008). Such a position contrasts with food justice activists who put much emphasis on the more complex values and significance of food within the lives of historically marginalized groups and on making culturally valued food available to communities of color (Anguelovski 2014; McCutcheon 2011, 2013).

In the domain of affordable housing, community organizations are advocating for green, affordable, and healthy housing (Loh and Eng 2010). Often times, demands for healthy housing go hand in hand with demands for opportunities in the green economy through federal funding for jobs, training for energy efficiency projects, or revenue redistribution from utility companies for weatherizing buildings (Fitzgerald 2010; Song 2014). Yet, experiences of greening public housing or building green affordable housing reveal complex challenges such as aligning local project goals and implementation with community priority and needs, preventing long-term displacement and creating an affordable housing or mixed use development that is truly community owned. To date, however little analysis exists on the constraints of such developments (Winston 2010). This is in part due to the fact that most EJ scholars are not quantitative economists or real estate economists, and vice versa.

At any rate, the inclusion of issues of socioeconomic well-being reflects the underpinning philosophy of the EJ movement, tying environmentalism to a broader quest for social and economic justice, that is the achievement of community wealth creation, equitable redistribution of resources, employee ownership, alternative local economic and workforce development strategies, and increased organizing at the union or neighborhood level (Dobson 1998; Pulido 1996; Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003; Agyeman 2013). Yet, only a few studies have specifically examined urban EJ organizing around economic justice, community wealth, and urban redevelopment. This is where community development scholars need to step in.

Most recently, EJ activism in urban neighborhoods has come to be multifaceted with community groups working on a variety of projects that build on and complement each other. Some scholars have in turn started to analyze broad-based community rebuilding and examine the role of place and place attachment in EJ projects. They reveal that as residents rebuild their neighborhood and create green spaces, community gardens, or playgrounds, they do so in order to overcome environmental trauma and fear of erasure, remake place, and create safe havens for residents, thereby addressing both the physical and psychological aspects of environmental health (Anguelovski 2013b).

The Production of Cycles of Unequal Urban (Re)development and Growth

Within recent developments in urban EJ scholarship, one of the main research shortcomings is the lack of studies examining the relationship between the larger context of urban development and inequities in access to environmental goods and

amenities. As Schweitzer and Stephenson noticed (2007), EJ scholars have drawn few connections between the housing discrimination, residential segregation, and EJ literature, and between urban (re)development and the emergence of new forms of environmental injustice. Although the nascent literature on urban placemaking within EJ scholarship (Anguelovski 2014; Agyeman 2013) attempts to provide new methodological and theoretical possibilities for improving research on urban environments and racial equity by examining long-term processes of neighborhood decay, abandonment, and reconstruction, much remains to be done. In this section, I situate EJ struggles within processes of urban growth and development and analyze the contribution of the urban sociology and geography scholarships to the understanding of such processes, before turning to the analysis of new environmental forms of exclusion and gentrification in cities. I argue later in the article that such new exclusion is what destabilizes the EJ movement while creating new fertile avenues for research.

The literature on neighborhood change in urban sociology and urban history has documented that, in distressed neighborhoods, patterns of racial segregation in regards to housing and residential choice established early on the conditions for neighborhood decay, devaluation, and disinvestment—and for the siting of environmental bads. It is impossible to summarize this vast scholarship in a short article but the next few paragraphs will attempt to briefly review its main contributions.

Early on, urban historians exposed the long lasting impact of social processes such as racial discrimination in housing rentals or sales, presence of redlining by insurance companies or lending institutions, and neighborhood covenants on communities of color (Self 2003; Sugrue 2005; Hillier 2003). This has in turn shaped the formation of environmental inequalities. In Baltimore, for instance, segregation ordinances, racial covenants, home improvement associations, and the Home Owners Loan Corporation together with the Parks and Recreation Board initially created separate black spaces for areas that were historically underserved with parks which ultimately fueled the inheritance by blacks of much of Baltimore's green space, including its smaller and more congested parks (Boone et al. 2009).

