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# Environmental Racism and the Movement for Black Lives: Grassroots Power in the 21st Century

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**Environmental Racism and the Movement for Black Lives:  
Grassroots Power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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In partial fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Environmental Analysis,  
2015-16 academic year, Pomona College, Claremont, California

Readers:

Professor Martha Arguello  
Professor Zayn Kassam  
Professor Char Miller

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# Introduction

If we want to talk about the environment...we have to talk about environmental racism – about the fact that kids in South Central Los Angeles have a third of the lung capacity of kids in Santa Monica.

—Danny Glover<sup>1</sup>

I was first introduced to the concept of environmental racism in college courses, but I gained a much better understanding of it once I began talking to people of color organizing in the grassroots, who struggle with and against environmental racism in their everyday lives. I have found there are many connections to be made between the grassroots movement for environmental justice, which takes a stance against the violence of environmental racism, and the movement for Black Lives, which began just a couple years ago in response to racialized police violence, which continues to end black lives across the U.S. Throughout this process I have redefined my conceptualization of environmental justice in a way that has broader implications for organizing on the grassroots level against the perils of neoliberalism. Herein I will explore a recent social justice movement by the name of Black Lives Matter (BLM), and consider how environmental racism can become integrated into this movement's conception of state violence. I envision an environmental justice in which people of color may have the agency to play an active role in reclaiming the health and autonomy of their communities, so that their living conditions don't sentence them to early, systemic, and intergenerational death. Through various lines of research and investigation, I have come to find that the environmental justice movement and the movement for Black Lives must combine the efforts of grassroots power on a global scale in its efforts

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah van Gelder, "Danny Glover: An Interview by Sarah van Gelder," Article, *YES! Magazine*, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/working-for-life/danny-glover-an-interview-by-sarah-van-gelder>.

to challenge neoliberalism and the racialized nature global apartheid. BLM, the new and reinvigorated movement for black liberation, can—and must—evolve into a platform to challenge environmental racism as a form of state-sanctioned racial violence. When we expand our understanding of violence against black bodies, we begin to see that our movements, if they are to save as many lives as possible must challenge the root of the problem: neoliberalism.

With environmental justice being such an urgent issues, one might come to wonder why it isn't talked about very widely in environmentalist circles. Today, environmentalism is largely/starkly split between a mainstream movement, which is predominantly white, and an environmental justice movement, which is composed of people of color. The primary reason for this divide is the way in which racist economic and social forces have separated the environments inhabited by white people and those inhabited by people of color. While the environmental justice highlights the lived experiences of people of color, the mainstream environmental movement in the United States continues to employ narrow conceptualizations of the environment that fail to prioritize people—most significantly, poor people of color. In thinking about the spatial separation of environmental consciousness, I wonder if there are lessons to be learned from previous social movements and whether we can apply them to our current time. If the Black Lives Matter and environmental justice movements have similar goals, what might we learn from radical movements of the 60s and 70s as we forge our own new path?

The most prominent radical party in the U.S. during the 60s and 70s was the Black Panther Party (BPP), which formed from the need to address police brutality in black communities. This objective was also the root of BLM's conception in 2014. However, once the Panthers developed themselves more politically, they began to address other community issues such as malnutrition and disease. They understood these problems as a reflection of the racist contradictions present in the United States' political and economic system—which is why they considered revolution, liberation, and self-

determination to be their ultimate goals. Radical movements in the Black Power era took a more community-based approach to combating environmental justice issues, and the importance of grassroots work continues to be a key strategy in the social movements of today. But before I get to ahead of myself, you might be wondering: How did I become involved in environmental justice issues in the first place?

Before coming to Pomona I was very interested in science, so in my first semester of college I enrolled myself in Biology classes with the pre-medical track in mind. After realizing that I wanted to learn more about ecology and the natural world, I decided to declare a major in environmental analysis instead. In my initial exposure to environmental issues and activism, I found myself discouraged to see how the white mainstream movement dominates how we shape public attitudes towards environmentalism. Rather than having a critique of the economic and social systems that perpetuate environmental degradation, many of my peers were set on emphasizing personal choices in their environmentalism. They think that if everyone takes shorter showers, recycles, and purchases reusable and “ecofriendly” products, then we will be doing our part to help protect the environment. These efforts, while important in helping to reduce overall consumption, often do little more than perpetuate consumption and the individualization of the environmental movement.<sup>2</sup> When corporations promote “conscious” consumption and so-called “green” or “responsibly-sourced” products, they participate in the commercialization of the environmental movement. By commodifying the mission of environmental activism, they diffuse social energy for short-term corporate gain. In this process, companies manipulate the public mind by undermining and overwhelming grassroots messaging with liberal propaganda and cheap greenwashing campaigns that quell people into feeling good about their consumption.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael F. Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?,” *Global Environmental Politics* 1, no. 3 (August 2001): 31–52, doi:10.1162/152638001316881395.

Greenwashing is when a company or organization spends more time and money claiming to be ‘green’ through advertising and marketing than actually implementing business practices that minimize environmental impact.<sup>3</sup>

Today, greenwashing continues to mislead the American public into thinking that their individual consumer actions can collectively minimize the environmental impact of society as a whole. From a radical perspective, it becomes clear that the main culprit of environmental degradation is not consumer choice, but larger economic forces that make most of our consumer choices possible. For example, agriculture constitutes seventy percent of all water use worldwide (eighty percent in California), and industrial production and agriculture emit more greenhouse gases than transportation, electricity and heat production combined.<sup>456</sup> While more informed environmentalists have exposed individualism, greenwashing, and other corporate efforts to co-opt the movement, many of these environmentalists still fail to acknowledge how environmental issues impact people—especially people of color. Once I became aware of this problem, I also began to wonder where all of the environmentalists of color were. Surely, highlighting their voices could broaden the environmental movement’s lens and reinvigorate the fight for sustainability on both a local and global scale. As I started looking back on the history of the U.S. environmental movement, I realized the extent to which white privilege and racism prevented the involvement of black people and thwarted possibilities for radical change. Environmentalism’s lack of racial diversity goes back a long way.

National environmental and conservation groups like the Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, and the Audubon Society lead, plan, and fund the US mainstream environmental

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<sup>3</sup> “About Greenwashing | Greenwashing Index,” <http://www.greenwashingindex.com/about-greenwashing/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Water Consumption Statistics - Worldometers,” <http://www.worldometers.info/water/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Guo, “Agriculture Is 80 Percent of Water Use in California. Why Aren’t Farmers Being Forced to Cut Back?,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2015/04/03/agriculture-is-80-percent-of-water-use-in-california-why-arent-farmers-being-forced-to-cut-back/>.

<sup>6</sup> “Fifth Assessment Report - Mitigation of Climate Change,” <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg3/>.



movement.<sup>7</sup> Since the establishment of the Sierra Club in 1892 and rise of the conservation era, the protection of wildlife and natural spaces have taken top priority in both national and international environmentalism. At the same time, the environmental movement—and its leadership—has been almost entirely white, with clear roots in racist ideology and practice. In fact, John Muir, the hailed environmentalist and founder of the Sierra Club, fled to Canada to avoid fighting in the Civil War and was known to be racist against Native Americans.<sup>89</sup> Brentin Mock asserts that these environmentalists were typically people with more social capital, leaving them privileged enough to spend their time and effort prioritizing the admiration and protection of natural spaces that were easily accessible to them. On the other hand, people of color in the U.S. during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had limited rights and were forced to struggle and survive in a violent, white supremacist society.<sup>10</sup> As environmentalists like Muir worked to open space for the exclusive use of whites, the needs and concerns of people of color in the early conservation movement went largely neglected.

As the Progressive era moved into the twentieth century, environmentalists directed more attention towards environmental health and urban standards like clean water, efficient sewage handling and stable population growth. However, these efforts were mostly driven by the extent to which white communities were being affected by poor environmental health, and not by how black folks suffered in far more crowded and unsanitary urban ghettos.<sup>11</sup> The mainstream environmental movement continued to largely ignore the experiences of people of color throughout the 1970s, when environmental and ecological activism were becoming more prominent in US society.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Bullard, ed., *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, 1st ed (Boston, Mass: South End Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> “Why Race and Class Matter to the Environmental Movement,” *Grist*, <http://grist.org/article/gelobter-soul/>.

<sup>9</sup> “‘Muir’s Early Indian Views’ (1994) - John Muir Newsletter - John Muir Exhibit,” [http://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/john\\_muir\\_newsletter/wakefield\\_indian\\_views.aspx](http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/john_muir_newsletter/wakefield_indian_views.aspx).

<sup>10</sup> “Are There Two Different Versions of Environmentalism, One ‘White,’ One ‘Black?’,” *Grist*, <https://grist.org/climate-energy/are-there-two-different-versions-of-environmentalism-one-white-one-black/>.

<sup>11</sup> Nathan Hare, “Black Ecology,” *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 6 (April 1970): 2–8.

Mainstream environmentalism has often excluded the perspectives and concerns of people of color, in part because people of color have often been stereotyped as ignorant and apathetic towards environmental issues.<sup>12</sup> However, a 2010 poll conducted by Yale rebukes this point and demonstrates what many people of color already know from our more progressive political leanings, experiences with environmental racism, and vulnerability to global climate change: minorities are equally, and often even more supportive than white Americans, of national climate and energy policies.<sup>13</sup> But how can this be, if people of color haven't contributed significantly to mainstream environmental movement? The answer to this question reveals itself when we begin to understand how people of color have been enlisted in a multi-dimensional battle throughout their struggle for autonomy and justice. As a result, people of color have been forced to prioritize social and political issues, like racial discrimination, segregation, and disenfranchisement, which pose the most apparent danger to our livelihoods. The oppressive political and social climate experienced by people of color would continue to further their commitment to racial justice activism.

After the assassination of Dr. King in 1968, when civil rights activism was declining, many white activists and student protesters began to focus more attention on the anti-war movement. Others turned towards environmental movements. At the same time we saw the emergence of the Black Power movement and radical political parties and organizations led by people of color, such as the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the Brown Berets, and the Red Guard, along with white radical organizations like the Young Patriots and Students for a Democratic Society. Without stating it explicitly, these movements—most notably, the Black Panthers and Young Lords—fought against a variety of environmental injustices. Meanwhile most African Americans remained unable to divert their

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<sup>12</sup> “Are There Two Different Versions of Environmentalism, One ‘White,’ One ‘Black?’”

<sup>13</sup> Marina Fang, “Why Minorities Care More About Climate Change,” *ThinkProgress*, <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2013/07/29/2360971/why-minorities-are-greener-than-the-rest-of-the-population/>.

organizational and financial resources into the mainstream environmental movement, largely due to the legitimate danger of the mainstream undermining their critical struggle for civil and human rights.<sup>14</sup>

While the issues of pollution and population growth were prioritized by the mainstream environmental movement during this time, white environmentalists were more concerned with cleaning and preserving uninhabited lands—the recreational spaces of the affluent—and often held racist attitudes that considered the black and brown population *itself* to be the main cause of the population problem.<sup>15</sup> Mock suggests that the 1970s were also a time when many white people thought that their privileged social position might be jeopardized if black and brown people were to gain more voting power and political representation.<sup>16</sup> This promoted the further exclusion of people of color from the mainstream environmental movement. Since the 1970s, mainstream environmentalism has slowly become more integrated.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as more people of color have integrated into the mainstream environmental movement. There is still almost no representation within the movement’s senior membership.<sup>17</sup> Michel Gelobter attributes this more to differences in vision rather than pure discrimination.<sup>18</sup> People of color focus on their experience of social injustice within their environment, and environmentalists of color know that social justice is something that been routinely ignored in the mainstream movement’s decision-making.<sup>19</sup> Urban neglect and the overcrowded conditions of ghetto communities beginning during the peak of wartime industrialization continue to subject communities of color to a less “natural” community environment, an environment that is noticeably different from that of predominantly white

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<sup>14</sup> “Are There Two Different Versions of Environmentalism, One ‘White,’ One ‘Black?’”

<sup>15</sup> Hare, “Black Ecology.”

<sup>16</sup> “Are There Two Different Versions of Environmentalism, One ‘White,’ One ‘Black?’”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> “Why Race and Class Matter to the Environmental Movement.”

<sup>19</sup> Michel Gelobter, “The Soul of Environmentalism: Reconsidering Transformational Politics in the 21st Century,” *Redefining Progress*, 2005.

suburban communities.<sup>20</sup> While white suburbanites could look out their windows and view trees and grass, black people in urban centers could see little more than cement and buildings.<sup>21</sup> From this reality of segregation sprung forth an understanding of ecology through a more critical lens—one that took into account intersections of race, class, and public health. This analysis contributed to scholarship that predated the rise of the environmental justice movement in the 80s and 90s. It is in the context of the environmental justice movement that we have come to understand the nature of environmental racism and how it continues to impact the health of communities of color both in the U.S. and around the world. As a struggle firmly grounded in the grassroots, the environmental justice movement has gained more attention and membership in the last 35 years. But in just the last two years, a new social justice movement by the name of Black Lives Matter has begun an effort to bring widespread attention to an extremely important issue that continues to disproportionately impact Black communities across the country: police brutality.

The first chapter of this thesis paints a picture of my experience at Pomona College and offers my perspective on educational apartheid, BLM activism, contradictions within this institution of higher education, and my positionality to the struggle. In chapter two I offer a brief history of the environmental justice movement, examining early analyses of the racialized nature of ecological and public health disparity. In this chapter I also introduce how the concept of environmental racism was born. In chapter three, I explore grassroots struggles for environmental justice in Los Angeles County, including excerpts from interviews that I conducted with an organizer from the city of Pomona and an organizer from South Los Angeles who is associated with the BLM movement. In chapter four I frame neoliberalism as the root cause of environmental racism and explain how it furthers global apartheid. In

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<sup>20</sup> “Think People of Color Don’t Care about the Environment? Think Again,” *Grist*, <https://grist.org/people/think-people-of-color-dont-care-about-the-environment-think-again/>.

<sup>21</sup> Hare, “Black Ecology.”

chapter four I give an overview of BLM's origins and politics. In this chapter I also introduce how environmental racism is state violence. Finally, I conclude with how my research might inform a united movement for self-determination moving forward.

Preparing this thesis has been a painful process, as it has entailed a detailed analysis of the dehumanization of communities of color. Reading and thinking about the violence waged against our communities has taken a physical, psychological, and emotional toll. At the same time, learning more about how people continue to organize in the struggle for social and environmental justice offered me the inspiration and resolve to continue on. This thesis is not simply an academic work, but a political one. I write with the continued survival of communities of color always in my mind. May this scholarship contribute something towards the greater liberation of my people, or at least offer a glimpse inside a global system plagued by contradiction and injustice. But first, let me tell you where I'm coming from.

## Chapter 1: My Experience within the Ivory Tower

The institutions of learning in capitalist society are created to train and form cadres who will manage and secure the reproduction of capitalist society. That is to say that in a world that is split between the oppressor nations and oppressed nations, the education must serve to maintain the status quo.

—Luwezi Kinshasa<sup>22</sup>

When I first arrived at Pomona College, I was excited about various possibilities that had opened up for me. If a black, low income, first-generation student like myself could be accepted into an elite academic institution such as this one, then perhaps the notion of social mobility might hold true in our society. I was admitted to Pomona through Questbridge, an organization that matches high achieving low-income high school students with elite four year colleges. While it has been reassuring to at least have some community with other students who come from less privileged backgrounds, my feelings have shifted as I've had more time to reflect on what it means for me to be here. I realize that I am in a position that enables me join the ranks of an elite class within the greater hegemony of global capitalism, to become assimilated into a system that perpetuates segregation, economic disparity, and violence against humans and the environment.

At times it has felt as though my presence here is an anomaly. I grew up in a low-income neighborhood, but attended public school in middle/upper-middle class suburbs. Through the support of my family, as well as the encouragement of teachers and counselors in grade school, I was able to excel academically and attain a college scholarship. My excitement and gratitude made me indifferent towards the tokenization that I would experience as someone who contributes to the diversity of a predominantly white and economically privileged student body. I'm not alone in the sentiment that the

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<sup>22</sup> "The Role of African Intellectuals in the World," [http://uhurunews.com/story?resource\\_name=the-role-of-african-intellectuals-in-the-world](http://uhurunews.com/story?resource_name=the-role-of-african-intellectuals-in-the-world).

social climate at the Claremont Colleges (5Cs)—among other things—is far from what it should be if it hopes to offer a safe and supportive learning environment for students from marginalized backgrounds. But I will speak more to that later. In the meantime, it is important to consider this institution’s current efforts to improve campus climate and address the serious issue of racial and economic diversity.

Pomona College president, David Oxtoby, and the President’s Advisory Committee on Diversity (PACD), began putting together a plan in 2014 to address issues of campus diversity through the year 2025. When I first read through a working draft of this plan, I came across a section titled “Access and Inclusion,” its objective being to, “develop a campus community that includes the fullest possible range of diverse perspectives and backgrounds essential to a rigorous learning environment.”<sup>23</sup> In order to help “diversify” the student body, Pomona plans to expand admissions recruiting both domestically and internationally, develop relationships with local community colleges, and maintain a commitment to providing need-blind financial aid.<sup>24</sup> The final version of the plan was released in April 2015, and while strategies such as this seem well-intentioned, it’s disconcerting how they embody the limited extent to which liberal reforms can provide more reasonable access to higher education within an inherently unequal educational framework. As long as marginalized communities—especially working-class communities of color—are continually oppressed by the negligence of a state-funded public education system, how can institutional diversity progress towards an ideal of justice centered on equity and inclusion?

