Sustainability
Approaches to Environmental Justice
and Social Power
Edited by
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Equality in the Air We Breathe

Police Violence, Pollution, and the Politics of Sustainability

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Donna Murch's history of the Black Panther Party, *Living for the City*, takes its title from a Stevie Wonder song: “living just enough / just enough for the city.” Wonder sings a familiar story of the Great Migration. As a young boy, the song's protagonist moves from rural Mississippi to the city—with its promises of opportunity—but economic conditions, police violence, the prison system, a toxic environment, and other forms of racism beat him down. The song was released in 1973, a few years after cities like New York adopted the policy of “planned shrinkage,” or the removal of essential city services from poor neighborhoods, usually where black people lived. In the song, the boy is arrested for a small street crime and sentenced to ten years in prison. In the city, then, he finds the “new Jim Crow.” In one of the song’s final verses, Wonder tells us, “He spends his life walking the streets of New York City / He’s almost dead from breathing air pollution / He tried to vote but to him there’s no solution.” These images depict what the scholar Rob Nixon calls slow violence, “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scale.” They also speak to the geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism as “the state-sanctioned and extralegal exposure of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” And yet the song does not end in despair. Instead, Wonder hopes that “you hear inside my voice of sorrow” and that it “motivates you to make a better tomorrow.” “Living for the City” thus opens up into life and the possibility of enacting other, more just worlds.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense—among other groups—sought to enact a more just world in the 1960s and 1970s. Their health clinics, free breakfast programs, “survival conferences,” and other projects aimed to reverse social forces that tore at black lives in the United States while making connections with colonized people across the globe. They inspired other decolonial movements in the United States at the time, like the Puerto Rican Young Lords in New York City. Today's Black Lives Matter movement is, at least in part, a legacy of the Black Panther Party. Both engage in a form of decolonial thinking and alternative world-making practices in the context of the state-sanctioned violences of our time. “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black Lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise,” write the movement's organizers on its website. The physical gesture of “Hands Up!” during anti-police violence protests and signs that read, “I can't breathe,” attest to the ways race and racism manifest—as they did for the protagonist in Wonder’s song—as everyday, embodied vulnerabilities. Yet Black Lives Matter is more than simply a protest against racialized violence. To quote its website, “It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” The movement is about, as Alicia Garza, one of its founders, puts it, “broadening the conversation to include Black life.”

This chapter brings an interdisciplinary and social justice perspective to the concept and practices of “sustainability” by foregrounding the work of anti-racist struggles in U.S. cities, like Black Lives Matter. We assert that anti-racist struggles have always been struggles about life-sustaining environments, at least as “the environment” is defined by the environmental justice movement as the place where we “live, work, and play.” Black and brown activists, scholars, and cultural figures like Stevie Wonder have not separated police violence from pollution in their political critiques—the social and the ecological are inseparably connected in the work of building a better world. As such, anti-racist movements offer a serious challenge to conventional notions of sustainability—asking sustainability practitioners to rethink their ideologies and practices through a politics of difference. Whose lives are to be sustained? Which environments are at stake? And how might social movements like Black Lives Matter offer powerful socioecological arguments about how to build sustainable futures? This chapter focuses on U.S. cities and specifically on resistance to the racialized geographies of pollution and
police violence, two toxic vectors through which black and brown lives are rendered vulnerable in the United States today. We develop this argument through examples of social movements from our own research in San Francisco and New York and alongside other scholars and activists who emphasize the relationship among place, embodiment, and politics.

We are indebted to, and inspired by, scholars and activists who insist that any notion of sustainability should be inseparable from issues of equity and justice. However, we hope our argument moves beyond the notion of bringing together anti-racist praxis with an already-existing sustainability movement, particularly as this movement has been defined by mainstream environmentalism of the Global North. Rather, we turn to anti-racist social movements as a distinct standpoint and sociospatial positionality from which to understand and articulate an alternative vision of “sustainability.” This alternative vision of sustainability is emphatically not about sustaining the status quo but refers to life-sustaining practices and more livable worlds. In solidarity with Black Lives Matter and in reference to Eric Garner’s last words, “I can’t breathe,” in the second half of the chapter we focus on breathing and the breath—that essential act of life that is often constrained or denied to people of color. We consider the breath as a geographical site of political struggle and resistance to unsustainable socioenvironmental conditions.