In addition, while industries throughout the 1960s and 1970s disinvested from central areas and white property owners left urban neighborhoods, municipalities neglected to address the social and spatial problems left behind. A city like Oakland exemplifies this process (McClintock 2011). Historical processes of industrial (re)development and economic restructuring together with a lack of public resources for inner-city areas left many neighborhoods dilapidated (Massey and Denton 1993). In just a few years, neighborhoods turned from stable and welcoming to suddenly grim and undesirable, which opened the door for the unequal siting of LULUs, the unequal application of environmental laws, and the unequal access to environmental goods. Such dynamics of neighborhood socio-spatial change were also supported and accompanied by urban policies that followed the passage of the Housing Act of 1949. Urban renewal policies reshaped urban neighborhoods, often for the worse, and contributed to segregation (Von Hoffman

2003; Fullilove 2004) and to the elimination of entire blocks of low-income neighborhoods (Vale 2013).

Yet, a few decades later, many areas that were the targets of massive urban renewal programs are some of the first areas to experience gentrification (Small 2004). An increasing number of neighborhoods such as Harlem (New York), Bronzeville (Chicago), or Tremé (New Orleans) are facing today what scholars are calling “New Urban Renewal,” as formerly degraded and abandoned inner-city neighborhoods are being rebranded from an abandoned ghetto to a cultural artifact and a site for revitalization on which developers can bank (Hyras 2008; Boyd 2008; Brand 2015). Narratives of former blight and current cultural vitality come together in order to enable the “creative destruction” of these neighborhoods cleared twice—once during the slum cleanup and urban renewal from the mid-1930s to the end of the 1960s and today through the new waves of demolition, redevelopment, and remaking of neighborhoods for wealthier and whiter residents (Vale 2013). Part of this process reflects the production side of gentrification, through which developers, investors, and individuals from privileged backgrounds buy the property of less well-off families in inner poor and working-class areas and turn them around for new wealthier residents (Anderson 1990; Smith 1986). Through the rent gap (Smith 1987), they make profits by reinvesting in degraded and abandoned properties.

What this research reveals is that wealthier groups live in neighborhoods that receive a flow of resources and they are able to purchase high-quality houses and reap the benefits from new amenities often created through urban renewal programs while shifting environmental burdens and LULUs to the most marginalized neighborhoods in which unemployed and working-class residents are forced to move because this is where they can afford to live (Gould and Lewis 2012). Poorer residents are confined into dilapidated and cramped housing in neighborhoods that tend to have worse air quality, poorer access to healthy and affordable food, substandard public transit, and lower quality parks.

Most recently, these multitier dynamics combining capitalist forces, governmental decisions and programs, classism, and racism and contributing to continuous resident exclusion have also come to include another process: neighborhood greening by public and private investors. In the next section, I examine how recent research in environmental gentrification demonstrates that new urban environmental transformations and improvements are intertwined with inequality (re)formation and gentrification. I also articulate how environmental and social change in cities codetermine each other and create new forms of exclusion.

The Political Economy of Urban Environmental Gentrification: Municipal Sustainability and Greening Projects as New LULUs?

In urban areas, the literature in land and real estate economics has revealed that a strong correlation exists between urban land

cleanup; investment in park or open space creation or rehabilitation, waterfront redevelopment, or ecological restoration; and changes in demographic trends and neighborhood property values. For instance, the cleanup of Superfund sites has been related to a significant appreciation in housing values—up to 18.5 percent for blocks within one kilometer of the site (Gamper-Rabindran, Mastro Monaco, and Timmins 2011). Eventually, population characteristics seem to change. The removal of sites from the Superfund list results in an increase of 26 percent in mean household income, and in a 31 percent increase in the share of college graduates (Gamper-Rabindran and Timmins 2011). When land is contaminated, its value decreases but it also creates a rent gap for investors (Bryson 2013). Wastelands are sites of reinvestment and value creation as they get transformed from industrial and contaminated sites to sites up for remediation, transformation, and profit making. They evolve from waste sites to wastable places producing new geographies of environmental injustices, as illustrated by numerous cases of brownfield redevelopment at the Hunters Point Shipyard in southeast San Francisco (Dillon 2013).