By seeking individuals deemed “essential to a rigorous learning environment” (I have a hard time interpreting what this should really mean), Pomona’s vision of diversity excludes the masses, youth who cannot hope to excel within a public education system that sets them up to fail.<sup>25</sup> Poor children—

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<sup>23</sup> President’s Advisory Committee on Diversity, “Lighting the Path to 2025: A Vision for Diversity” (Pomona College, April 30, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

mostly children of color—benefit the least and suffer the most from state-funded instruction because most public schools in the U.S.—most notably those in urban centers—remain highly segregated, a reflection of greater segregation patterns in neighborhoods and communities across the nation.<sup>26</sup>

Schools that were already deeply segregated 30 years ago are no less segregated now, while thousands of other schools that had been integrated (either voluntarily or by the force of law) have since been rapidly resegregating. You only need look at public school enrollment figures in most major cities. For example in the academic year beginning 2002, segregation rates of black or Hispanic students ranged from 75 percent in New York city to a more typical 84 percent in Los Angeles to a nearly total segregation rate of 94 percent in Washington D.C.<sup>27</sup>

Along with segregation, underachievement in public schools is also perpetuated when schools in communities of color are not adequately funded for curricular and extra-curricular programs. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, a revered neoliberal policy designed to address academic underachievement, only established unattainable achievement goals measured through massive amounts of standardized testing.<sup>28</sup> Under these new targets, schools are now set up to fail—they receive less funding when students get lower scores—and when they do the federal government quickly intervenes to “restructure” (i.e. privatize) them.<sup>29</sup>

In the classroom, public school teachers in urban areas—who are often less experienced—routinely fail to understand the cultural background of their students.<sup>30</sup><sup>31</sup> This causes them to express pessimistic or apathetic attitudes, which condition their students to internalize academic inferiority.<sup>32</sup> There’s a feeling of hopelessness, that students—instead of furthering their education and applying for

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<sup>26</sup> “Our Educational Apartheid | Reimagine!,” <http://reimagineerpe.org/node/2810>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Adam Sanchez, “Educational Apartheid in America,” <http://isreview.org/issue/67/educational-apartheid-america>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> H. Lankford, S. Loeb, and J. Wyckoff, “Teacher Sorting and the Plight of Urban Schools: A Descriptive Analysis,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 37–62, doi:10.3102/01623737024001037.

<sup>31</sup> “Still Separate, Still Unequal: America’s Educational Apartheid JONATHAN KOZOL / Harper’s Magazine v.311, n.1864 1sep2005,” <http://www.mindfully.org/Reform/2005/American-Apartheid-Education1sep05.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



college—should develop trade skills that increase their chances of securing a job with a living wage.<sup>33</sup> Children raised in these communities are vulnerable to going down the school-to-prison pipeline—which funnels students out of public schools and into juvenile and criminal justice systems through “zero-tolerance policies,” thereby normalizing their exposure to excessive disciplinary measures and their submission to authority.<sup>34</sup> Frequent suspensions and expulsions in response to non-violent and mundane forms of adolescent misbehavior push these students away from school. This is certainly the case in the city of Los Angeles, where some schools are patrolled by their own police force, and a disproportionate number of students of color are ticketed and criminalized for fighting, daytime-curfew violations, and other minor infractions.<sup>35</sup> I wonder, if the administrations and students of this consortium truly understood the reality of educational apartheid in the United States, might they alter or challenge what “diversity” should really look like on these campuses?

American society reinforces the myth of meritocracy: the idea that as long as someone is diligent, they can become educated, find a profitable career, and advance themselves socially and economically.<sup>36</sup> That is what makes need-blind admission on these campuses so attractive to people from less privileged communities. Pomona admits more of us (20% of admitted students come from families that make \$60,000 a year or less) in its plan for institutional diversity and inclusion.<sup>37,38</sup> What receives far less attention is how 40% of Pomona students are from families from the wealthiest 20% of society.<sup>39</sup> By highlighting diversity efforts that divert attention away from the overrepresentation of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “School-to-Prison Pipeline,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/racial-justice/race-and-inequality-education/school-prison-pipeline>.

<sup>35</sup> “Los Angeles School Police Still Ticketing Thousands of Young Students,” *Center for Public Integrity*, December 27, 2012, <http://www.publicintegrity.org/2012/12/27/11984/los-angeles-school-police-still-ticketing-thousands-young-students>.

<sup>36</sup> “The Meritocracy Myth,” <http://www.ncsociology.org/sociationtoday/v21/merit.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Pomona College Board of Trustees, “Pomona College Institutional Indicators Spring 2015,” 2015.

<sup>38</sup> President’s Advisory Committee on Diversity, “Lighting the Path to 2025: A Vision for Diversity.”

<sup>39</sup> Pomona College Board of Trustees, “Pomona College Institutional Indicators Spring 2015.”

privileged students, Pomona inadvertently perpetuates a negative ideology which suggest that higher education can empower smart and less privileged youth through need-blind admissions. These efforts do not truly represent low-income and working class communities nationwide, but instead represent a particular minority of those who have had the academic and social resources to meet academia's standards of achievement. We must dispel of the belief that access to higher education has the potential to fully address economic inequality through offering the opportunity of upward social mobility. We must remember that these colleges hold their allegiances to the most economically privileged portion of society: the bourgeoisie.

Rather than coming together to challenge institutional injustice, I have noticed how families from less-represented backgrounds instead feel pressure to ensure that their children can jump through the same academic hoops as those from more privileged backgrounds (who can do so more easily in order to maintain their class position). If students fail to succeed in grade school, it's often considered a personal failure rather than the failure of a school system and a society that wasn't set up with them in mind. But then again, how many institutions are actually set up with the interests of poor people of color in mind? This question will present itself in a multitude of ways later on, but for now I will move on to how I experienced my time at Pomona College.

At first, I really grappled with my less privileged identity Pomona and struggled with the idea that I might not have the ability to "succeed" in the eyes of the academy. I used to think that I needed Pomona in order to validate my personhood, that if could excel here, then my aptitude would be formally legitimized. But as time progressed I came to realize how my being here legitimized this college's existence as a place that can claim to champion diversity. As I've matured and come to better understand my positionality in relation to Pomona College, I have developed a renewed sense of confidence and self-worth. I understand that my education is not merely a means to acquire social

capital in a competitive world, but an outlet through which I may discover more about myself and think critically about societal transformations that might ensure the long-term survival of our planet and all of its life. I refuse to accept that Western hegemony and global capitalism are the best we can aspire to as a species. The liberal status quo cannot continue to subjugate both people and the environment in its vision of “freedom” and “progress,” terms which have been used for much of American history as code words for a system that profits by oppressing the poor communities of color.<sup>40</sup> This point will develop over the course of this thesis, but as I continue along with my narrative, I wish to offer some background on my involvement with Black Lives Matter movement at the Claremont Colleges (5Cs).

## My Perspective on Black Lives Matter Movement and Student Activism at the 5Cs

The movement for Black Lives received attention on national level on August 9, 2014, when Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson murdered Michael Brown, an unarmed black teen. His body was left in the street four hours after his death.<sup>41</sup> Brown had been stopped by Wilson after having stolen a few boxes of cigarillos from a nearby liquor store. Wilson testified that Brown exhibited signs of threatening behavior and that he had reached into the police car in an attempt to grab his gun.<sup>42</sup> After the gun fired, Brown was injured and he made an attempt to flee before turning his body towards Wilson. At this point, Wilson claimed that he feared for his own safety and shot twelve rounds at Brown, who again, was unarmed. After 25 days of deliberation and the consideration of physical evidence and multiple eyewitness accounts, the grand jury on the case decided to not indict Wilson on

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<sup>40</sup> “Why Race and Class Matter to the Environmental Movement.”

<sup>41</sup> “What Happened in Ferguson?,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

November 25, 2014.<sup>43</sup> black communities across the nation were outraged at how the justice system had failed to convict such an act of racialized violence, and protests sparked in Ferguson on the night of the verdict.<sup>44</sup> Black Lives Matter action at the 5Cs began the next day.

A little over a year ago, 5C students organized a demonstration to march in solidarity with the residents of Ferguson and the movement for Black Lives.<sup>45</sup> Before the march, Sidney Lemelle, longtime Pomona College African History and Africana Studies professor, spoke a little about the tradition of student activism against racism on the Claremont campuses. During the march, we walked through downtown Claremont, stopping at city hall and finally ending at the Claremont police station. The demonstration had brought people together on campus in a way that I had never witnessed before, but there was a major problem: It was not organized or led by black students. As a result, many black students felt that many white and a few non-black people of color allies were taking up a lot of time over the course of the demonstration, especially during times when we stopped and people spoke on the megaphone. White allies—many of whom spoke about how they didn't realize that racism and police brutality were significant problems before coming to college—ended up detracting from the effectiveness of the demonstration, and took time away from black students, who experience the realities of racism in their everyday lives.

Near the end of the 2014 fall semester, during finals week, black students staged die-ins at Pomona and Pitzer dining halls to bring attention to the horrifying number of black people who die from police violence every year. Not only were some students rude and disrespectful in the dining halls by laughing, showing frustration, and walking over the bodies of the protestors, but there were also racist

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Jon Swaine, "Ferguson Protests: State of Emergency Declared after Violent Night," *The Guardian*, August 10, 2015, sec. US news, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/10/ferguson-protests-st-louis-state-of-emergency>.

<sup>45</sup> "Students March to Protest Ferguson Verdict," <http://tsl.news/articles/2014/12/5/news/5871-students-march-to-protest-ferguson-verdict>.

comments posted on social media.<sup>46</sup> Many Claremont students were disgusted to find racist comments on Yik Yak—an anonymous social media smartphone app—mentioning how irritating and inconvenient some students thought the protests were. Racist responses to the die-ins were clear indicators of the racism that continues to exist within college campus across the country. Many students were outraged, knowing that BLM movement wouldn't stop there.

On May 7, 2015, the spring semester following the initial Ferguson demonstration, there was another Black Lives Matter demonstration at the 5Cs, but this time it was organized and led by black students, with non-black poc and white allies playing a supporting role.<sup>47</sup> We drafted a statement demanding that college administrations acknowledge the racially motivated acts of violence taking place across the country and to accommodate black students, who struggle psychologically and emotionally on campuses where many other students remain apathetic towards these brutal events.<sup>48</sup> The death of Freddie Gray was fresh in most of our minds. Gray, a 25 year-old black man, was arrested on April 12, 2015 for possessing what Baltimore police alleged was an illegal switchblade. While being transported in a police van, Gray fell into a coma and was taken to a trauma center.<sup>49</sup> Gray died a week later on April 19, 2015 due to injuries to his spinal cord.<sup>50</sup> A few days later, before an official investigation had begun, six Baltimore police officers were temporarily suspended with pay.<sup>51</sup> After we had marched through each of the campuses and made our demands, student protesters organized a human blockade on

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<sup>46</sup> “Students Organize ‘Die-In’ Protests at Dining Halls,” <http://tsl.news/news/4511/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Black Students, Allies Demonstrate for Administration Support in Wake of Baltimore,” 2015, <http://tsl.news/articles/2015/5/14/news/6477-black-students-allies-demonstrate-for-administration-responses-support-in-wake-of-baltimore>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> “Freddie Gray’s Death Ruled a Homicide,” *PBS NewsHour*, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/freddie-grays-death-ruled-homicide/>.

<sup>50</sup> “Freddie Gray, the Baltimore Man Who Died of Spinal Injury Sustained in Police Custody - The Atlantic,” <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/the-mysterious-death-of-freddie-gray/391119/>.

<sup>51</sup> Oliver Laughl and Jon Swaine, “Six Baltimore Officers Suspended over Police-van Death of Freddie Gray,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2015, sec. US news, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/apr/20/baltimore-officers-suspended-death-freddie-gray>.

the intersection of Claremont Boulevard and Foothill Boulevard, stopping traffic for about ten minutes as a few students voiced their sentiments along with a statement of solidarity with Black Lives Matter. The police were present, but they weren't antagonistic since we weren't there for long. Black students met after the demonstration and voiced general approval with how things went along with the need for future organizing efforts.

On November 12, 2015, students of the Claremont Colleges held a campus-wide demonstration to protest institutional racism and to stand in solidarity with students of color nationwide, who routinely confront racism on their respective campuses. Earlier that day, Dean Spellman of CMC officially resigned from her position after a protest that took place in response to an email that she had sent to a student of color. In this email, she mentioned how, "we can better serve students ... who don't fit our CMC mold," disseminating the belief that CMC is a place for white privileged students.<sup>52</sup> The resignation was a timely move on behalf of CMC in order to keep the school's reputation from gathering any more negative media attention, but nonetheless it was still a small victory for students of color at the 5Cs.

The demonstration was effective in how it was organized and led by black students, who were then followed by non-black people of color and white allies, but I began to feel disturbed when the march ended and the megaphone was opened for people to share their thoughts and feelings. One speaker, a black woman who was a representative from a local NAACP chapter, took the megaphone and started reinforcing respectability politics, mentioning how activists of color need to be "intelligent" and "diplomatic" when addressing race issues, or else people "might think we're stupid". I'm not sure why the NAACP was there or who might have invited them, but it was insulting for them to show up halfway through our march to only push ideas of respectability politics and tone-policing language into

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<sup>52</sup> "Amid Racial Bias Protests, Claremont McKenna Dean Resigns," *Latimes.com*, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-claremont-marches-20151112-story.html>.

people's heads. In addition, a few students of color spoke about how we were making change just by simply being present, which I found particularly misguided. Demonstrations like these should be viewed as only one part of the struggle for students of color and committed allies to resist against institutional racism. I now feel demonstrations like these—while they serve a purpose by promoting the visibility of these issues—provide too much instant gratification. Many students are so quick to pat themselves on the back for standing in solidarity when a demonstration rolls around, but is that all they think that in solidarity entails, echoing chants during a campus protest once a semester?

The last several weeks of the fall 2015 semester have been psychologically and emotionally draining. On November 17, there was a conversation between Claremont students, President Oxtoby, and his advisory committee on diversity—the same committee that drafted the diversity plan—regarding the College's plans to address issues of representation and diversity.<sup>53</sup> But once the conversation started, the tone was set by the many students who spoke and shared personal stories. These stories revealed ways in which these students had been mistreated by campus administration. It was somewhat encouraging to see less-represented students, especially working-class students and students of color, demand better access to campus support, financial aid, and inclusive spaces, but it was also depressing how little attention was paid to the how this institution perpetuates a white liberal status quo that rests on the toil of the working class.<sup>54</sup> As I mentioned earlier, Pomona College accepts students of color mostly to benefit the school's reputation and the experience of the predominantly white student body. While this was pointed out on few occasions by some of the students who spoke, little could be voiced about how the conversation with Oxtoby consisted of mostly aspiring petit bourgeois students of color, demanding equity within an institution whose culture perpetuates a capitalist system reliant on the oppression of the poor and working classes. While the event was a small step forward in exposing some

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<sup>53</sup> "Pomona Students Present List of Demands to Oxtoby," <http://tsl.news/news/5296/>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

of the administrative and institutional failures of the college, how can we be certain that many of the problems mentioned won't simply be retold again a few weeks or a few months from now? How long will it take for race issues on campus to return back to that regular repressive calm?

As Audre Lorde writes in the "Transformation of Silence and Language into Action", it is necessary for us all to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding."<sup>55</sup> But does the pursuit of knowledge at an elite institution like Pomona facilitate the dissemination of truth to those who have not come to understand a particular form of academic scholarship and understanding? Aren't grades administered by professors who have specialized in knowing through understanding concepts in an academic way? As a low-income student who was awarded the privilege of being able to study at Pomona over the last four years, I've come to realize how this place can influence students to mainly voice thoughts that they feel are acceptable to higher authority. Truth becomes unpopular and controversial when it goes against the ideals of the institution. As students, we are under supervision and are encouraged to synthesize and transform the ideas we learn here to fit the context in which we now find ourselves. But as life continues in the Claremont bubble, I can't help but feel so utterly detached from the turmoil and violence that continues to devastate oppressed communities of color everywhere as a result of global capitalism.

I take Audre Lorde's "knowing beyond understanding" to mean knowing beyond the intellectual and conceptual confines that make it so we must articulate our ideas in a manner that is traditionally regarded as "rational" and "respectable." When I envision knowing beyond understanding, I see truth being expressed through the very realities that less privileged communities must endure in modern society. People from oppressed communities don't need to understand the exact processes of neoliberalism to know the exploitation and injustice that it thrusts into their everyday life. There was

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<sup>55</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, c2007, n.d.).



power and a potential moment of mobilization to be found in students sharing their experiences, pain, and frustration with President Oxtoby in November. But criticizing the fact that institutional racism still exists on these campuses is the very least that students of color should be directing their energies toward. Not to diminish the significance of the conversation, but in all honestly a lot of the personal narratives that I heard were not surprising given the general amount of ambivalence Pomona College has had towards the needs of students of color. It would have been promising to see at least one student acknowledge how Pomona ought to challenge its own position as a gateway institution that certifies achievement to an exclusive minority of our society's youth at the expense of many others. But perhaps that kind of criticism can only spring forth once political consciousness on campus is elevated enough so that students of color and less privileged students can mentally decolonize, self-criticize, and seek to address the little bit of the oppressor that lurks deep within themselves.

The list of demands that students drafted before the conversation was a step in the right direction in terms of holding the administration accountable to producing results now, or at least within a timeframe where graduating seniors might begin to see the changes that need to keep happening on campus.<sup>56</sup> I just hope that in the long run, student groups might start to organize around issues that challenge the neoliberal framework in which this college operates. Otherwise there might only continue to be conversations where less-privileged students plead for better support and resources in a place that is enabling most of them to improve their class position and abandon their ties and commitments to class struggle. Yes, becoming part of the bourgeoisie does mean that you inherit a physically comfortable life, but it's because of the bourgeoisie that working class people are forced to starve, to forgo medical care, to live a life where they can barely survive. One shouldn't be ashamed of wanting a better life for their family and loved ones, but entering the bourgeoisie means further complicity within an economic,

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<sup>56</sup> "Pomona Students Present List of Demands to Oxtoby."

social, and political system that leaves the masses of working class people and people of color scrambling to make ends meet. It's thoughts like these which make me think more and more about economic exploitation and my positionality to it.

I currently exist within a capitalist educational system that is designed to function for the people it deems essential to its reproduction. As students enrolled at Claremont Colleges, my fellow students and I are those chosen few. Meanwhile, 'the others' experience the struggle and the weight of our immense privilege. If student activists are actually serious about addressing social injustice, they ought to support social movements aimed at improving conditions for all people, not just those who benefit from having a family member enter the bourgeoisie class. I understand that many students of color maintain strong ties to the communities from which they come from and that these students also hope to use their education as resource for those back home who cannot escape class struggle. These are the people that I think are worth reaching out to and potentially organizing with. If Claremont students are serious about supporting social movements beyond the extent to which they will participate in a conversation with school administrators centered on representation within a problematic higher education system, then reach out to local grassroots organizations and Black Lives Matter chapters. There are BLM chapters in Los Angeles as well as the Inland Empire for people to learn how to organize around serious social issues. As I've grown tired of hearing stories of oppression, I'm eager to hear critical perspectives that don't look to the Claremont College administration as an agent of change. If students want a brighter day for everyone, and not just ourselves and those immediately around us, then representation and support from our college will only get us so far. I advocate for a more radical analysis that is critical of higher education's interests in upholding neoliberalism. Our solidarity with social movements must be more than symbolic—it must be genuine. Before working-class students and

students of color continue down their respective journeys, they must ask themselves: Do I want to be represented or liberated? As for me, I've decided to fight for liberation.

Unless representation within an oppressive system is consciously used as a means to dismantle that system and transform society for the better, then you will only become complacent within that system's domination. This dialectic between the oppressor and the oppressed is a recurring theme in this thesis. In the next chapter this dialectic will surface through how people of color in the U.S. come to understand their miserable ecological conditions in relation to dominant white society.

## Chapter 2: Environment Justice as a Movement against Environmental Racism

In the final analysis, if we are really worried and concerned about our ecology, we will take steps to eliminate the overcrowded, inhuman conditions where a segment of the population is degraded, brutalized and compartmentalized.

—Terry Jones<sup>57</sup>

In this chapter I will explore some of the ways in which systemic racism has influenced how communities of color in the United States—particularly African-American communities—experience the environment, in addition to ways in which early Black Power ideology has shaped black ecological consciousness. I will also give a brief history of the environmental justice movement and how it has become a movement centered on resisting environmental racism.

### Racialized Ecological Separation and Black Power Ideology

We are a part of our environment, which is why it is important to understand our relationship with nature through an ecological lens. Ecology is a subject through which we examine relationships between organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings. The word "ecology" was derived by a German biologist, and comes from the word "aikos" meaning house.<sup>58</sup> I like this fact because we must understand that the environment is our home. When the concept of ecology became more

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<sup>57</sup> Terry Jones, "Apartheid Ecology in America: On Building The Segregated Society," *Black World*, May 1975.

<sup>58</sup> Hare, "Black Ecology."

politicized in mainstream environmentalist circles, it was associated more with protecting the environment from pollution and degradation. But this discourse, much like the mainstream environmental movement, failed to integrate the voices and perspectives of people of color. Because communities of color in the U.S. have historically inhabited environments that have been considerably different than those of white communities, mainstream ecological discourse couldn't address the degraded conditions that people of color experience, especially those experienced in urban centers. As a result, ecologists ended up neglecting the social costs of industrialization on communities of color. It would take the effort of black scholars and sociologists to explain how people of color experience their ecology as an effect of segregation.

Almost the entirety of the black experience in the United States has been shaped by racism and segregation, including the environments in which black people have lived. African-American Studies professor Manning Marable explains that black communities in search of economic opportunity had little choice but to move into highly segregated urban centers, known as ghettos.

In the twentieth century, as millions of rural southern blacks migrated to the industrial northeast and Midwest, seeking employment and a better way of life, they quickly confronted a newer form of racial exclusion and stigmatization—the urban ghetto.<sup>59</sup>

Urban ghettos are where the environmental, social, and economic forces of pollution tend to be the most severe. They are a places where black people have been forced to exist in both physical and psychological imprisonment.<sup>60</sup> These conditions are what guided a lot of black sociological discourse concerning the particular experiences of people of color in their environment.

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<sup>59</sup> Manning Marable, Ian Steinberg, and Keesha Middlemass, eds., *Racializing Justice, Disenfranchising Lives: The Racism, Criminal Justice, and Law Reader*, 1st Palgrave Macmillan pbk. ed, Critical Black Studies (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Jones, "Apartheid Ecology in America."

In 1970, before there was any formal conception of what environmental justice was, sociologist Nathan Hare wrote about how traditional ecological discourse had been failing to address the systemic issues that presented themselves in urban ghettos. In doing so, he introduced the concept of black ecology.

The legitimacy of the concept of black ecology accrues from the fact that: (1) the black and white environments not only differ in degree but in nature as well; (2) the causes and solutions to ecological problems are fundamentally different in the suburbs and ghetto (both of which human ecologists regard as "natural [or ecological] areas"; and (3) the solutions set forth for the "ecological crisis" are reformist and evasive of the social and political revolution which black environmental correction demands.<sup>61</sup>

I find black ecology groundbreaking not only in how it assesses the disparities between black ghettos and predominantly white suburbs, but in how it identifies social and political transformation as the solution to the ecological problems facing black urban dwellers. A similar analysis is written in 1975 by Terry Jones, who goes a step further in conceptualizing racialized environmental disparity as apartheid ecology, which acknowledges the existence of two distinct ecological systems: an urban ecosystem of impoverished blacks and a suburban ecosystem of more privileged whites. He explains ways in which these ecological systems differ in the following passage:

Decaying buildings, polluted air from factories, and crowded living conditions make up the ecological environment of inner city Blacks, while suburban whites have an ecological environment that tends to be more pleasant.<sup>62</sup>

Coming from a place of urban despair, apartheid ecology expresses considerable disdain towards mainstream environmental consciousness in the 1970s, especially because of how its popularity came at the expense of social programs that would improve these conditions.<sup>63</sup> Jones' also accredits the growth

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<sup>61</sup> Hare, "Black Ecology."

<sup>62</sup> Jones, "Apartheid Ecology in America."

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

of white suburbs to government prejudice, especially through the discriminatory nature of the Federal Housing Administration's and Veteran's Administration's insuring and understating programs. In addition to these programs, road building activities carried out by federal highway agencies worked to make car travel between cities and suburbs easier for white folk.<sup>64</sup> The systematic nature of this residential isolation and subjugation is a more modern development in the US colonial project, a project that dates back to this nation's founding. As environmental justice activist Robert Bullard writes:

The nation was founded on the principles of "free land" (stolen from Native Americans and Mexicans), "free labor" (cruelly extracted from African slaves), and "free men" (white men with property)...It has allowed communities of color to exist as internal colonies characterized by dependent (and unequal) relationships with the dominant white society or "Mother Country."<sup>65</sup>

The colonial project has necessitated the exploitation of the land and people of color. But Robert Bullard—"the father of the environmental justice"—wasn't the first to conceptualize the internal colonial model. This model was first explored by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in their 1967 book, *Black Power*, as way of explaining the social and political oppression of African Americans.

The economic relationship of America's black communities [to white society]...reflects their colonial status. The political power exercised over those communities goes hand in glove with the economic deprivation experienced by the black citizens. Historically, colonies have existed for the sole purpose of enriching, in one form or another, the "colonizer"; the consequence is to maintain the economic dependence of the colonized.<sup>66</sup>

Before Carmichael published ideas like these, he was the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) near the end of the civil rights movement. *Black Power* represented the beginning of a shift in black political consciousness that would later grow into the Black Power

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Bullard, *Confronting Environmental Racism*.

<sup>66</sup> Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, Vintage ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

movement of the 60s and 70s. Through an understanding of how the systemic oppression experienced by black people reflected their colonized status within white society, Carmichael advocated a black Nationalist ideology that predicated on the principles of black unity and self-determination. He understood that lasting social change could only be accomplished by black people coming together and participating in a revolution that would allow them to separate themselves from white society.<sup>67</sup> I consider black ecology a product of Black Power movement in how it envisions a solution to the ecological crisis that black people experience in urban ghettos. In the concluding lines of “Black Ecology,” Hare asserts that:

The real solution to the environmental crisis is the decolonization of the black race...It is necessary for blacks to achieve self-determination acquiring a full black government and a multi-billion dollar budget so that blacks can better solve the more serious environmental crises of blacks.<sup>68</sup>

Radical political parties and organizations of color that formed during the Black Power era—most notably the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords Party—realized the importance of self-determination and included it as a key point in their respective political programs.<sup>6970</sup> More than a decade before the environmental justice movement began, these groups already had a conception of environmental justice: the prolonged health and survival their communities. Both of these revolutionary parties were formed through grassroots struggle and understood that in order to have a revolution, you need people. Witnessing the effects that poverty and urban neglect were having on the health of their communities, they took initiative and began offering free breakfast programs, free health clinics, and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Hare, “Black Ecology.”

<sup>69</sup> “Black Panther’s Ten-Point Program,” <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm>.

<sup>70</sup> “13 Point Program and Platform of the Young Lords Party,” [http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/Young\\_Lords\\_platform.html](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/Young_Lords_platform.html).



other services that would meet the immediate health and safety needs of their people.<sup>7172</sup> In this way, The BPP and YLP offer a unique snapshot into a time when political activism reached its peak and people of color were coming together to challenge the ecological degradation they were experiencing in U.S. cities. But as the Black Power era was coming to an end in the late 70s and early 80s—along with most of these radical organizing efforts—poor communities and communities of color were beginning to protest the introduction of toxics and other environmental hazards into their communities.

## Anti-Toxics Movement and Early Studies

During the late 70s and early 80s, as the mainstream environmental movement remained dominated by the white middle class, many low-income communities and communities of color across the country, including African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, were realizing how unequal social, economic, and political power relationships made them more vulnerable to environmental hazards than the rest of society.<sup>73</sup> And while there was a growing political base for environmental reform and regulatory relief for some environmental problems, this still couldn't address how poor and minority communities were becoming dumping grounds for environmental hazards.<sup>74</sup> This being the case, the grassroots movement for environmental justice began as an anti-toxics movement, incorporating the efforts of both white and nonwhite activists who were emphasizing how poor

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<sup>71</sup> Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis ; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>72</sup> Matthew Gandy, "Between Borinquen and the Barrio: Environmental Justice and New York City's Puerto Rican Community, 1969-1972," *Antipode* 34, no. 4 (September 2002): 730–61, doi:10.1111/1467-8330.00267.

<sup>73</sup> "Chapter 2: What Is Environmental Justice?," <http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/envjust/ch2.htm>.

<sup>74</sup> M E Northridge and P M Shepard, "Environmental Racism and Public Health.," *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 5 (May 1997): 730–32, doi:10.2105/AJPH.87.5.730.

communities were being threatened by both polluters and the state.<sup>75</sup> However, given the almost inextricable link between race and class, communities of color soon began to realize just how severe their exposure to environmental hazards would become.

The event that brought widespread attention to the discriminatory siting of hazardous materials was the creation of a PCB (Polychlorinated Biphenyl) landfill in Warren County, North Carolina in 1982. The landfill resulted in protests and over 500 arrests, including national civil rights leaders, African-American elected officials, environmental activists, and labor leaders. Among those arrested were Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., the executive director of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, who would eventually end up coining the term environmental racism almost a decade later.<sup>76</sup> Soon after the Warren County protests, people saw a need to examine the relationship between environmental hazard exposure and demographic makeup.

The Warren County protests led to the U.S. General Accounting Office conducting their own study, *Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities*.<sup>77</sup> The study revealed that three out of four off-site, commercial hazardous waste landfills in Region 4 (which consists of eight states in the South) were found in mostly black communities, even though African-Americans were only 20% of the region's population.<sup>78</sup> Fifteen years later, the state of North Carolina was required to spend over \$25 million to clean and detoxify the Warren County PCB landfill.<sup>79</sup> While the relationship between racial demographics and landfills was

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<sup>75</sup> Laura Pulido, "A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY OF ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM RESEARCH\*," *Antipode* 28, no. 2 (April 1996): 142–59, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.1996.tb00519.x.

<sup>76</sup> Kelly Colquette and Elizabeth Henry, "Environmental Racism: The Causes, Consequences, and Commendations," *Tulane Environmental Law Journal* 5, no. 1 (1992 1991): 153–208.

<sup>77</sup> Robert D. Bullard, "Environmental Justice in the 21st Century: Race Still Matters," *Phylon (1960-)* 49, no. 3/4 (2001): 151, doi:10.2307/3132626.

<sup>78</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation With Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities" (Washington D.C., 1983).

<sup>79</sup> Bullard, "Environmental Justice in the 21st Century."

becoming more evident, the need for further research led the Commission for Racial Justice to implement their own study: *Toxic Waste and Race*.

*Toxic Waste and Race* consisted of two lines of investigation. The first examined the significance of race and socio-economic status in relation to the location of commercial hazardous waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities. The second examined the presence of uncontrolled toxic waste sites in ethnic and racial minority communities.<sup>80</sup> The results revealed that communities of color were far more likely to be situated very close to hazardous waste sites.

In communities with one operating commercial hazardous waste facility, the mean minority percentage of the population was approximately twice that of communities without facilities (twenty-four percent vs. twelve percent). In communities with two or more operating commercial hazardous waste facilities or one of the five largest landfills, the mean minority percentage of the population was more than three times that of communities without facilities (thirty-eight percent vs. twelve percent).<sup>81</sup>

The study found race to be the single most important factor (more important than income, home ownership rate, and property values) in the location of abandoned toxic waste sites.<sup>82</sup> The study also found that three out of every five [African-] and Hispanic-Americans live in communities with abandoned toxic waste sites; sixty percent (roughly 15 million); black people live in communities with one or more abandoned toxic waste sites; three of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills are located in mostly African American or Latino communities and accounts for 40 percent of the nation's total estimated landfill capacity; and finally, that African Americans are heavily overrepresented in the population of cities with the largest number of abandoned toxic waste sites, which include cities like Memphis, St. Louis, Houston, Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta.<sup>83</sup> The conclusions drawn from

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<sup>80</sup> Colquette and Henry, "Environmental Racism: The Causes, Consequences, and Commendations."

<sup>81</sup> Benjamin Chavis Jr., "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites." (Commission For Racial Justice United Church of Christ, 1987).

<sup>82</sup> Bullard, "Environmental Justice in the 21st Century."

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

*Toxic Waste and Race* provided definitive proof that unequal environmental hazard exposure was primarily determined by race.

## Environmental Racism: Injustice That Drives a Movement Forward

In the wake of *Toxic Waste and Race* and other studies revealing the racialized exposure of communities to environmental hazards, Dr. Benjamin Chavis Jr. coined the term environmental racism. In the foreword to Robert Bullard's 1993 book, *Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, Chavis writes:

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And, it is racial in the history of excluding people of color from mainstream environmental groups, decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies.<sup>84</sup>

The conceptualization of environmental racism was a critical political moment in the environmental justice movement because it provided a basis by which communities of color could seek to resist the discriminatory siting practices that placed toxics and polluting industries in their respective communities. Environmental racism drives the environmental justice movement in its recognition of how systemic racism results in disproportionate siting and the diminished health of communities of color. However, although environmental racism identifies the problem and provides added legitimacy to community protest against environmental hazards, an understanding of environmental racism doesn't necessarily prevent the burdens of industrial and economic expansion from spreading disproportionately.

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<sup>84</sup> Colquette and Henry, "Environmental Racism: The Causes, Consequences, and Commendations."

Pollution and waste, the main environmental externalities of industrial capitalism, continue to fall on those sectors of society that can least resist them—poor communities of color.<sup>85</sup> But social and economic oppression can't stop communities of color from fighting for their right to exist within a healthier living environment. Though the work is difficult, grassroots organizing is essential, as we will see reflected in current environmental justice struggles in Los Angeles County.

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<sup>85</sup> Robert Collin, "Environmental Equity: A Law and Planning Approach to Environmental Racism," *Virginia Environmental Law Journal* 11, no. 4 (1992 1991): 495–546.