In other words, the redevelopment of contaminated areas and the planning of neighborhood greening and green amenities by public agencies and private investors do not seem to benefit people originally exposed to toxics—but rather newcomers moving to the neighborhood. Contaminated land and nature are thus some of the materials actors of gentrification through the value that developers assign to it. Urban sociologists, geographers, and urban political ecologists have recently examined such processes through case-based studies in ecological gentrification. They define ecological gentrification as “the implementation of an environmental planning agenda related to public green spaces that leads to the displacement or exclusion of the most economically vulnerable human population while espousing an environmental ethic” (Dooling 2009, 630). Gentrification highlights the fact that new or restored environmental goods tend to be accompanied by rising property values, which in turn attracts wealthier groups, while creating greater gap with poorer neighborhoods (Gould and Lewis 2012). It reveals the contradictions inherent to restoring nature in the city through a municipal greening agenda and its accompanying rationalization and ethical discourse and consensual politics (Checker 2011), and the exacerbation or production of injustices for vulnerable groups. It also questions traditional planning approaches conceiving green spaces as tools to address the need for social reform or poor public health and to promote economic development (Dooling 2009). In that sense, green gentrification highlights the fact that residential exclusion is as much influenced by changes in the built environment as by a greater number of parks (Smith 2002).

As recent research in planning and urban geography has shown, the processes of environmental gentrification seem to often be embedded in municipal sustainability planning. In the past decade or so, many cities in the United States and beyond have developed local agendas and programs to make cities greener and more livable (Checker 2011; Anguelovski and Carmin 2011; Bai, Roberts, and Chen 2010; Wheeler and Beatley

2009). Sustainability plans are seen as one of the most important elements that demonstrate the commitment that cities take toward achieving sustainability (Portney 2013). On the ground, public investment often consists in the provision or restoration of environmental amenities in the forms of parks, promenades, waterfronts, or playgrounds (Dooling 2009; Hagerman 2007).

Yet, many redevelopment plans and projects that tout themselves as sustainability-based or “green” seem to fail to consider the existing conditions of urban neighborhoods, including neighborhood vulnerabilities and the impact of projects on residents of color and low-income families. For instance, EJ groups have raised concerns about the social impacts of PlaNYC in NYC (Rosan 2012). The elderly, residents in rent-stabilized units and families receiving government assistance seem indeed to be particularly vulnerable to sustainability planning and brownfield redevelopment sponsored by PlaNYC (Pearsall 2008; Checker 2011). Similarly, municipal projects planned under the label of compact development (and other growth control practices such as smart growth), have been shown to pose challenges to ensuring housing affordability and to developing the land in ways that the most socially vulnerable groups can get access to housing (Addison, Zhang, and Coomes 2013), which then increases the possibility that green amenities projects become LULUs for socially vulnerable groups. Yet, potential increases in vulnerability are completely antithetic to a true vision for sustainability (Mueller and Dooling 2011).

Recent research in gentrification associated with the greening and implementation of an environmental sustainability agenda has shed light on a variety of social and political actors whose behavior contributes to environmental gentrification: private developers, elected officials, planners, and individual homebuyers themselves. For instance, as developers implement new high-end housing projects, they increasingly frame positive discourses about the environmental values contained in those projects while also promoting their own corporate interests. For example, in Vancouver, when investors built and advertised new residential housing, they presented new residents’ engagement in a garden called Omni Garden as a way for them to enhance their quality of life and promote the wellness of the whole community (Quastel 2009).

Elected officials themselves advance discourses about urban sustainable development and launch livability initiatives—while often promoting what scholars call “modern” visions for the city that remove a morally condemned social and housing fabric (Rosol 2013). Similarly, municipal discourses of urban ecological reclamation in distressed neighborhoods include ecological control and modernization as part of the agenda so that the city can become more esthetically appealing and marketable (Brownlow 2006). Such agendas and their accompanying discourses result in the environmental and social cleanup of entire neighborhoods inhabited by low-income residents and minorities and of their industrial legacy. In addition, policy makers pass zoning decisions that allow for the construction of high-end residential units while leaving untouched noxious industries in marginalized areas (Checker 2011). They give tax

breaks and other types of incentives to developers so that they can maximize their rate of return over a short time frame.