## Chapter 3: Analyzing Grassroots Struggles for Environmental Justice in Los Angeles County

With the help of organized environmental coalitions and other interest groups, minority groups are utilizing more action-oriented techniques including protesting, demonstrating, picketing, applying political pressure, and initiating litigation.

—Colquette and Henry<sup>86</sup>

This chapter includes selected excerpts from interviews with two organizers in Los Angeles County: Ingrid Gutierrez and Ronald Collins. Although they each have been or are currently involved in grassroots community organizations in southern California, there are many differences between their respective organizing contexts. I conclude the chapter with an analysis comparing and contrasting each of their efforts in an attempt to navigate the challenges and triumphs of this kind of work.

### Excerpts from an Interview with Ingrid Gutierrez: Community Organizer for United Voices of Pomona for Environmental Justice

Rickie: What public health issues you are seeing in the Pomona area?

Ingrid: Some of the public health issues that we are seeing in Pomona, especially in Southeast Pomona, are a lot of illnesses in children. There's a lot of asthma and allergies, as well as cancer. We are seeing a cancer cluster in the community of Sacred Heart

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<sup>86</sup> Colquette and Henry, "Environmental Racism: The Causes, Consequences, and Commendations."

Church, which is south Pomona off of Hamilton. Also asthma in adults. We live in a community that is largely migrant, and when we're talking about our community and our health they often mention how they didn't even know what asthma was in their countries of origin. But now in their adult years, they're developing these illnesses.

Rickie: What does United Voices of Pomona for Environmental Justice do in the Pomona area with respect to these issues?

Ingrid: We formed initially because we were fighting the development of a waste transfer station in our community. And it was a huge deal because, probably for the first time in Pomona's history, there were hundreds of people coming out to city council meetings, planning commission meetings, and speaking out during public comment. Many autonomous youth were showing up as well, who weren't aligned with organizations. However, city council ended up voting for the development of the project. So that's when we decided to become United Voices. It was pretty much in order to tell the developers that we weren't going to let them have the last word. We put in a lawsuit, which unfortunately didn't happen. It ended up falling through as a result of intimidation tactics that the developers had employed. Eventually a year after the decision, this process had made us pretty tired. We felt we had exhausted our resources and that we had been defeated. Then we met with Penny Newman, a lifelong environmental justice activist in the Inland Empire who was with the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice. She told us that the fight wasn't over and that there was still so much for us to do. She pretty much told us how there's so much going on in the fight for environmental

justice, which we already knew. We had made similar arguments about how our community was being targeted and overdeveloped by industrial activities. From there, we started to see a bigger picture of environmental racism. We started doing educational toxic tours of our neighborhood and visiting some of the businesses that are in our neighborhood. We spread the word, invited community, and did presentations with high school youth, who started getting involved in coming to our weekly meetings and coming to city council when yet more development was brought to the table. Then another group in Pomona came up with a recycling moratorium, where the city wouldn't be able to allow any more waste and recycling facilities for the duration of a year while a task force group came up with recommendations for city council regarding this issue. We have three United Voices members on that task force: two appointed by city council members to represent their districts, and one specifically as a United Voices representative. So that's where the focus has been for about a little over a year. But it's really difficult work.

Rickie: From what I've been reading regarding the different kinds of ways people combat these issues, it seems like all the cards are stacked against you. You try to do one thing by the book and they throw something at you that's full of jargon in an effort to exclude the community.

Ingrid: Exactly. I think these problems are institutionalized. When developers come and say that they want to apply for a permit to have their business somewhere, they pose a threat to the community. It's all about a legal process that they have to go through with the city. Even community input with respect to these developments is just a formality



because, in the end, it's all about the people that are making the decision. They're getting financial contributions from these developers and their companies so that come election time, when they want to run for whatever position they want to go for, they have money and they have support. Like you said, it does seem like all the cards are stacked against us. In our community we're fighting so much. You know it's not just environmental racism, its police violence, its immigration status, its neighborhood conditions. There's so much that the community will try to do what it can. People will try to get involved in whatever movement that seems most important to them, but that divides us and makes matters more difficult. I don't blame anybody that's not showing up to the environmental justice meetings in our community because I know the reality of it. Not to make excuses for them though.

Rickie: It's promising to see that there is continued interest in the high school because youth support is very important. In your experience, what are the kinds of grassroots initiatives or organized public actions have worked, which ones haven't worked, and why?

Ingrid: I think the ones that work the most in terms of raising consciousness, are the toxic tours. I feel like I've explained why. What hasn't worked...well there's a lot that hasn't worked. I'm thinking about times where we've tried to mobilize the community. We find out that something is happening at city council, like a vote, and realize that we need to go speak out. We're usually speaking out against development, like those that are

continually targeted towards southeast Pomona. There's so much effort involved in that process. We mobilize people, they come out. But even throughout time, I feel that less and less people are coming out. I don't think that it's our fault. I think the system is meant to keep people feeling disempowered and without any hope. People feel that their participation results in no progress, or when there is progress, it's often not the kind that people are hoping for. This does something really nasty in that it breaks people's spirit, and messes with their agency. And this can go both ways because I think those of us who are still with United Voices after three years are the ones who keep seeing this time and time again, knowing that we need to continue sharing what is going on. We call out elected officials, put them on blast, and pretty much speak the truth. But I think that we have to do more than that. I don't know what exactly, but we need to do more than that so we're not just sharing the truth and then people become complacent in non-involvement because they feel it won't result in any change. It's interesting. And I don't really have answers.

Rickie: Disempowerment appears to be common when facing these issues, with people feeling that there's nothing they can do to change their conditions. It's probably due to the systemic nature of these issues. I'm hoping to gain more background on the kinds of developments that are sprouting up around the Pomona area. You mentioned a recycling plant. What are some other projects being pushed by developers in the Pomona area?

Ingrid: Well, recycling and waste management is the biggest industry here. We have about 30 waste and recycling facilities in Pomona. And that's intense. We're handling a

lot of waste treatment and recycling, metal recycling, construction, demolition, greencycling, and plastic processing. There are also numerous auto body shops, which are some of the dirtiest. There's a facility called U PICK U SAVE. Are you familiar with it?

Rickie: Is that the junkyard where you get car parts that you need?

Ingrid: Yes it's a junkyard that people go to when they're looking for a car part and want to save some money by purchasing it used. You find a car that's compatible with yours, pick the part, and pay cheaper for it because it's used. But what we've seen on that particular site and at a lot of other auto body wreckage places is their ground contamination. Many of their cars aren't properly drained, so liquids, oil and other contaminant are going into the ground. And considering how much groundwater Pomona has, I often wonder what's going on there. It's scary because we get most of our drinking water from groundwater. There's also a lot of product manufacturing, including places that make Styrofoam products and luxury spas for the wealthy. They're making them here. They use chemicals and materials, like fiberglass, that can cause cancer and premature death. There are also frequent fires. The fire risks associated with manufacturing plants are high because they are operating with unsafe working conditions. Facilities like Mission Recycling have several fires per year. There's also a huge mountain of metal that doesn't seem to be getting any smaller. What are they doing with that? At any rate, it's there and it's potential fuel. There are homes next to and behind it as well. We've spoken to the people who live right there who say how loud and how dirty

it is. A lot of these places are guilty of participating in what it called greenwashing, where they say that they're being eco-friendly and keeping our community clean. But places like Mission Recycling bring in trucks that empty out recyclables and end up leaving the site and the street dirty. The street where the people live. One of the high school students always talked about how there's such a negative image of Pomona and how dirty we are. People from outside the community look down on Pomona residents and might think, "They're so dirty. They don't care about where they live. Look at the street and all this trash. Why don't they clean it up?" Little do they know that our communities are literally being trashed because no one values them. I'm talking about Pomona and the areas that are largely migrant and working class.

Rickie: In your experience, has policy at the community level been a useful tool for addressing some of these issues, if at all?

Ingrid: I guess I can speak as far as the waste and recycling moratorium and the task force goes. I feel that it's important work, but it's kind of upsetting to set expectations. It's reform work. Sometimes it can be pretty discouraging because, even if the city council were to approve our recommendations and implement them, sometimes I wonder if they actually enforce them because that's the biggest issue that we have with all of the facilities operating in Pomona. Our guidelines are not really being enforced. There are laws at the local, state, and federal level meant to protect communities and the environment, but the city seems to enforce things on a complaint basis. It creates an interesting dynamic where people are ratting out their neighbors. Code enforcement is

going after residents, whereas these big industries and polluters are affecting all of us. Sometimes there are elitist complaints, like when somebody's lawn is brown. Aesthetic complaints. We're in a drought and shouldn't even have lawns, period. But that's a different issue. It's discouraging because I wonder when policies are actually going to be enforced. And then also, what about the people right now who are suffering, who are ill, and who have around 10 bottles of medicine that they have to take every day because that's how they live? We had an action outside of assembly member Freddie Rodriguez's office recently, pushing him to support state level policy SB-350. One of our members, a mom, went into his office and shared what she had in her purse: 10 bottles with different medications that she has to carry every day at any time for her elementary school-age child. He's about nine years old. And that's not the only case. She tells me that she knows other moms that are dealing with the same thing. Sometimes she can't come to certain events because she is taking care of her kid or making visits to the hospital. In terms of local policy, I don't know how effective we can be. I'm realizing that local policy is a lot of work, a lot of investment, a lot of looking ahead towards the future. But in the meantime, people are sick and their health is deteriorating.

Rickie: It seems that health problems are diverting energy away from the urgency required to push long-term policy. People's conditions aren't getting any better and policy reform can't come quickly enough. In social movements, when there are issues in the community that need to be addressed, it's too easy to think, "Oh just wait your turn. We can vote on something and maybe in the next three years it'll be better." But with respect to the problems that already exist, how are those going to improve? How are

people going to get developments out, if that's even an option? How are people's health and quality of life expected to improve? As you have said, it can be very discouraging, especially when people have to take care of their own livelihoods. They don't necessarily have time to try to formulate and push policy when they have to take care of their families.

Ingrid: In my family, we used to never have asthma. But my cousin was diagnosed with asthma when he was about 4 years old. He's 8 now. And my nephew, who's 2 years old now, was diagnosed with asthma before he reached 12 months. We're talking about babies. It's so sad because sometimes. I just want to take them out. I take my nephew out for a walk around the neighborhood and he can't. We get to the corner of the street and he's breathing heavily and coughing. That's not normal. He'll run a little bit, for like 50 feet or something, and he'll be coughing and panting.

Rickie: What kind of work do you envision making the biggest difference moving forward, or what kind of work do you want to see happening moving forward in order to continue the fight in combating development and future instances of environmental injustice in the Pomona area?

Ingrid: That's really difficult because I've been going through a period in my life where, personally, I find myself questioning a lot of my involvement, especially with everything that I mentioned in response to the previous question. I don't want to ask permission. At

this point I don't care if these "respected" leaders in my community think I'm respectable or not. I don't mean it in a way to be disrespectful, but rather I really want to push myself and challenge myself to do what I need to do and what I feel is my purpose. To exercise my agency and act. So this is a difficult question because I feel like I'm in a place where I don't know if I want to continue to be in United Voices because my vision for the future is with my community, not at city hall. I have felt conflicted about this for years. I feel this burden of responsibility, and that with my privilege it's therefore my duty to be at city hall. I don't have a family, kids of my own, or other responsibilities that would keep me from it, so I feel like I have to be there. Looking ahead, I feel like I need to do more consciousness-raising. This is political work, but I haven't yet figured out how to go about it. But that's part of it and also because these institutions don't have legitimacy in my opinion

Rickie: Institutions like city hall?

Ingrid: Yes. The government. The United States of America. We're talking about the colonization and enslavement of people. That's what this country was built on, and what it continues to be built on. On the backs of people of color. We continue to see changes in how it looks and how it is experienced, but by asking these institutions to not approve developments, we give them legitimacy without addressing this history. It's not like this history is in the past either because it continues to affect us even now, which is something that I think about.

Rickie: By asking local government for permission to not allow development, I see why you might feel like you are validating a system that can perpetuate greed, neglect, and violence. It really goes to show how much work there is yet to be done. We ultimately want to see societal transformation and revolution, but we are stuck pushing reform, right?

Ingrid: Yes. And there's so many of us who think this way and who might understand that. And yet there we are stuck in these "progressive" organizations, non-profits, or in Sacramento. I know so many bright people who get that, but who then find solace in the stability of a job with a salary and the like. But I don't think that's how we should organize. I often think about tribal people and the issues of sovereignty.

### Excerpts from an Interview with Ronald Collins: BLM Associate and Community Organizer for the Labor Community Strategy Center

Rickie: What were some of the environmental and public health issues that you were seeing while doing this work?

Ron: Here in Los Angeles, the number one thing is car pollution, so a lot of people don't necessarily equate public transportation work with environmental justice work. But when you look at a city like Los Angeles, where 90% of bus riders are people of color, we're doing a lot less polluting than most folks. And then when you look at how most major freeways are in communities of color and how major roads are often going through



communities of color, you're seeing that we're being disproportionately affected by car pollution and air pollution. So that was probably the biggest thing. There was car pollution and the way that we tackled that was being rigorous about challenging Metro to create an environmentally safe, environmentally sound public transportation system that worked for working-class people of color.

Rickie: Have you noticed whether there is much consciousness around these issues in the surrounding communities?

Ron: I think there is a growing consciousness, but I don't think that the movement has a level of consciousness that we need to start to see a strong movement. I think that there are definitely folks who do social justice work who understand the environmental justice world. They understand that lens kind of. But it's still been one of the greatest challenges for us as organizers, particularly within the black community, to bring the environmental justice fight to our communities, unless of course they live in impacted areas. So I would say folks that live in New Orleans probably have a lot more of a lens and an understanding around what exactly environmental racism is and how it functions in our society than just say black folks here in California. And I think that's generally where we see the dividing lines in our community. Folks who have had serious, direct effects are usually much more conscious around environmental justice issues, versus folks who might understand it, but aren't necessarily as tenacious about going out and changing these issues.

Rickie: Are there people with asthma or other health problems who are usually more outspoken about these issues?

Ron: In Los Angeles it's generally a broad range of folks, I wouldn't necessarily say it's folks who are mostly affected by asthma, but I think it's generally folks who understand what car pollution here in Los Angeles is doing right now. I think there are a lot of people who understand that Los Angeles is the car capital of the world. You have 9 million cars for 11 million people. That's a ridiculous amount of cars. There's no place on Earth, with the exception of one city in China that has a concentration of cars like that. So when we're talking about LA, a lot of people understand just the simple effects of looking outside and your sky is grey. We have beautiful sunsets here, and they're all fake. I think it's more the folks who are seeing and understanding these things, but also people who are seeing the next generation. I think we are seeing a lot of parents who are seeing their children struggle with asthma, emphysema, and these kinds of diseases that are involved in the environmental justice fight. In particular, my little brother has had respiratory problems his whole life. He's twelve. So it's not like he's out here smoking cigarettes. It's not like he's doing anything. It's literally just the air quality here in Los Angeles that gives him problems with breathing and stuff like that. So I think that it's mostly people who, more than seeing themselves directly affected, but people who are starting to understand how it's affecting the next generation.

Rickie: What were some major takeaways of working with the LA Bus Riders Union?

Ron: I think one of the major things is the dual-pronged approach. The Bus Riders Union sued the MTA (Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority) and won over 2 billion dollars back into the bus system, and then used on-the-ground movement to sustain those wins. I think the Bus Riders Union had one of the best models in how to use policy to actually make real changes. They sued, they got a federal consent decree, but the work didn't stop there. Then we built a mass movement to ensure that the federal consent decree was followed through on. One of my biggest takeaways from the Bus Riders Union was also anti-capitalism: situating capitalism as the problem. Also prioritizing the leadership of working-class people of color. I think that one of the models that the LA Bus Riders Union has had in having a planning committee and having a member-elected leadership body is truthfully giving some level of self-determination to people of color. And that, if anything, is to me what's most important because we best understand our situation and are the best apt to create solutions to our problems. Oftentimes we have these great white knights that want to come in and pull an Eric Garcetti. "I'm going to save all the poor people of color because they don't know that they are in trouble" But the reality is, no, we've got this.

## Conclusions

The polluted conditions experienced by people of color in the both Los Angeles and Pomona are a result of environmental racism, and white privilege,<sup>87</sup> and raising people's consciousness around environmental issues can be extremely difficult. However, holding toxic tours are a good method of creating awareness. The efforts of the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles were successful because of the strength of their claim's and their two-pronged approach. Community members of color were involved in each step of the process, so they could ensure that their transportation needs were met in a city where most of the car pollution comes from people who live in surrounding cities. United Voices of Pomona for Environmental Justice faces a significantly greater challenge, where citizens are forced to resist an overwhelming amount of toxic facilities on a compliant basis. And even when community members make demands, there is little enforcement in making sure that guidelines are met. Pomona is largely a Latino and migrant community, so mobilizing and resisting developments can be a difficult and exhausting process, especially because people must also struggle with health problems and intimidation tactics from developers.<sup>88</sup> In summary, the issues presented in both Pomona and Los Angeles represent how vital grassroots participation is in resisting environmental racism, which is having a severely negative impact on the health of younger generations. However, as these organizers mention, a major difficulty in addressing environmental racism on a grassroots level is how entails participating in a lot of reform work within a capitalist society. In the next chapter I will

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<sup>87</sup> Laura Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (March 2000): 12–40, doi:10.1111/0004-5608.00182.