Private individuals also play a role in the realization of environmental gentrification. New residents purchase houses in revitalized neighborhoods, use new amenities, and even influence how amenities such as parks should be used—to the detriment of vulnerable groups (Checker 2011). Here, procedural equity gets violated for the benefits of newcomers from higher classes and socioeconomic status. In some cases, wealthier and white groups even attempt to exclude immigrants and poor workers from new spaces of “environmental privilege” and accuse them of damaging natural resources while overlooking the fact that they are able to enjoy natural areas thanks to their invisible work (Park and Pellow 2011). Thanks to their access to political elites and their knowledge of local or national politics, they are able to keep marginalized groups out of environmental improvements and spaces where they lived or would like to live (Park and Pellow 2011). In sum, elites control and manipulate urban environments for personal and private appropriation at the expenses of marginalized groups (Bryson 2013; Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 2006).

Many economic and financial interests are embedded in the process of sustainability planning and environmental gentrification. Green amenities and infrastructure make an area more attractive and hold the promise of fostering new economic growth and revitalization through business development (De Sousa 2003; Low, Taplin, and Scheld 2005; Dooling 2009; Quastel 2009). Recent research shows that cities compete for urban green transformations that make them more attractive, and they can boost their competitiveness and strategic growth by encouraging green investments and projects through an entrepreneurial use of resources (Tretter 2013). Today, critical geographers highlight how urban economic success seems to depend on a good quality of life and an attractive environment, which makes the control of this environment a critical factor in enhancing the competitive landscapes of cities (Gibbs and Krueger 2007). In Portland, OR, for instance, green amenities projects of restored ecologies and narratives of an optimistic future have sold a new revitalized urban landscape to wealthier classes and to investors who are encouraged to bring new capital and consumption into the local economy (Hagerman 2007).

In sum, sustainability agendas reflect a logic of competitive and entrepreneurial urbanism which gives a central role to real estate development and to the interests of private investors. Municipal plans and initiatives that are meant to create a sustainable and compact city mirror a form of capital accumulation that embodies the “depoliticization of the social” (Madra and Adaman 2014, 710). Sustainability at the local scale does not enter in conflict with capitalist accumulation but is actually a constituent of it and enables its survival (Keil 2007; Gibbs and Krueger 2007). As critical geographer Erik Swyngedouw argues, sustainability illustrates a postpolitical, postdemocratic, and a conflictual turn in which neoliberal governance regimes advance local greening projects while ending possibilities for a real politics of the environment and a real debate about the purposes and impacts of such projects (Swyngedouw 2007)—and

their likelihood of being considered as a LULU in the lives of low-income and minority residents. Sustainability becomes a technical question that eludes core urban questions at the intersection of racial inequalities, social hierarchies, and environmental privilege. Many projects about green amenities attempt to neutralize opposition by projecting the creation of benefits while actually seeming to privilege the profit of developers. What is properly political is hidden and becomes invisibilized in political interventions. There is no debate, dissent, and disagreement allowed to arise in the development of environmental sustainable initiatives (Swyngedouw 2009).

In sum, recent studies on urban redevelopment and environmental gentrification have exposed how new imaginaries of green urbanism or sustainable (or smart, as used in many cases) growth are closely intertwined with the political economy of the neoliberal city. In many ways, environmental gentrification is thus the flip side (or logical follow-up) of what urban renewal critics such as Mindy Fullilove (2001), John Betancur (2002), and Don Parson (1982) called “Negro removal” or “Latino removal,” because “green and white arrival” accompanies displacement. Here, the racial aspect of whiteness is in some ways hidden and invisibilized by the word green.

Environmental Gentrification as New Conundrum for EJ Activists

Today, one of the key challenges for land use planning and sustainability planning seems to greatly depend on how the planning profession and policy makers are able to address the conflicts and controversies that emerge as part of the implementation of sustainable development and livability initiatives (Godschalk 2004). The implementation of greening or sustainability agendas has indeed not occurred without community resistance and new developments in EJ activism.