<sup>88</sup> Ingrid Gutierrez, Interview by Rickie Cleere, October 15, 2015.

discuss how the neoliberalism—the political and economic philosophy that promotes capitalism—is the root cause of environmental racism.

## Chapter 4: The Problem of Neoliberalism and Transnational Capital

We're currently living in terms of transnational capital, which I see as really dominating. It's very clear that in terms of environmental justice, black and brown bodies are considered as sacrifice zones. This is fundamental for the reproduction and functioning of racial capitalism. They need somewhere to put the stuff. They're externalities as they call them in environmental economics.

—Laura Pulido<sup>89</sup>

Understanding the perpetuity of environmental racism requires that we examine the larger hegemonic forces that make such inequality and exploitation possible, namely neoliberalism. Neoliberalism seeks to transfer control of the economy from the public to the private sector, rationalized by the narrative that it will produce a more efficient government and improve the economic health of the nation.<sup>90</sup> A key component of neoliberalism is deregulation, the abolishing or limiting of regulations that might deter foreign investment. Deregulation can have dramatic consequences on local communities, especially poor communities and communities of color. By allowing private corporate interests to not adhere to regulations that might increase the costs of production, the economic costs associated with cleaner, more efficient technology and production practices are externalized—they are pushed onto the surrounding environment and the communities that inhabit them.

When costs are externalized, unclean production standards create pollution, which poses a substantial threat to environmental and public health. Pollution diminishes air and water quality

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<sup>89</sup> Laura Pulido, Interview by Rickie Cleere, December 1, 2015.

<sup>90</sup> "Paper: What Washington Means by Policy Reform," <http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/paper.cfm?researchid=486>.

and exposes people and the environment to harmful contaminants. These contaminants range from heavy metals, like lead and mercury, to other compounds that contain elements like carbon, sulfur, and nitrogen. Exposure to environmental contamination leads to increased frequency of chronic illness, especially respiratory diseases and cancer. People in polluted communities must pay increased medical costs to treat more frequent rates of sickness. In effect, neoliberalism externalizes the costs of enforcing environmental regulations (ones that would lead to cleaner technologies and production practices) onto people living in surrounding communities, who must pay higher medical bills while having the quality and duration of their lives reduced.

Deregulated industrial production produces a net effect on environmental, consumer, and worker safety regulations. Not only does it increase human exposure to contaminants in workplaces and residential communities, but the presence of industrial developments also decreases property values in particular geographical zones, making areas more favorable for future developers seeking to purchase less expensive land. This leads to the expansion of industrial zones down the path of least resistance—in or near communities of color. These ‘sacrifice zones’ subject people of color to the waste produced by the nation’s wealth.

Neoliberalism is a framework that does not promote useful reform and material improvement in the community conditions of people who live in communities of color. Instead it will work in favor of corporation as they accumulate transnational capital. As mentioned earlier, industry would rather reduce production costs and maximize profits by not adhering to regulations than pay for cleaner technologies that would favor the health of people and the environment. As a result, corporations—as part of the project of globalization—relocate their assets (and waste abroad), where the same environmental problems eventually occur. These problems extend some of the apartheid conditions I that described in the second chapter

(overcrowding, pollution, environmental hazards exposure) outward into developing countries, contributing to what Salih Booker and William Minter describe as global apartheid, which we can understand as

An international system of minority rule whose attributes include: differential access to human rights; wealth and power structured by race and place, structural racism, embedded in political institutions and cultural assumptions; and the international practice of double standards that assume inferior right to be appropriate for certain ‘others,’ defined by location origin location place and gender.<sup>91</sup>

The ‘others’ that Booker and Williams describe are the people of the Second and Third World, who are mostly black and brown people. Under neoliberalism, reduced trade barriers, little regulation, and access to cheap labor led to the creation of maquiladoras—assembly plants which operate as the subsidiaries of subcontracted firms or transnational corporations—in Mexico. Not only do maquiladoras pay exploitative wages and provide unsafe working conditions, but they also don’t follow very strict environmental guidelines and dump waste, which can end up affecting the people who live in nearby villages.<sup>92</sup> This shows how neoliberalism spreads environmental racism globally. The problem created by neoliberalism necessitates that we understand the global scope of the struggle for environmental justice. As Ron Collins explains:

If there is no global movement there is no movement - period. Because, if we stop their polluting in your backyard, they will go to Taiwan, they will go to China, they will be in Africa, and they will be in South America. So we have to understand that it is a global problem and the only solutions are global - period.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Leith Mullings, “Race and Globalization,” *Souls* 6, no. 2 (June 2004): 1–9, doi:10.1080/10999940490506979.

<sup>92</sup> Sergio De La Torre and Vicki Funari, *Maquilapolis*, 2006.

<sup>93</sup> Ronald Collins, Interview by Rickie Cleere, November 14, 2015.



The need for global solutions may seem like an overwhelming one, but not if oppressed peoples can find commonality with one another on a global scale. However, this doesn't entail international solidarity. Huey Newton, former leader of the Black Panther Party, notes the contradiction of recognizing national boundaries alongside a need for international solidarity that arises from the U.S.'s continual violation of those national boundaries.<sup>94</sup> If we want to promote Third World unity in opposition to global apartheid and ecological collapse, it is better to follow in the line of Huey Newton's revolutionary intercommunalism and recognize how U.S. neoliberalism continues to transform all other nations into oppressed communities: small entities with a collection of institutions that exist in order to serve a small group of people.<sup>95</sup> If we understand the world as a collection of oppressed communities, then we might be able to realize the power that grassroots organizing can produce on a global scale. With this in mind, I will now turn to a grassroots movement that, over the last two years, has gained global recognition in its pursuit of social justice: Black Lives Matter.

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<sup>94</sup> Besenia Rodriguez, "'Long Live Third World Unity! Long Live Internationalism' Huey P. Newton's Revolutionary Intercommunalism," *Souls* 8, no. 3 (September 2006): 119–41, doi:10.1080/10999940600882889.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 5: Black Lives Matter and Environmental Racism as State Violence

Woke up thinking about freedom and self-determination #BlackLivesMatter  
—Patrisse Cullors<sup>96</sup>

Black communities in the U.S. and around the globe are impacted the worst and should be central in shaping and leading the national environmental justice movement

—Opal Tometi<sup>97</sup>

In this chapter I will explain how Black Lives Matter started and discuss the politics of this new grassroots movement. I will also demonstrate how BLM is focusing more attention on environmental justice issues and how it is expanding a conversation of state violence that includes the violent threat of environmental racism.

### #BlackLivesMatter: From Hashtag to Movement

In this technological age, most people look to their phones or computers to view and share information. Social media has become an integral part of our daily lives, allowing us to connect with others and exchange our thoughts and feelings about current events through sites

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<sup>96</sup> Patrisse Cullors, “Woke up Thinking about Freedom and Self-Determination #BlackLivesMatter,” Facebook.com, (n.d.), 11/27/15.

<sup>97</sup> Sydney Brownstone • Apr 29 and 2015 at 12:26 Pm, “How Black Lives Matter Is Changing Environmentalism, According to Seattle’s New Environmental Justice Manager,” *The Stranger*, <http://www.thestranger.com/blogs/slog/2015/04/29/22135254/how-black-lives-matter-is-changing-environmentalism-according-to-seattles-new-environmental-justice-manager>.

like Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, Google+ and Pinterest. The social media hashtag (#) is a symbol that connects people's conversations. But how exactly do they work, and what happens when certain ideas become more widely disseminated? Here's a brief explanation of how hashtags work.

Whenever a user adds a hashtag to their post, it is immediately indexed by the social network and searchable by other users. Once someone clicks on that hashtag, they'll be brought to a page that aggregates all of the posts with the same hashtagged keyword in real-time. Once a keyword picks up enough momentum it becomes known as "trending." Trending isn't simply a matter of becoming the most popular hashtag on the networks. Each users' trending topics is different based on their location and social connections.<sup>98</sup>

Social media hashtags have proven to be a useful platform for social and political involvement, and was a critical part of how BLM began. #BlackLivesMatter was created on July 13, 2013, shortly after former police officer George Zimmerman was found not guilty in the murder of Trayvon Martin, a black 17-year-old who was walking home from a 7-Eleven in Sanford, Florida.<sup>99</sup> It was launched by Alicia Garza, a domestic worker rights organizer in Oakland, California; Patrisse Cullors, an anti-police violence organizer in Los Angeles, California; and Opal Tometi, an immigration rights organizer in Phoenix, Arizona.<sup>100</sup> The three of them met through Black Organizing for Leadership & Dignity (BOLD), an organization that trains community organizers.<sup>101</sup> Outraged by the verdict, members in BOLD social forums began asking the organization's leaders how they would respond to the assault on and devaluation of

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<sup>98</sup> "How to Use Hashtags on Every Social Media Network," *Sprout Social*, <http://sproutsocial.com/insights/how-to-use-hashtags/>.

<sup>99</sup> Jamil Smith, "Black Lives Matter Co-Founder: 'We Are In a State of Emergency,'" *The New Republic*, July 20, 2015, [http://www.newrepublic.com/article/122334/blacklivesmatter-co-founder-we-are-state-emergency?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=nfrb&utm\\_campaign=20150721](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/122334/blacklivesmatter-co-founder-we-are-state-emergency?utm_medium=social&utm_source=nfrb&utm_campaign=20150721).

<sup>100</sup> "Black Lives Matter: The Growth of a New Social Justice Movement | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed," <http://www.blackpast.org/perspectives/black-lives-matter-growth-new-social-justice-movement>.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

black lives. In a Facebook post titled “A Love Note to Black People,” Garza called on them to “get active,” “get organized,” and “fight back.” Garza saw how the targeted killing of black people in the U.S. was a result of institutional racism, something that couldn’t be defeated through voting, education, or pulling oneself up with strapless boots. She ended the post by telling her readers that she loves them and that “Our Lives Matter, Black Lives Matter.” Cullors responded to the post with “#BlackLivesMatter,” and with Tometi’s added support, a new organization was born.<sup>102</sup> Garza asserts that #BlackLivesMatter was created as a call to action. “It was a response to the anti-black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements.”<sup>103</sup> Since then, #BLM has transformed from a hashtag and into a full-fledged social movement.

A decentralized Black Lives Matter Network was established shortly soon after the movement had been set in motion and now has at least 23 chapters in the U.S., Canada, and Ghana. BLM places high importance on grassroots work, and mobilizes activists and community organizer in its efforts to uplift black communities and call attention to state-sanctioned violence. Given the exhausting nature of such work, BLM also advocates for radical self-care.<sup>104</sup> The movement continues to organize protests around the deaths of black people in who are unjustly killed by law enforcement officers, as well as broader issues of racial profiling, police brutality, and racial inequality in the United States criminal justice system. In rejecting a charismatic male-centered, top-down movement structure—which was the model for the civil rights movement—and focusing on grassroots participation, and looks to include those who are often marginalized

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza,” *The Feminist Wire*, 2015, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>.

<sup>104</sup> Ahmad Greene, “Radical Black Self-Care in the Advent of Social Schizophrenia,” *Ahmad Greene*, <http://agreene.kinja.com/radical-black-self-care-in-the-advent-of-social-schizop-1698231733>.

in social movements.<sup>105</sup><sup>106</sup> BLM aligns itself with black liberation movement and looks to uplift the voices of those who are most oppressed. Opal Tometi explains:

The beautiful thing about the black liberation movement is that it is more than saying “Black Lives Matter.” This period in history is a celebration of intersectionality, which mandates that the full breadth of our humanity be acknowledged and embraced. This means that queer, trans, migrant, formerly incarcerated, disabled and all of us who find ourselves unapologetic about our complexity are more committed than ever to champion the scope of the human rights agenda that we deserve.<sup>107</sup>

Black Lives Matter looks brings together intersections of identity while also recognizing that the violent reality that black people across the world are in a state of emergency.<sup>108</sup> This is reflected in Alicia Garza’s explanation of what Black Live Matter is supposed to mean.

Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.<sup>109</sup>

Facing violent oppression head on, BLM’s political orientation prioritizes urgency and visibility over patience and respectability, which is why they have utilized political disruption as a tactic in the 2016 presidential race. The disruption of the Netroots Nation conference in July 2015 and the campaign rallies of Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in cities like

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<sup>105</sup> “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza.”

<sup>106</sup> Clayborne Carson, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle,” *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (September 1987): 448, doi:10.2307/1900032.

<sup>107</sup> Opal Tometi and Gerald Lenoir, “Black Lives Matter Is Not a Civil Rights Movement,” *Time*, December 10, 2015, <http://time.com/4144655/international-human-rights-day-black-lives-matter/>.

<sup>108</sup> Smith, “Black Lives Matter Co-Founder.”

<sup>109</sup> “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza.”

Seattle and Los Angeles have received responses of dismissal and hostility.<sup>110</sup> Many who take issue with BLMs tactics, including conservative students at the Claremont Colleges, view the BLM protestors as hecklers who, by interrupting and not whole heartedly supporting Sanders—a candidate who has advocated for racial justice issue—are being counterproductive in how they address issues like state violence.<sup>111</sup> But considering how Sanders is beholden to the political system, one shouldn't consider him a social justice advocate who will act with much urgency. He must be held accountable to demands of communities of color, who remain underrepresented in the political process.<sup>112</sup> Not matter who they disrupt, BLM is pushing candidates to be more receptive of the needs of communities of color. By bringing attention to police killings at Sander's campaign rallies, the BLM demonstrators pressured him to put together a racial justice platform and to hire more black staffers, including press secretary Symone Sanders.<sup>113114</sup> That being said, people who take issue with BLM continually look to characterize protestors as impatient, violent, and rude hecklers. But to those people I must pose this question: If activists who are serious about addressing racial injustice and state-sanctioned violence don't pressure politicians to address issues that political reform has yet to resolve, how is the democratic process supposed to meet the needs of the people?

People who make negative characterizations of BLM protestors typically don't experience the harsh realities of anti-black racism and poverty. These negative interpretations of

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<sup>110</sup> “How Bernie Sanders and Martin O’Malley Botched #BlackLivesMatter at Netroots Nation - The Root,” [http://www.theroot.com/articles/politics/2015/07/how\\_berniesanders\\_and\\_martin\\_o\\_malley\\_botched\\_blacklivesmatter\\_at\\_netroots.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/politics/2015/07/how_berniesanders_and_martin_o_malley_botched_blacklivesmatter_at_netroots.html).

<sup>111</sup> “Black Lives Matter: A Downward Spiral | The Claremont Independent,” <http://claremontindependent.com/black-lives-matter-a-downward-spiral/>.

<sup>112</sup> “OPINION: Black People, White Government,” <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/ferguson-africanamericanspoliticalrepresentation.html>.

<sup>113</sup> “On the Issues: Racial Justice,” *Bernie Sanders*, <https://berniesanders.com/issues/racial-justice/>.

<sup>114</sup> Chimene is a third-generation native of Maricopa County et al., “Sanders Answers BLM: Hires Black Woman As National Press Secretary,” <http://reverbp.com/politics/sanders-answers-blm-hires-black-woman-national-press-secretary/>.

political protest stem from a complacency with neoliberal policy, which stipulate that social change be promoted through legislation and by electing candidates that “care” the most about important issues like racial justice. I believe the Black Lives Matter Network isn’t endorsing a political candidate in the 2016 election because they see it as counterproductive to movement’s ultimate goal of self-determination.<sup>115</sup> Not aligning the movement with a particular candidate was a calculated move, intended to resist co-optation and to influence the political line of candidates as much as possible. As Garza explains:

What we’ve seen is an attempt by mainstream politics and politicians to co-opt movements that galvanize people in order for them to move closer to their own goals and objectives... We don’t think that playing a corrupt game is going to bring change and make black lives matter.<sup>116</sup>

If the political system were a legitimate means of black representation and empowerment, communities of color wouldn’t still be subjected to disenfranchisement, underfunded public education, and police brutality. Even the election of a black president in Barack Obama—who I think hasn’t done enough to challenge the myth of a post-racial society—didn’t lessen the need for a movement to like BLM. While Garza doesn’t discourage activists to endorse presidential candidates based on their local conditions, as a network, she says, “that’s not work we’re engaged in yet.” I think that this was an important clarification for Garza to make. By not discouraging individual activists from engaging in candidate endorsement while having the BLM network abstain, the movement should be able to adhere to its more radical aims without risking the threat of co-optation. By remaining committed to grassroots efforts, Black Lives Matter has

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<sup>115</sup> Collins, Interview by Rickie Cleere.

<sup>116</sup> Associated Press, “Black Lives Matter Movement Refuses to Endorse Any 2016 Presidential Candidate,” *The Guardian*, September 19, 2015, sec. US news, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/sep/19/black-lives-matter-endorsement-2016-presidential-candidate-election>.

been able to focus the country on one of the most obvious forms of oppression that continue to plague society: state violence. But what about other forms of state violence, like environmental racism, that severely impact the health of people of color? In the next section, I will explain how BLM is beginning to bring attention to the violent realities of environmental racism.

## Environmental Racism as State Violence

Opal Tometi, BLM co-founder, has said that environmental issues are “inextricably linked to a racial justice agenda.”<sup>117</sup> She is absolutely right. More environmental justice discourse is beginning to illuminate the connections between police killings and the dangerous health risks associated with chronic pollutant exposure. Police killings like Eric Gardner’s death illustrate how racist violence plays out in more ways than one. Gardner, whose last words before being asphyxiated before NYPD were “I can’t breathe,” was also an asthmatic who had grown up in a more polluted section of New York. His death sheds light on the connections between more obvious forms of police violence and environmental racism. Eddie Bautista, an environmental justice advocate in New York City, asserts that, “limiting the conversation about racism to just about how we’re policed is a lost opportunity... racism also kills slowly and insidiously.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Katie Valentine, “Why Supporting The Fight Against Racist Police Killings Could Mean A New Chapter In Environmentalism,” *ThinkProgress*, <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/12/19/3604999/enviro-support-for-black-lives-matter/>.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*



The slow and insidious nature of the violence of environmental racism is something that Rob Nixon discusses in his book *Slow Violence*.<sup>119</sup> And although people probably don't immediately think of environmental racism when they think of state violence, it is important to make the connection that police killings, as well as the premature deaths resulting from environmental racism, both happen under the state's supervision. And while state and federal environmental justice initiatives claim to reduce the disproportionate exposure of communities of color to pollution, these often work to co-opt the more substantive aims of the grassroots environmental justice movement. Laura Pulido mentions how this is happening all over the U.S., including the state of California, a place that is generally considered one of the more "green" states. She explains that:

Over 30 states have environmental justice initiatives, and California—unsurprisingly as a more liberal state—has some of the most progressive ones. And they've sold out the environmental justice movement completely. Activists realized what had been happening— they were basically being co-opted.<sup>120</sup>

While the co-optation of the environmental justice movement is a disturbing reality, it shouldn't come as a surprise given the susceptibility of state agencies and politicians to corporate lobbyists, who act as the agents of transnational capital. Even right now, in December 2015, as the Environmental Protection Agency is considering setting a more protective health standard for ozone (i.e. smog) which is emitted from the exhaust of cars, trucks, power plants and factories, big oil lobbyists and manufacturers are pushing back, prioritizing profits over people and trying to get the EPA to leave the smog standard where it is.<sup>121</sup> Even though EPA analysis suggests that

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<sup>119</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 1. Harvard Univ. Press paperback ed (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013).

<sup>120</sup> Pulido, Interview by Rickie Cleere.

<sup>121</sup> Valentine, "Why Supporting The Fight Against Racist Police Killings Could Mean A New Chapter In Environmentalism."

reducing smog could save thousands of lives and prevent nearly one million asthma attacks each year by 2025, major polluters continue to provide the same old arguments they always make that tougher environmental protections will hurt the economy.<sup>122</sup> This only goes to show you what lengths how far our government is willing to go in order in furthering the interests of transnational capital and perpetuate the slow violence of environmental racism.

Now that that I have come to the conclusion that environmental racism is a slow form of state violence, how might it become incorporated into BLM's opposition of state violence? I conclude with the answer I received from BLM associate and environmental justice organizer, Ronald Collins.

I think that is a very difficult. I think that when we say "state violence," the umbrella is so huge that it's difficult for an organization, or a forum like BLM for that matter, to put its hand in all the pots in which we could possibly be dealing with state violence. So we could be talking about educational violence, we could be talking about state violence with women, we could be talking about state violence towards queer folks. There's just a lot, particularly and especially when we're talking about black folks. So I think that it's very difficult for them to do that. But I think one way that the work can definitely be merged is by simply having that analysis of capitalism and having that analysis and calling it violence. I think that one of the things that BLM has great power to do is to call out different forms of violence, and it has actually done a very good job in highlighting different forms of state violence that we haven't necessarily considered state violence before this point. So if there is continued conversation around what state violence looks like in terms of environmental justice and in terms of environmental racism, I think that BLM has a lot that they can do in terms of raising the issue and raising consciousness. Just like what they have done around more traditional forms of state violence, which is really just using their organization as a vehicle to bring things to the masses.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Collins, Interview by Rickie Cleere.

## Conclusion

There is a contradiction in our society in that everyone says they want health – for themselves, for their friends, family, and community – but the underlying logic of capitalism, the profit motive, produces and reproduces ill health for the vast majority of the population...by framing our issues in terms of the health of individuals and communities, we can expose and challenge this contradiction.

—Aiyanas<sup>124</sup>

Through my research and investigation I have come to the conclusion that environmental justice movement, which is in opposition to environmental racism, and the Black Lives Matter movement, which is in opposition to police brutality and other forms of anti-black violence, are part of the same struggle: a struggle against the neoliberal violence of the state. State oppression embodies violence in more forms than one, including co-optation—which entails the assimilation of people into a political framework that answers to the gatekeepers of transnational capital. This struggle against neoliberal violence is at the same time a struggle for communities of color to achieve self-determination on a global scale, a monumental task which might be informed through a revolutionary intercommunalist framework of global grassroots solidarity.

Until oppressed communities achieve self-determination, grassroots initiatives centered on health and medicine, like those implemented by radical organizations like the BPP and YLP, can act as means for people of color to continue surviving despite the challenges of existing within a system of global apartheid. BLM's promotion of radical self-care as a survival strategy offers a contemporary spin on this this strategy.

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<sup>124</sup> “Health Care as Social Justice Practice - Upping the Anti,” <http://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/health-care-as-social-justice-practice/>.

As we progress through the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a time where environmental destruction, economic disparity, and social injustice threaten the safety of all life on Earth, the world will be taking notice of the movement for Black Lives. Although Black Lives Matter has existed for about two and a half years, it is constantly looking to find ways to challenge the political system and uplift the efforts of grassroots organizers. As someone who wants to contribute in a shared movement for liberation, I have yet to determine what my role will be in this tumultuous time. I know it will be challenging. I know it will be dangerous. But it will be doing something to contribute to a new era of revolutionary struggle.

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.

It is our duty to win.

We must love each other and support each other.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.<sup>125</sup>

Black Lives Matter.

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<sup>125</sup> Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago, Ill: L. Hill Books, 2001).

## Appendix

The purpose of this appendix is to offer the completed versions of my three interviews, which includes text that I did not deem appropriate for the actual thesis. These interviews were all conducted under the permission of my interviewees.

### Interview with Ingrid Gutierrez: Community Organizer for United Voices of Pomona for Environmental Justice

Rickie: Thanks Ingrid for volunteering to interview for my thesis. I just have a few questions about the kind of work that is being done and the kinds of issues that people are seeing in the Pomona area. What are the kinds of public health issues that you are seeing in the Pomona area?

Ingrid: Some of the public health issues that we are seeing in Pomona, especially in Southeast Pomona, are a lot of illnesses in children. There's a lot of asthma and allergies, as well as cancer. We are seeing a cancer cluster in the community of Sacred Heart Church, which is south Pomona off of Hamilton. Also asthma in adults. We live in a community that is largely migrant, and when we're talking about our community and our health they often mention how they didn't even know what asthma was in their countries of origin. But now in their adult years, they're developing these illnesses.

Rickie: What does United Voices of Pomona for Environmental Justice do in the Pomona area with respect to these issues?

Ingrid: We formed initially because we were fighting the development of a waste transfer station in our community. And it was a huge deal because, probably for the first time in Pomona's history, there were hundreds of people coming out to city council meetings, planning commission meetings, and speaking out during public comment. Many autonomous youth were showing up as well, who weren't aligned with organizations. However, city council ended up

voting for the development of the project. So that's when we decided to become United Voices. It was pretty much in order to tell the developers that we weren't going to let them have the last word. We put in a lawsuit, which unfortunately didn't happen. It ended up falling through as a result of intimidation tactics that the developers had employed. Eventually a year after the decision, this process had made us pretty tired. We felt we had exhausted our resources and that we had been defeated. Then we met with Penny Newman, a lifelong environmental justice activist in the Inland Empire who was with the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice. She told us that the fight wasn't over and that there was still so much for us to do. She pretty much told us how there's so much going on in the fight for environmental justice, which we already knew. We had made similar arguments about how our community was being targeted and overdeveloped by industrial activities. From there, we started to see a bigger picture of environmental racism. We started doing educational toxic tours of our neighborhood and visiting some of the businesses that are in our neighborhood. We spread the word, invited community, and did presentations with high school youth, who started getting involved in coming to our weekly meetings and coming to city council when yet more development was brought to the table. Then another group in Pomona came up with a recycling moratorium, where the city wouldn't be able to allow any more waste and recycling facilities for the duration of a year while a task force group came up with recommendations for city council regarding this issue. We have three United Voices members on that task force: two appointed by city council members to represent their districts, and one specifically as a United Voices representative. So that's where the focus has been for about a little over a year. But it's really difficult work.

Rickie: From what I've been reading regarding the different kinds of ways people combat these issues, it seems like all the cards are stacked against you. You try to do one thing by the book and they throw something at you that's full of jargon in an effort to exclude the community.

Ingrid: Exactly. I think these problems are institutionalized. When developers come and say that they want to apply for a permit to have their business somewhere, they pose a threat to the community. It's all about a legal process that they have to go through with the city. Even community input with respect to these developments is just a formality because, in the end, it's all about the people that are making the decision. They're getting financial contributions from

these developers and their companies so that come election time, when they want to run for whatever position they want to go for, they have money and they have support. Like you said, it does seem like all the cards are stacked against us. In our community we're fighting so much. You know it's not just environmental racism, its police violence, its immigration status, its neighborhood conditions. There's so much that the community will try to do what it can. People will try to get involved in whatever movement that seems most important to them, but that divides us and makes matters more difficult. I don't blame anybody that's not showing up to the environmental justice meetings in our community because I know the reality of it. Not to make excuses for them though.

Rickie: That's a good point. There are so many issues affecting the community that it's difficult to get everyone on board with these initiatives. You mentioned that there was a lot of youth interest and active involvement in organizing. In addition to that, is there much consciousness around or awareness of environmental racism or other environmental justice issues in the Pomona area?

Ingrid: Honestly I feel that there is not. We do our part through reaching out and through our toxic tours. We've also been able to share our message through social media outlets like Facebook and Instagram. When we get a chance to go to city council and speak out, we mean it. But even these efforts exclude the majority of Pomona residents who aren't on social media and who can't make it to city council meetings, like parents and families. And so there is a lot of community exclusion. But I feel the youth play an important role in addressing this. They're critical because, once they started getting involved last year, all it took was a couple of high schools students and they were running what they call the "Green Team" at Pomona high school. All it really took was one student to find out about us and what we did. It resonated with them so much that they had to share it with the rest of their club, and then the club came and participated in our toxic tour. They wanted to have one specifically ran by the club. A year later they're reaching out again. They're realizing that it's a new year and that they want to get more members and make another toxic tour. I think they're key. In knowing about these issues, then they talk about them. They write about them in their English classes, history classes, or anywhere else where an assignment can be applied to something that's very real in their lives. This helps make

their education and their learning process culturally relevant to what is being lived. So you draw connections.

Rickie: It's promising to see that there is continued interest in the high school because youth support is very important. In your experience, what are the kinds of grassroots initiatives or organized public actions have worked, which ones haven't worked, and why?

Ingrid: I think the ones that work the most in terms of raising consciousness, are the toxic tours. I feel like I've explained why. What hasn't worked...well there's a lot that hasn't worked. I'm thinking about times where we've tried to mobilize the community. We find out that something is happening at city council, like a vote, and realize that we need to go speak out. We're usually speaking out against development, like those that are continually targeted towards southeast Pomona. There's so much effort involved in that process. We mobilize people, they come out. But even throughout time, I feel that less and less people are coming out. I don't think that it's our fault. I think the system is meant to keep people feeling disempowered and without any hope. People feel that their participation results in no progress, or when there is progress, it's often not the kind that people are hoping for. This does something really nasty in that it breaks people's spirit, and messes with their agency. And this can go both ways because I think those of us who are still with United Voices after three years are the ones who keep seeing this time and time again, knowing that we need to continue sharing what is going on. We call out elected officials, put them on blast, and pretty much speak the truth. But I think that we have to do more than that. I don't know what exactly, but we need to do more than that so we're not just sharing the truth and then people become complacent in non-involvement because they feel it won't result in any change. It's interesting. And I don't really have answers.

Rickie: Disempowerment appears to be common when facing these issues, with people feeling that there's nothing they can do to change their conditions. It's probably due to the systemic nature of these issues. I'm hoping to gain more background on the kinds of developments that are sprouting up around the Pomona area. You mentioned a recycling plant. What are some other projects being pushed by developers in the Pomona area?



Ingrid: Well, recycling and waste management is the biggest industry here. We have about 30 waste and recycling facilities in Pomona. And that's intense. We're handling a lot of waste treatment and recycling, metal recycling, construction, demolition, greencycling, and plastic processing. There are also numerous auto body shops, which are some of the dirtiest. There's a facility called U PICK U SAVE. Are you familiar with it?

Rickie: Is that the junkyard where you get car parts that you need?

Ingrid: Yes it's a junkyard that people go to when they're looking for a car part and want to save some money by purchasing it used. You find a car that's compatible with yours, pick the part, and pay cheaper for it because it's used. But what we've seen on that particular site and at a lot of other auto body wreckage places is their ground contamination. Many of their cars aren't properly drained, so liquids, oil and other contaminant are going into the ground. And considering how much groundwater Pomona has, I often wonder what's going on there. It's scary because we get most of our drinking water from groundwater. There's also a lot of product manufacturing, including places that make Styrofoam products and luxury spas for the wealthy. They're making them here. They use chemicals and materials, like fiberglass, that can cause cancer and premature death. There are also frequent fires. The fire risks associated with manufacturing plants are high because they are operating with unsafe working conditions. Facilities like Mission Recycling have several fires per year. There's also a huge mountain of metal that doesn't seem to be getting any smaller. What are they doing with that? At any rate, it's there and it's potential fuel. There are homes next to and behind it as well. We've spoken to the people who live right there who say how loud and how dirty it is. A lot of these places are guilty of participating in what it called greenwashing, where they say that they're being eco-friendly and keeping our community clean. But places like Mission Recycling bring in trucks that empty out recyclables and end up leaving the site and the street dirty. The street where the people live. One of the high school students always talked about how there's such a negative image of Pomona and how dirty we are. People from outside the community look down on Pomona residents and might think, "They're so dirty. They don't care about where they live. Look at the street and all this trash. Why don't they clean it up?" Little do they know that our communities

are literally being trashed because no one values them. I'm talking about Pomona and the areas that are largely migrant and working class.

Rickie: It's common for passersby to look down on those who live in communities that have to bear society's burden. People think that these residents choose the conditions that they live in and assume that they aren't using their agency, but there's often no other place for people in these communities to go. With property values going up and the cost of living remaining as high as it is, where can a migrant or working class community member move to in order to live a healthier life and not worry about these issues? In your experience, has policy at the community level been a useful tool for addressing some of these issues, if at all?

Ingrid: I guess I can speak as far as the waste and recycling moratorium and the task force goes. I feel that it's important work, but it's kind of upsetting to set expectations. It's reform work. Sometimes it can be pretty discouraging because, even if the city council were to approve our recommendations and implement them, sometimes I wonder if they actually enforce them because that's the biggest issue that we have with all of the facilities operating in Pomona. Our guidelines are not really being enforced. There are laws at the local, state, and federal level meant to protect communities and the environment, but the city seems to enforce things on a complaint basis. It creates an interesting dynamic where people are ratting out their neighbors. Code enforcement is going after residents, whereas these big industries and polluters are affecting all of us. Sometimes there are elitist complaints, like when somebody's lawn is brown. Aesthetic complaints. We're in a drought and shouldn't even have lawns, period. But that's a different issue. It's discouraging because I wonder when policies are actually going to be enforced. And then also, what about the people right now who are suffering, who are ill, and who have around 10 bottles of medicine that they have to take every day because that's how they live? We had an action outside of assembly member Freddie Rodriguez's office recently, pushing him to support state level policy SB-350. One of our members, a mom, went into his office and shared what she had in her purse: 10 bottles with different medications that she has to carry every day at any time for her elementary school-age child. He's about nine years old. And that's not the only case. She tells me that she knows other moms that are dealing with the same thing. Sometimes she can't come to certain events because she is taking care of her kid or

making visits to the hospital. In terms of local policy, I don't know how effective we can be. I'm realizing that local policy is a lot of work, a lot of investment, a lot of looking ahead towards the future. But in the meantime, people are sick and their health is deteriorating.

Rickie: It seems that health problems are diverting energy away from the urgency required to push long-term policy. People's conditions aren't getting any better and policy reform can't come quickly enough. In social movements, when there are issues in the community that need to be addressed, it's too easy to think, "Oh just wait your turn. We can vote on something and maybe in the next three years it'll be better." But with respect to the problems that already exist, how are those going to improve? How are people going to get developments out, if that's even an option? How are people's health and quality of life expected to improve? As you have said, it can be very discouraging, especially when people have to take care of their own livelihoods. They don't necessarily have time to try to formulate and push policy when they have to take care of their families.

Ingrid: In my family, we used to never have asthma. But my cousin was diagnosed with asthma when he was about 4 years old. He's 8 now. And my nephew, who's 2 years old now, was diagnosed with asthma before he reached 12 months. We're talking about babies. It's so sad because sometimes. I just want to take them out. I take my nephew out for a walk around the neighborhood and he can't. We get to the corner of the street and he's breathing heavily and coughing. That's not normal. He'll run a little bit, for like 50 feet or something, and he'll be coughing and panting.