Recent EJ organizing includes protests against projects or amenities perceived as contributors to environmental gentrification. EJ groups have come to support residents who contest smart growth policies in the context of neighborhood revitalization and upgrading (Tretter 2013) or who express concerns about tree planting and other greening programs as triggers for gentrification and displacement (Battaglia et al. 2014). Resistance has also been emplaced in complete streets planning processes which municipalities use in order to make neighborhoods more walkable and livable and to bring the streets back to pedestrians and bikers (Agyeman and Zavetoski 2015). For instance, many longtime minority residents consider bike lanes as new LULUs. In Portland, OR, city plans to enhance biking safety along North Williams Avenue has been met with the resistance of locals, who explain that safety seems only to have become a concern because white residents are moving to the neighborhood or riding through it, and they feel that bike lanes impose upon them (Agyeman 2013). Their resentment is also emplaced in the historical context of urban segregation and disinvestment in North East Portland neighborhoods (Gibson 2007).

Most recently, urban sociologists and geographers have revealed that longtime residents are also apprehensive about so-called healthy food stores moving into their neighborhood (often with the approval of policy makers and elected officials) because they seem to signal to developers, real estate agents, and outside residents that it is “ready” to be redeveloped. As a result, recent conflicts have exploded around the opening of natural and organic stores such as Whole Foods Markets in ethnically and socially diverse neighborhoods. In 2011, as residents protested against the opening of a Whole Foods store in JP, Boston and framed it as a LULU, they articulated their own vision of “healthy food,” contested supermarket greenlining, food privilege, and food gentrification in the neighborhood and defended culturally based practices around food (Anguelovski 2015). Food justice groups have indeed come to realize that their activities contribute to the attraction of newcomers to the neighborhood (Cadji and Alkon 2015).

Traditional EJ activism suggested that residents are fixed in their neighborhood and cannot move out away from toxic industries or waste sites. On the opposite, recent gentrification-related EJ activism is about fighting displacement. Back in 2006, the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council had already released a report “Unintended Impacts of Redevelopment and Revitalization Efforts in Five Environmental Justice Communities,” pointing clearly at the relationship between neighborhood rehabilitation and risk of displacement. Today, environmental gentrification studies reveal that activists are still fighting the collective imaginary that green equals white and middle class. They show that this equation gets reinforced by the way in which the urban political economy is structured and by how discourses of urban sustainability and environmentalism are rarely critical of the inequalities that underpin them.

Taking into consideration the whole process of green gentrification, EJ organizations and local activists are now forced to connect the pursuit of EJ with demands for affordable homes and place identity and against new green amenities at any price. For instance, in Brooklyn, longtime residents of Newtown Creek together with local business owners have defended the idea of a “just green enough” strategy for their neighborhood (Curran and Hamilton 2012). They embrace its industrial base and activities, rather than considering them as a traditional LULU. The health and quality of life of current residents can be improved but not to the point that it brings in new green design or buildings and their accompanying waves of new residents and investments. Since increasing the amount of green space can create an urban greening and equity paradox through rising housing costs, planning, and urban environmental scholars now argue that urban greening interventions need to focus on “green enough” interventions and be accompanied by strategies to provide affordable housing, housing trust funds, and by a commitment of public officials and planners to control powerful real estate (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014).

In other cases, urban geographers examine how antigentrification organizing has at times translated into residents speaking out against projects at community board meetings or

advocating for historic areas designation where buildings cannot exceed a certain height (Pearsall 2012). Residents are also resorting to clever coping strategies against housing price increases, such as drawing on social networks or engaging in rent sharing practices (Pearsall 2012). In other instances they build allies with middle-class residents that support their advocacy (Hamilton and Curran 2013; Curran and Hamilton 2012).

Perhaps the greater challenge today for EJ groups is to witness longtime demands for urban sustainability backfiring at them and not being certain about what to advocate for in their neighborhood. For instance, in NYC, in the mid-2000s the organization WEACT developed an urban sustainability agenda through its “Sustainable Development Program” in order to plan a healthy sustainable urban community, focusing on food justice and public space. With the preparation and release of PlaNYC 2007, WEACT was provided with an opportunity to shape the city’s green agenda. However, the restoration of green amenities, such as the Marcus Garvey Park, and the subsequent construction of high-end condominiums ranging from US\$500,000 to 2 million dollars units next to the park, illustrated how PlaNYC had overlooked social and political considerations. Additionally, as newcomers moved in, they rejected the traditional cultural practices of some of the park’s traditional users (i.e., drummers), by complaining about noise levels and advocating for changing the park’s rules (Checker 2011).

As this example (and many others) suggests, city-sponsored sustainability planning is often grounded in the demands and successes of the EJ movement but can also coopt its discourses to promote redevelopment that favors high-income residents and displaces fragile groups (Checker 2011). Countermovements to urban redevelopments are then reduced to defensive moves against what I call “green LULUs” and to compromises because of the technocratic decision-making process in traditional planning practice. It is thus becoming difficult for activists to move beyond the perception that new parks or renovated waterfronts are LULUs for socially or racially vulnerable residents and support new green amenities because of the gentrification pressures they seem to trigger or accelerate. Such a dynamic creates a paradox for EJ movements (Faber and Kimmelberg 2014).

Yet, this most recent aspect of EJ mobilization—as the defense of the right to place and territory, the right to stay without being displaced, and the right to remain protected from waves of uncontrolled investment, land grabbing, environmental profit, speculation, and disinvestment—is still understudied. This is where interdisciplinary work in urban and environmental sociology, critical urban geography, political ecology, political economy, and urban planning needs to take place.

Discussion

In this article, I have traced the history and evolving agendas and frames of the EJ movement in cities. I have also examined how numerous studies in urban sociology, geography, or planning itself have supported this EJ movement by uncovering the

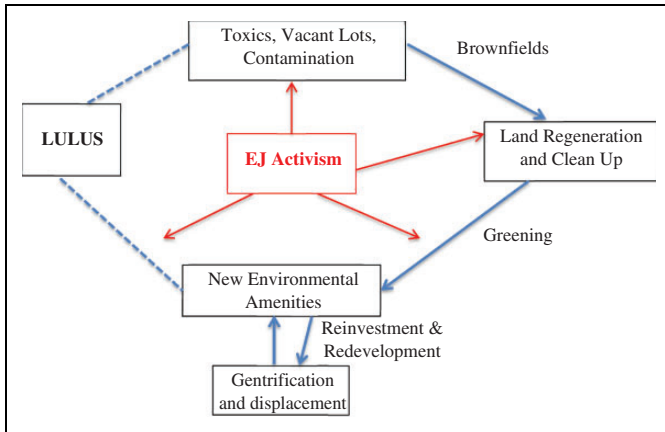


Figure 1. The multiple forms of locally unwanted land uses in recent environmental justice activism.

political economy of unequal distribution of environmental bads and later the unequal access to environmental goods and services. They have revealed how the EJ movement has had to adjust to the changing context of urban growth and development, to the shifting strategies of policy makers, planners, and private investors—with greater emphasis in the past ten years on municipal sustainability and renaturing projects in cities—and to the unequal process of land cleanup, remediation, redevelopment, and greening. Most recently, studies in critical geography and political ecology have exposed how local governments, real estate developers, and agents as well as home buyers promote redevelopment projects and encourage new environmental practices in ways that transform urban environments, produce new forms or socio-spatial control, and create environmental distributional and procedural inequalities. They analyze the ways in which urban sustainability efforts can produce gentrification, resulting in displacement and financial burden for the most vulnerable urban dwellers. Study results show the lack of planning for equity in municipal neighborhood sustainability projects and the absence of strong political leadership to address distributional and representational equity.

Today, urban sustainability and greening projects seem to be the new urban frontier in a “revanchist city” agenda (Smith 1996). As the cases of community resistance mentioned in this article illustrate, long-term vulnerable residents and their supporters often see waterfront redevelopment or ecological restoration projects with an eye of concern. Such projects are a sign that their neighborhood is changing—and not for their benefit—thus converting such greening initiatives into new forms of LULUS: Green LULUS. In view of multiple processes of redevelopment, environmental gentrification and displacement, greening, and sustainability projects might indeed be triggering a more acute impact in terms of community stability and resilience than toxic waste sites. Longtime vulnerable residents might be forced to move, unable to remain in the neighborhood. Environmental gentrification processes demonstrate how sustainability planning and the process of bringing nature back into the city is still much too romanticized. Greening is a

double-edged sword. EJ activists have thus become constrained by having to fight two types of LULUS (see Figure 1 below)—environmental toxics and green amenities—and by underlying processes of land speculation and redevelopment. Municipal green plans and projects entail the risk of further promoting traditional urban renewal and unequal development in the city. As critical planning and geography scholarship shows, they seem to be one of the new routes for capital accumulation in cities, presented with win-win environmental, social, and economic benefits for all under an optimistic discourse of a promising and sustainable future. Yet, such discourses and practices erode possibilities for real politics through postpolitical and postdemocratic tendencies (Swyngedouw 2007).