Rickie: In making connections with other social issues like state violence, how has Black Lives Matter informed your work in environmental justice? Has it at all? Are there connections or overall trends that you've noticed on the local level?

Ingrid: I think the environmental justice movement has a history of being started by black people. The father of environmental justice was Robert Bullard after all. The environmental justice movement is different from the mainstream environmental movement, which is mostly white. But in a way that's kind of the point. What's interesting is, a couple of months ago I had

the opportunity to go to Sacramento for what was called a Congreso. It was put on by the California Environmental Justice Alliance, which is pretty much a coalition made up of about 10 environmental justice groups from throughout the state. They were there to push policy. I actually did work on some mainstream environmental issues when I was in college, but over time I began to feel so out of place. I felt like the work I was doing wasn't relevant to my community, so I decided to leave and continue to be an advocate for the environment, except for with an environmental justice perspective. However, it was so weird going to Congreso in Sacramento because it felt similar to how I had felt when I was still involved in the mainstream environmental movement. There were a lot of communities that weren't at the table being represented, like Native American people. All of these environmental justice people were kind of trying to play the system and trying to make policies, which is important, but not at the cost of forgetting or compromising other issues. With this experience in mind, I don't think that the environmental justice movement is really learning much from movements like BLM. BLM doesn't ask for permission. They don't ask the police for a permit to take the streets. I feel like that's how we're failing. We're failing because we're asking the very system that's continually neglected us. The system isn't broken, it was built that way. That's why I think it's discouraging to see how we're still asking. Were still going and pleading city council to not approve projects.

Rickie: To put it another way, might you say that we're asking nicely for reform within a system that was never really intended to improve our situation?

Ingrid: Yes. There is a lot to learn in order to totally change how environmental justice organizations and collectives operate. I don't have many connections with other autonomous environmental justice collectives. Maybe I'm more connected to environmental justice groups that are 501(c)(3)s, which are more legitimate in the system's eyes or in politicians' eyes. It begins to get into the whole respectability politics thing, which is another way that we can learn from BLM. BLM activists are being really critical of respectability politics, making sure to name it when they see it. They realize how respectability politics puts people down and how it not only criticizes what people say, but the ways in which people engage with these issues. I find that (respectability politics) and tone policing so insulting. They distract people from the message and cause them to focus their attention on something that isn't nearly as important. We've tried to not

subscribe ourselves to respectability politics in United Voices, and I feel like we did lose the respect of organized groups in Pomona. Three years ago when we first started forming, groups were coming to our meetings and trying to become a part of starting this group. But when they realized that we were autonomous youth and that we weren't going to let them dictate everything or delegate us into one of their subgroups, they bounced. They showed their true colors and I feel like it very much was about respectability politics. These people were older and more experienced, or at least claimed to be more experienced. They told us how they knew how angry we were, but insisted that we not feel angry or that we find certain ways to channel our anger in order to seem more respectable. I found that totally dehumanizing. In our communities, there are still a lot of people who see United Voices as a loud and angry group that only makes noise, but we just let them talk and they'll leave.

Rickie: That's a connection that I had really been thinking about a lot, since respectability is often talked about with BLM. I feel that the environmental justice movement has been greatly informed by people not waiting for permission, by people who decided to take an initiative and protest in ways that expose the issues. If there is little urgency, then movements, as history has shown us, lose their momentum and fail. What kind of work do you envision making the biggest difference moving forward, or what kind of work do you want to see happening moving forward in order to continue the fight in combating development and future instances of environmental injustice in the Pomona area?

Ingrid: That's really difficult because I've been going through a period in my life where, personally, I find myself questioning a lot of my involvement, especially with everything that I mentioned in response to the previous question. I don't want to ask permission. At this point I don't care if these "respected" leaders in my community think I'm respectable or not. I don't mean it in a way to be disrespectful, but rather I really want to push myself and challenge myself to do what I need to do and what I feel is my purpose. To exercise my agency and act. So this is a difficult question because I feel like I'm in a place where I don't know if I want to continue to be in United Voices because my vision for the future is with my community, not at city hall. I have felt conflicted about this for years. I feel this burden of responsibility, and that with my privilege it's therefore my duty to be at city hall. I don't have a family, kids of my own, or other

responsibilities that would keep me from it, so I feel like I have to be there. Looking ahead, I feel like I need to do more consciousness-raising. This is political work, but I haven't yet figured out how to go about it. But that's part of it and also because these institutions don't have legitimacy in my opinion

Rickie: Institutions like city hall?

Ingrid: Yes. The government. The United States of America. We're talking about the colonization and enslavement of people. That's what this country was built on, and what it continues to be built on. On the backs of people of color. We continue to see changes in how it looks and how it is experienced, but by asking these institutions to not approve developments, we give them legitimacy without addressing this history. It's not like this history is in the past either because it continues to affect us even now, which is something that I think about.

Rickie: This kind of relates to what I'm currently feeling as a senior in college who wants to be involved in organizing work. People look to make it about the status of individuals rather than the importance of the issues that individuals hope to shed light on. So, rather than focusing on state violence or environmental racism, people focus on their own credibility, presentation, and respectability. By asking local government for permission to not allow development, I see why you might feel like you are validating a system that can perpetuate greed, neglect, and violence. It really goes to show how much work there is yet to be done. We ultimately want to see societal transformation and revolution, but we are stuck pushing reform, right?

Ingrid: Yes. And there's so many of us who think this way and who might understand that. And yet there we are stuck in these "progressive" organizations, non-profits, or in Sacramento. I know so many bright people who get that, but who then find solace in the stability of a job with a salary and the like. But I don't think that's how we should organize. I often think about tribal people and the issues of sovereignty.

Rickie: I really hope that moving forward, movements like BLM can sustain their momentum and begin talking more about environmental justice issues. That way there can be a shift away

from focusing on respectability and reform in order to make more space for civil disobedience and protest. Hopefully we can find ways to keep pressing for change and break from a cycle that hasn't resulted in the progress that we hope to achieve.

Ingrid: Yeah I hope so too. I think that there is so much to learn from the BLM movement, but not like learn and take from it. We have to actively support it in some way, because we're not separate. We're connected. There are still a lot of questions that I am working with.

Rickie: Thank you for taking the time to conduct this interview, I appreciate your input

## Interview with Ronald Collins: BLM associate and Community Organizer for the Labor Community Strategy Center

Rickie: What your relationship to BLM Movement and how did you become involved in environmental justice work in the Los Angeles Area

Ron: I don't necessarily work with BLM. I'm on the periphery of Black Lives Matter. I worked with folks who started BLM who continue to do the work, but I'm more associated with Black Lives Matter more so than I am actually a member. Just to be clear. I started my work in the Labor Community Strategy Center. Basically I came into the organization and I wanted to help do something to change the world. As I was in the organization, one of the organizers, Sun Yang Yen, really took me under her wing and started to show me what environmental justice was and what it looked like for our people. I started becoming involved in the organization in 2006. In 2009, I started getting really serious about the climate justice aspect of the work. Most of that comes from how we were a community organization with an environmental justice lens, and then I really focused in on that particular piece of the work that we do.

Rickie: What were some of the environmental and public health issues that you were seeing while doing this work?

Ron: Here in Los Angeles, the number one thing is car pollution, so a lot of people don't necessarily equate public transportation work with environmental justice work. But when you look at a city like Los Angeles, where 90% of bus riders are people of color, we're doing a lot less polluting than most folks. And then when you look at how most major freeways are in communities of color and how major roads are often going through communities of color, you're seeing that we're being disproportionately affected by car pollution and air pollution. So that was probably the biggest thing. There was car pollution and the way that we tackled that was being rigorous about challenging Metro to create an environmentally safe, environmentally sound public transportation system that worked for working-class people of color.

Rickie: Have you noticed whether there is much consciousness around these issues in the surrounding communities?

Ron: I think there is a growing consciousness, but I don't think that the movement has a level of consciousness that we need to start to see a strong movement. I think that there are definitely folks who do social justice work who understand the environmental justice world. They understand that lens kind of. But it's still been one of the greatest challenges for us as organizers, particularly within the black community, to bring the environmental justice fight to our communities, unless of course they live in impacted areas. So I would say folks that live in New Orleans probably have a lot more of a lens and an understanding around what exactly environmental racism is and how it functions in our society than just say black folks here in California. And I think that's generally where we see the dividing lines in our community. Folks who have had serious, direct effects are usually much more conscious around environmental justice issues, versus folks who might understand it, but aren't necessarily as tenacious about going out and changing these issues.

Rickie: Are there people with asthma or other health problems who are usually more outspoken about these issues?



Ron: In Los Angeles it's generally a broad range of folks, I wouldn't necessarily say it's folks who are mostly affected by asthma, but I think it's generally folks who understand what car pollution here in Los Angeles is doing right now. I think there are a lot of people who understand that Los Angeles is the car capital of the world. You have 9 million cars for 11 million people. That's a ridiculous amount of cars. There's no place on Earth, with the exception of one city in China that has a concentration of cars like that. So when we're talking about LA, a lot of people understand just the simple effects of looking outside and your sky is grey. We have beautiful sunsets here, and they're all fake. I think it's more the folks who are seeing and understanding these things, but also people who are seeing the next generation. I think we are seeing a lot of parents who are seeing their children struggle with asthma, emphysema, and these kinds of diseases that are involved in the environmental justice fight. In particular, my little brother has had respiratory problems his whole life. He's twelve. So it's not like he's out here smoking cigarettes. It's not like he's doing anything. It's literally just the air quality here in Los Angeles that gives him problems with breathing and stuff like that. So I think that it's mostly people who, more than seeing themselves directly affected, but people who are starting to understand how it's affecting the next generation.

Rickie: Have you been in any grassroots work in organizing communities in response to car pollution? What approaches have been taken by the organizations that you've been affiliated with in trying to combat these issues?

Ron: I would say that the most effective kind of fronts that I've seen fighting for environmental justice in the country is Grassroots Global Justice. Grassroots Global Justice is a network of organizations that tackle a range of issues. Everything from feminist work to environmental work. But I'd say that it's probably the most organized form in the country being that their membership spans the entire east coast, west coast, and they've also branched out internationally at this point. Grassroots Global Justice is a network of organizations, so their membership is actually organizations rather than individuals. They've brought these organizations together to do delegation visits to the UN conference on climate change. So that was one of the spaces where I was able to see some of the effects of pollution here in the U.S. most directly. I was able to go to the UN conference on climate change in 2010 in Cancun. Basically what GGJ does is it brings

folks who are from the first world and it tries to help them understand the struggles. So that's one of the most organized forms. And generally when I see environmental justice work being done, I feel like it is the networks rather than individual organizations that have membership bases that tend to be the most successful.

Rickie: What are the tactics of a lot of these groups?

Ron: A lot of it is very two-pronged. The first approach is interacting with the UN. So when you're talking about global climate change, generally the UN is going to be the body that is kind of dealing with it. And I say dealing with it in a very loose sense because they're not actually dealing with it. So for GGJ they do these delegation visits, which are obviously a little different than visiting your local senator, because you're talking about the international. Especially inside international social movements, there's the practice of building what I like to call counter conferences. So they'll have the big UN conference, where all the big wigs and all the diplomats come. And then juxtaposed to that they will have a People's conference. It's organizations like La Via Campesina which, if you're talking about environmental justice on a global scale, then La Via Campesina is kind of like the god of environmental justice work. They are a peasant farmer organization of over 100 million folks. It's the largest peasant farmer organization in the world and they basically are just complete badasses. They're all over the world, and each region does their own different stuff. But basically the general tactics that we see are, one, these delegation visits and these counter conferences that are created, but also very much mass movements in terms of mass demonstrations. So we saw last year in December there was the People's Climate March, the huge event that happened in New York. These are the same folks who generally put on the conference called Power Shift, which is another huge environmental justice conference... Well let me rephrase that. It's not an environmental justice conference, it is a climate conference that is against climate change. The reason I make that distinction is I think that people have gotten this idea that if you're working to save the climate or if you're working against global warming that you're doing environmental justice work. This is untrue. There are actual principles of environmental justice. So to say that you do environmental justice work is to say that you're working under a very specific framework that puts people of color and native people at the forefront of what you do, and at the forefront of creating the solution. And it also has an

analysis of understanding that capitalism is the problem. So if you're not working inside that framework you're not doing environmental justice work. But people like to say that everything is EJ at this point, right? So those I would say are the main tactics: the counter conferences, the delegations, and mass on-the-ground demonstrations.

Rickie: Which of those tactics would you say have been the most effective?

Ron: I don't know, how would you gauge effectiveness?

Rickie: I suppose what has led to most direct change?

Ron: I think each of them serve a different purpose. In terms of bringing visibility to the movement, I think that the mass movements have been the best. So we'll see these mass movements against Keystone XL. When we see these huge protests, like when we did with the People's Climate March, when we see large swellings of people doing this environmental work, I think that helps to bring visibility. I think that the counter conferences oftentimes help to bring cohesion and vision to the work. So I think that each kind of tactic plays its own role. And then the delegation visits I think are very successful in terms of interacting with these international players. Oftentimes I would say that, if anything, the conferences are the weakest because they're going to do what they're going to do. Oftentimes we go there to make a point and to let them know it happens, but there's very little actual motion in terms of pushing and moving these politicians once we get to that point because when we get to these conferences, it's basically a bunch of politician patting each other on the back and signing the document. There is no real discourse about what's going on in those documents. So I would say each of the tactics are successful in doing different things and play a different role in bringing visibility to the movement.

Rickie: What are some of the biggest obstacles in terms of implementing these tactics? What can stand in the way?

Ron: The gatekeepers keep the conference space from being a real space from which people can intervene. But I also think a reality is that, especially here in the United States, climate change seems so far away from us. I mean it's not a real thing to people. A perfect example I like to use is the difference between a drought in Los Angeles and a drought in Sub-Saharan Africa. So there's a drought in Los Angeles: What does that mean for me? I can't water my lawn. Oh darn. I might have to pay a little more at the grocery store for my bottled water. Oh darn. But that doesn't really impress upon me the severity of what's going on. Unless I'm a farmer in Central California. Unless I'm somebody who is directly related to the farm business. Then as far as I'm concerned, it's hot out. The weather is real nice. So I think that one of the obstacles has been really bringing this home to people who haven't had real experiences. I think having a conversation with a refugee from New Orleans is completely different from having a conversation with an Angelino or even a New Yorker after Sandy. When you think about New York you might think, "Oh. Sandy happened. It was terrible." But everybody moved right back into Manhattan and kept doing what they were doing. There wasn't really anything else.

Rickie: How do you think environmental racism might become an issue that BLM can organize around, or how might it become incorporated into their opposition against state violence since, I don't think that there's much of a connection between exposure to pollution and violence?

Ron: I think that is a very difficult thing. I think that when we say "state violence," the umbrella is so huge that it's difficult for an organization, or a forum like BLM for that matter, to put its hand in all the pots in which we could possibly be dealing with state violence. So we could be talking about educational violence, we could be talking about state violence with women, we could be talking about state violence towards queer folks. There's just a lot, particularly and especially when we're talking about black folks. So I think that it's very difficult for them to do that. But I think one way that the work can definitely be merged is by simply having that analysis of capitalism and having that analysis and calling it violence. I think that one of the things that BLM has great power to do is to call out different forms of violence, and it has actually done a very good job in highlighting different forms of state violence that we haven't necessarily considered state violence before this point. So if there is continued conversation around what state violence looks like in terms of environmental justice and in terms of environmental racism,

I think that BLM has a lot that they can do in terms of raising the issue and raising consciousness. Just like what they have done around more traditional forms of state violence, which is really just using their organization as a vehicle to bring things to the masses.

Rickie: Do you think that BLM's tactics might inform environmental justice organizing with respect to how it brings about disruption and mass protest?

Ron: I think it's difficult because the reality is that the environmental justice movement has been using these tactics for years. So it's not like if BLM does it that it will suddenly become a novel thing. I remember in the early 2000s, a Korean man killed himself in front of the UN conference. In 2010 we actually interrupted the UN session because they were silencing civil society. So I think these tactics have been used. I just think that they haven't been as successful because, when we're talking about global climate change, you're dealing with something that is a little bit different than dealing inside of state borders with transnational capital. And you have to understand that the power of transnational capital is such that there is nobody's door to knock on. There is no senator. There is no president. Okay you're going to knock on the door of Exxon Mobil. You know what they're going to do? They're going to smile and wave, maybe even crush you with their wallet. I think the tactics have been used, but I think it's more about now, how we elevate those tactics. I think that we are now at the point where we want our Earth to survive and we want to have the next generation. It's going to be up to this generation of organizers to elevate beyond what it has been doing and understand that this is no longer the point. Solidarity only goes so far. Now it's time to movement build. We have a protest and that's great, we've been doing that for years. But now, how do we interrupt in a real meaningful way? Just to give you an idea of how difficult interrupting in some of these spaces can be, when the UN had a conference in 2010, they had it at this six story resort called Moon Palace. And basically you could not get in within a mile of Moon Palace, unless you had credentials. So that means what exactly were you going to interrupt? You can stand a mile away and scream and shout all you want to, and you best believe it was guarded by the Mexican federal police. So there was no getting in. There were dudes with AK-47s or whatever else they carry, automatic rifles. And you were not getting anywhere near that place. So that gives you an idea of the lengths at which they go through in order to keep people out. They are not spaces where traditional kinds of

interruption can happen. Where I do think we have a real in is on the streets. These mass movements have to be tied to demands, they need to be tied to very strategic points. So I thought the People's Climate March in New York was great. Couldn't tell you what one of the demands was. Couldn't tell you exactly what they were marching about. You've got hundreds of thousands of people in the streets of New York fighting for climate justice, but who are you talking to, precisely? And what precisely are you asking them to do? I think that is where our movement needs to go, to move beyond this very airy atmosphere of being in a movement together to establishing the ten things that we want to do. The problem with that is getting everyone to agree on what those ten things are.