The recent scholarship on environmental gentrification I presented here highlights the importance of bringing back critical perspectives in gentrification studies (Slater 2006) and of “greening” gentrification research. Environmental gentrification opens up new areas for research. To date, no quantitative study has been conducted to measure if greener cities are in reality less racially and socially equitable and to assess the reality of equity and displacement across cities. In-depth assessments are needed to compare cities and determine which ones are more equal than others as they implement greening agendas—and for what reasons. Additionally, policy and real estate economics studies should dissect the role of real estate actors (developers, real estate companies, and homeowner associations) in contributing to green gentrification in a variety of ways, and this fifty years after civil rights achievements and fights against redlining and racist practices in housing choices.

Some domains of environmental gentrification research are also greatly understudied, such as urban food systems. Places such as community gardens and healthy food venues enhance access to fresh food while often beautifying the neighborhood. They are often appealing to gentrifiers, especially those involved in alternative food systems activism but who often lack a consciousness about the political dimension and whiteness of their discourse and practices (Guthman 2008). This would be a particularly meaningful area of collaboration between activists and researchers as they would work together to uncover some of the blind spots of environmental gentrification and collaborate toward greater urban social and racial justice. Another productive area of scholarship would be to develop the field of critical adaptation studies and examine the equity impacts of land use planning in the name of climate adaptation or urban resilience since cities are increasingly planning for climate risks or impacts (for a recent example, see [Anguelovski et al. In Press]).

A central question in green gentrification is also how EJ activists do confront the apolitical, postpolitical, and technocratic discourse of sustainability and reassert the social and political dimensions of the sustainability concept and their right to the city. What does their activism mean and how is it structured and framed in a context in which municipal sustainability projects are presented as beneficial for everyone? How do activists manage the tension between fighting for neighborhood

improvements and indirectly attracting wealthier and whiter newcomers? In turn, what are the anti-green gentrification policies, regulations, funding schemes, and participation mechanisms that municipalities put in place to address the conflicts that emerge from neighborhood greening projects and/or to address displacement and other social/racial threats? These are fruitful avenues for research.

Last, at the microscale, more attention needs to be paid to the individual strategies and adaptation behavior of residents in order to resist the negative impacts of gentrification and/or mobilize others around them to enhance community resilience. The question also remains open about how residents and EJ groups respond to gentrification benefiting minorities in cities and how class and race intersect and complicate understandings of environmental gentrifications. How is gentrification conceived when middle-class black residents move into or invest in a revitalizing neighborhood?

Recent environmental gentrification activism reveals the importance of continuing research which questions and redefines what it means to be green in the city. Planning scholars and practitioners must rethink urban sustainability in ways that address environmental gentrification, encroachment, affordability issues, and greening as the new “urban frontier.” Can only middle-class and white residents be green in the long term? If being green means to have access to new environmental goods in a sustained way, then this might well be the case. Such a reality requires a more critical examination of discourses and practices of urban environmentalism and of new forms of activism associating concrete demands with claims for a certain level of autonomy from the capitalist system and the state. It also requires accepting that, while the term green gentrification is powerful, it is just another way of understanding environmental injustices in cities and it does not represent a fundamentally new process in terms of the underlying political economy and urban geography dynamics. Traditional “brown” concerns of the EJ movements pointed at policy makers and dominant institutions for treating marginalized groups as if they do not deserve to live in healthy neighborhoods and allowed the siting of waste sites and other LULUs where they lived. Green gentrification is the flip side of that process through which the urban poor and people of color are only allowed to live in less healthy and livable neighborhoods.

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