Rickie: What do you think about BLMs efforts to distance themselves from politics?

Ron: In trying to dissociate themselves from the system, I think that they have done a disservice to themselves in some ways. I remember when the Democrats endorsed BLM, I would have thrown that in their face in a way that BLM didn't. "You support me? Then you support these five national policies then. Oh you don't support me? Oh so when you were supporting me you were lying? That's not a good look." But instead BLM was like, "No you don't support us. We don't support you. We didn't say that." And they just got very defensive. I just thought their response to that maybe wasn't the most political. And I understand that not everyone is trying to play politics. But this is America and it's also 2015. The protest movement is not going to win anything. We have seen that. If it was going to win, we would have seen those wins by now. We brought out numbers that haven't been seen in the U.S. since the sixties. So if the protest movement was going to do it, it would have done it. And that's just what's real. It's not to say that we don't hit the streets and not to say that we don't use that as a tactic, but we must also interact with politicians. BLM is calling for a debate. But these debates are paid for by companies like Facebook, so they're not getting a debate. That's the reality of it. You can scream and holler about how terrible and capitalist America is, or, you can do what was asked. They weren't going to give a debate, but they said that if they set up a candidate forum, then they would come. I would have set up a candidate forum and I would have had Louis Farrakhan moderating it. I would have said, "Alright. You said we could have a forum. Come!" But would they really have answered Farrakhan's questions about black issues? Probably not. Or maybe not

Farrakhan because he's got problems, but you know there's a way that some of the things that have happened could have been dealt with in a more political way. I think one thing that social movements of our generation have stopped doing is interacting with politicians in a real way, which is why I don't think that we've been as effective as the movements of the sixties. I think the reality was that Martin Luther King did work with politicians. The reality is that the Panthers, while they didn't, had a different kind of an organization. I'm starting to understand them more as a community organization rather than a political organization. They had a very serious politic, but their politics drove their work in the community. When they wanted to see a free bus program taking folks to prisons and back, they didn't lobby for the city council to pass an ordinance. They got a bus, they found some money, and they did it. There was no middle man.

Rickie: They saw the need for a free breakfast program and went on and did it.

Ron: There was no, "How do we get the school district to pay for this?" No, they did it. And I think that's what our generation is missing: putting your money where your mouth is. If you really believe in the liberation of your people, are you going to pay for that liberation? Because nothing is free without freedom.

Rickie: What are your thoughts on Campaign Zero?

Ron: I will say that BLM is doing great things, and I think that bringing light to the issues that black folks are facing is really important. And it's just hard. I think that Campaign Zero is really an attempt to build a vision for the society that BLM wants to see. I don't think that it's the same kind of policy that we might see with a Ten-Point Program. I think that this is something to get people thinking about what they would change about the culture of society. So in that regard, I really do think it is amazing. And I also don't want to ever detract from the work that is happening. In every movement folks agree and disagree with different portions of the work, but I think that it's important that we ultimately uplift, and campaigns like Campaign Zero are some of the most positive in moving towards that direction in terms of what someone like me would want to see in our society. I think they are great recommendations. I think the hard part is, how do we operationalize them? How do I operationalize ending police violence? There is no way to

operationalize that. But, perhaps there are ways in which we can take those demands and build upon them. And we can turn them into legislation and we can turn them into real things that I want to see. But also, some of the problems with that is I think that there is an element of self-determination inside of BLM that isn't being explicitly said, like in terms of having our own nation. And so we're not trying to make certain demands on the system because in reality, those folks think that we should have our own space that is separate.

Rickie: Do you think they are advocating for Black Nationalism?

Ron: I would not be surprised if there were quite a few Black Nationalists who were the folks driving a lot of BLM work because—being in spaces with those folks and talking to them, I think there are definitely at least some black people who are involved in that work who definitely feel that way. Again, not to speak for the organization and not to speak for those folks, but that's my feeling personally that's why I get weary of a lot of policy stuff because I truly believe that black folks need their own space. There is never ever going to be justice or any peace for black people while we are in the United States. It just won't happen. It was not built this way it was not meant to be this way. You know the worst thing that happened to the white man was we got free. They are still confused. So ultimately my general feeling about Campaign Zero is that it is a very amazing first step towards building a very powerful political message.

Rickie: Do you think that a policy platform like Campaign Zero would be useful in addressing environmental concerns?

Ron: I think that in order to address environmental concerns, we have to go beyond policy. The chief problem with what is going on with the environment right now is public consumption. If the entire world lived like how Americans live, there would be no world. It could not physically happen. The world would not survive. So the reality is that people in the first world have to seriously adjust their lifestyles. For instance, we eat meat at every meal, and if we don't that's somehow a problem, unless you're vegetarian. That's something that is very detrimental to the environment. It's hard because I think that policy stuff could definitely work, but I think that it has to be one prong to the approach, we have to be doing policy work, we have to be doing all



around work in terms of really building a grassroots movement, and we have to start to really change how we see things culturally. I think that culture has been dictated by capital for so long that we don't really understand how to be able to change our culture. Everything in American society in this culture is dictated by capital, so it's so hard for people to imagine a society where it isn't

Rickie: All the media.

Ron: Exactly. I think people in other cultures and other places don't understand the power of the American media machine. Inundated with distraction. Let's just, for a second, think about the Kardashians. They are literally a weapon of mass distraction. At least Beyoncé can sing and dance. I mean at the end of the day, you can like her or not like her, but at least she can sing and dance. Same thing with actors. At least they act. So the Kardashians are the perfect example of, "Look you can do nothing and just be rich and awesome and do nothing." And this is the American Dream. Everybody wants to be the Kardashians. Why? They don't do a darn thing. They have no talent, no responsibilities, but they're rich. How did they get rich, because people want to watch them be themselves on television, or be some caricatured version of themselves on television.

Rickie: What were some major takeaways of working with the LA Bus Riders Union?

Ron: I think one of the major things is the dual-pronged approach. The Bus Riders Union sued the MCA and won over 2 billion dollars back into the bus system, and then used on-the-ground movement to sustain those wins. I think the Bus Riders Union had one of the best models in how to use policy to actually make real changes. They sued, they got a federal consent decree, but the work didn't stop there. Then we built a mass movement to ensure that the federal consent decree was followed through on. One of my biggest takeaways from the Bus Riders Union was also anti-capitalism: situating capitalism as the problem. Also prioritizing the leadership of working-class people of color. I think that one of the models that the LA Bus Riders Union has had in having a planning committee and having a member-elected leadership body is truthfully giving some level of self-determination to people of color. And that, if anything, is to me what's most

important because we best understand our situation and are the best apt to create solutions to our problems. Oftentimes we have these great white knights that want to come in and pull an Eric Garcetti. “I’m going to save all the poor people of color because they don’t know that they are in trouble” But the reality is, no, we’ve got this.

Rickie: No, we live it every day. I’m not sure if you’ve heard. But recently Democracy Alliance, a political organization affiliated with the Democratic Party, said that they were interested in funding organizations that are involved with BLM and essentially funding BLM movement. I was wondering what your thoughts are on mainstream political organizations funding BLM and the possible dangers of such a possibility.

Ron: There is no danger because BLM is not going to let it happen. There is no way that BLM is going to tie themselves to a political party, no matter how progressive these democrats seem. That is an attempt by the Democratic Party specifically to co-opt Black Lives Matter and to co-opt the black vote. The democrats are worried that the Latino vote is being split, and that many conservative Latinos are joining the Republican Party. And if they do so in large numbers, the reality is that the democrats are going to have a hard way to go. So what they’re trying to do is warm some of the black vote and secure some of the voting bloc. And how they’re trying to keep black folks “happy” is by co-opting some of the messages from BLM and by having democratic politicians pander to BLM. I don’t think they’re in any real danger because BLM is not going to play ball like that. But in a general sense, if they were to then the biggest danger would be co-optation and then we become beholden to the system. When the system is funding you and the democrats are funding you, you don’t get to go and interrupt democratic debates. You don’t get to go and speak poorly of Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton or call people out. You don’t get to do those things when you are taking democratic money. And I think BLM has been very staunch about saying, “No, we don’t want your money,” because we value the freedom we have not taking your money more than we value whatever resources that you can buy.

Rickie: What do you think is most important for organizers and self-proclaimed proponents of BLM and environmental justice to understand as the struggle continues into the future?

Ron: One, the global scope of the struggle. If there is no global movement there is no movement – period. Because, if we stop their polluting in your backyard, they will go to Taiwan, they will go to China, they will be in Africa, and they will be in South America. So we have to understand that it is a global problem and the only solutions are global – period. There is no way to tackle this problem on a country by country basis. There is no way to tackle this problem on a region by region basis. It has to be done on a global scale. Two, human political party, get your life together. We need a political party that is not Democrat in values, that is not Republican in values, but that truly speaks to where the politics of the people are right now. Without that, we don't really have a hope of moving into the American political system. We will always be folks standing on the outside of the Democrats and Republicans while they make policy. Without a real third party that represents us and without taking power, we won't see much change. When thinking about revolution, what is the crux of a revolution?

Rickie: Taking state power.

Ron: There we go. We are not going to take state power standing outside of the capital building and shouting. We've seen what has happened. They unleashed armies upon us and we went running because we cannot compete with American military force. That is the reality of our situation at this moment. So what other options do we have? I think this boils down to what Malcolm X said. He said, "By any means necessary." He didn't say to go shoot people. He said, "By any means necessary." That could mean having to use electoral moves, it could mean talking to the black capitalists. Whatever means are necessary to get your agenda met, that is what you do. I think that is something that this new generation of blackivists needs to understand. It's not about you being a rebel on the street. It's about figuring out how you get your agenda met, how do you keep your communities safe, and how you can do that in a very strategic and prepared kind of a way."

Interview with Laura Pulido: Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity at the  
University of Southern California/Environmental Justice Scholar

Rickie: In your environmental justice scholarship, you explore the limits of the state in terms of dealing with the problem of environmental justice: What does it mean that we basically petition the state to “solve” problems that have been fully sanctioned by the state? What conclusions have you been able to draw in addressing this problem?

Laura: I think that elements of the environmental justice movement have become co-opted by the state, but I think that even more oppositional elements have become hopeful in placing their trust in the state. That the state will actually protect them, and actually recognize that no, the state is not your friend, it is here to protect transnational capital, especially in the particular moment that we are living in. So why would you do this? So I’ve just been hitting my head against the rock time and time again. I think there are a variety of things. There’s the historical moment that we’re living in. I also think that a lot of the EJ activists are older activists. And that’s significant if we think about how over time older activists become more conservative in some ways. So I think that they’re not adopting a sufficiently radical outlook. There’s also recognition. When Clinton signed the executive environmental order in ’94, then there was the idea that an apparatus would be set up for people of color to become involved, like the NEJAC (National Environmental Justice Advisory Council) and things like that. So there are these vehicles for people to be involved and that’s a form of recognition. I think that for some people of color that’s a really important thing. When you’ve historically been ignored and now you’re being included and invited to the table. I think people spent a lot of energy and investment in doing that kind of thing. But when you go that route, you also kind of become blinded to what is happening, because you become invested in a particular procedure.

Rickie: How might environmental justice movement inform how we understand environmental racism as a form of state violence?

Laura: One of the tricky things about environmental racism and thinking about it, there’s a guy named Rob Nixon and he wrote a book called *Slow Violence*. And I think that’s a wonderful

example of why people don't see it. Another thing that I'll say, particularly in the case of Los Angeles, is that certainly black people in parts of South LA are impacted by air toxins and other kinds of hazardous pollution, but Latino communities are far more impacted. So should that (BLM) movement choose and decide to broaden the lens, that also means reaching out and connecting with this other population as well, which other groups and the community coalition is trying to do. So there are those things. And I know there have also been moments within black Lives Matter movement across the country where there have been moments of black-brown solidarity around these issues. But in the case of Los Angeles, Latinos are far more impacted than African-American communities.

Rickie: As a student, it's been difficult engaging with other students on the matter of how elite institutions like Pomona, contribute to ineffectual liberal forms of campus activism. This kind of activism is centered on demands for diversity and representation within the greater corporate structure, which is assimilating less-represented people into the bourgeois class. What do you think might be good ways to implement more radical forms of student organizing on college campuses?

Laura: I know that there was action around workers' rights, which I think is really important because that kind of shifts the agenda from just "Let's get more students of color in here" which I'm not opposed to, towards something that is a good step in the right direction. And then I think it's important to think about the kind of geography of where you guys are located. Pomona comes close to the city of Pomona and the demographics of Pomona, the kind of stuff that's going on there. There are lot of issues concerning police violence, immigrants' rights violations, and environmental justice. It's kind of a classic city. So I think that's one way to go. But that really requires students to break out of the ivory tower where they can sometimes be ensconced. Having said that, I think that campus activism is a wonderful first step for people. It's a relatively safe place to try out forms of public persona and develop political consciousness, tactics and things like that. One step further, I don't know if there's a Black Lives Matter chapter in the Inland Empire or not, but I know there's the LA one. So that's a wonderful way to connect with these existing organizations that are on the front lines and taking strong positions.

Rickie: What do you think is most important to consider when thinking about grassroots movement and how it might support greater revolutionary movement and unity across communities of color in the U.S. and further.

Laura: Right. Well there's that issue. One of the fundamental questions as a geographer that we asks ourselves is "How much is it local?" I'm speaking with respect to the concerns and priorities of a movement, and how much they can be generalized when people think about jumping scales. To move to a larger kind of spatial consciousness and scale of activism. BLM has been a fabulous example of starting local and exploding. Occupy, same kind of thing. I think EJ did that initially. Groups started very local with down the block kind of stuff, which then began developing into regional networks and national organizations, some of which still exist to a certain extent. But I think that a lot of them have been degutted of the oppositional content over time. In fact there's a guy, Eric Carter, who wrote a paper in the journal *Local Environment* called "Environmental Justice 2.0." It's based here in Los Angeles looking at Latino environmental justice activism. He makes that case that it's in a second wave entirely. And I disagree with his analysis of it or how it got there. He says that because of post-Fordism, we've moved to a kind of service economy and many of the major pollution problems have been solved. Activists are now focusing on things like park access and less oppositional kinds of stuff. And I think that's accurate in terms of what is happening, but I disagree with how he got to that point. I certainly disagree with the point that environmental problems have been solved and I see this largely as co-optation. I don't know if he's comfortable saying that, or if he knows not to say that or whatever. But he's right that it's fundamentally changed this movement from what it used to be. So that's definitely something to consider. So co-optation is a concern that one would have when going beyond the local, and that could happen locally too. I guess that could happen at any scale. I heard somewhere—I'm not sure if it was in Baltimore, D.C., or New York—but in one of those three cities in the last two weeks there was some kind of march, it might have been a Black Lives Matter event, but they were directly linking together police violence, climate justice, and one other issue. And I thought that was excellent.

Rickie: Do you think that the scale of a movement is correlated to the level of state response and the likelihood of co-optation?

Laura: I think co-optation has something to do with the level of state response, which structures and shapes it. We have seen a very clear response to the demands of environmental justice activists at the federal level. So consequently, we do see co-optation at the federal level. We also see it at the level of the state and the local, but I would say probably less at the local. I think there is more fighting at the state level though, where there's been real clear efforts at co-optation. California has adopted some of the most aggressive environmental justice initiatives of all the states. Over 30 states have environmental justice initiatives, and California—unsurprisingly as a more liberal state—has some of the most progressive ones. And they've sold out the environmental justice movement completely. Activists realized what had been happening—they were basically being co-opted—and decided that they weren't going to participate. And this really generated a lot of attention, which I think has been a really healthy and productive kind of attention. Activists had to think about how they were going to respond to this and many realized that the state was going to try to f\*\*\* them over no matter what, right? The thing that they have to see—at least in my mind—is that by thinking about what our needs are in this moment, we can bring ourselves together. We're currently living in terms of transnational capital, which I see as really dominating. It's very clear that in terms of environmental justice, black and brown bodies are considered as sacrifice zones. This is fundamental for the reproduction and functioning of racial capitalism. They need somewhere to put the stuff. They're externalities as they call them in environmental economics. They need somewhere to put them and these are some of the most vulnerable places to put them at. On the other side we need to think about what's happening in terms of police violence. What is the role of the racial state? How is this benefitting—or is this benefitting—capital in various kinds of ways. What parallels can we see when “solving” social problems basically means locking up primarily black, and to a lesser extent brown people? So I think that there's a level of structural analysis that needs to occur that could unite these two kinds of concerns in a powerful way.

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