Black Geographies and the Unsustainable City

Drawing on Gilmore’s writing on racism as a state-sanctioned, group-differentiated vulnerability, in this article we consider racism as embodiment. This definition connects with the environmental justice movement, which has highlighted and challenged the health inequalities that have resulted from racialized exposures to industrial pollution. Environmental justice scholars have developed theoretical approaches to the entanglements of race and the environment. The geographer Laura Pulido demonstrates how race and racism work through the uneven production of place—specifically, through residential segregation and industrial pollution patterns in Los Angeles. Pulido draws on critical race scholarship and the analysis of race as a historically situated social formation, and she has extended these insights to urban geography. As Pulido explains, racism is “a sociospatial relation, both constitutive of the city and produced by it.” The sociologist Valerie Kuletz and the ethicist scholars Traci Brynne Voyles explore a different relationship between race and space, demonstrating how the disposability of indigenous lands in the United States and the disposability of indigenous peoples have been historically linked—specifically how desert landscapes have become a sacrifice zone for uranium extraction and U.S. nuclear weapons production, testing, and disposal.

In both urban and rural landscapes, the uneven, unequitable production of environmental conditions has resulted in “group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death.” Examples include the “slow violence” of chemical exposure in racially segregated cities and workplaces. It also includes forms of cultural death, as with the loss of indigenous practices and ways of being through settler colonialism and environmental degradation. Importantly, these toxic spatialities also led to environmental and health justice social movements, which have critiqued existing power relations and articulated other—often more life-sustaining—world-making practices. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline, for example, involves longstanding claims to territorial sovereignty and the right to uncontaminated water, and it also advances notions of climate justice and the need to transition to a fossil-free economy.

While environmental justice scholarship has traditionally focused on the relationship between race and industrial pollution, other scholars have shown how anti-racist social movements emerge in response to other life-diminishing and unsustainable conditions—toxic environments in a broad sense. Such social movements have drawn powerful connections between race and place or between social and spatial exclusions. The geographer Matthew Gandy and the communications scholar Darrel Wanzer-Serrano both explore how the impoverished and dirty streets of New York City’s East Harlem in the late 1960s were contested by the Puerto Rican Young Lords, whose first direct action in 1969 was a “garbage offensive” to clean up uncollected trash. The accumulation of waste on the streets had become a physical symbol of Puerto Rican political marginality. The Young Lords also organized free breakfast programs and medical clinics, modeled after the work of the Black Panthers. These programs offered life-sustaining interventions
in a landscape—both social and physical—produced through racialized municipal neglect. The historians Robert Self and Donna Murch have also shown how the Black Panthers in Oakland organized in response to the racialized production of urban space, including segregation in housing and employment, a neighborhood worn down by capital divestment and the decline of its tax base, and physically torn apart by the postwar construction of freeways and the BART rail line through an African American residential community in West Oakland.  

Many Oakland activists, including the Black Panthers, found spatial metaphors—in part from the anti-colonial lexicon of the time—useful in describing their urban experience. For example, in 1968 the community organizer Paul Cobb called West Oakland an “urban plantation,” while Don McCullum, chairman of the West Coast Region NAACP, testified to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that “here in Oakland . . . we are ringed by a white noose of suburbia.” According to Robert Self, in Oakland “the Panthers defined as actual and metaphorical space the defense of which had become their mission.” Many Black Power activists drew from the anti-colonial writer and activist Frantz Fanon, who, in The Wretched of the Earth, describes the Manichean segregation of colonial space. Fanon writes, “The coloniser’s sector is a sector built to last, all stone and steel.” The colonized sector, in contrast, is “a world with no space, people are piled up on top of each other, the shacks squeezed tightly together.” Fanon’s passage speaks to the mutual constitution of urban environments, social difference, and embodiment—including forms of violence and premature death.

The salience of these spatial metaphors can also be understood through the geographer Katherine McKitterick’s concept of “black geographies.” As an analytical framework and historical method, “black geographies” refers to the ways black subjects and black lives have been marginalized and displaced, in both material and imaginative space. Black lives are marginalized through physical and social displacement (such as incarceration or gentrification), through the naturalization of black bodies in some spaces and not others (as in the idea that some people are “out of place” while others belong), and through the erasure of black knowledge and experience from scholarly disciplines. McKitterick notes that black writers and activists have historically used spatial categories as a way of challenging dominant narratives and asserting the agency and specific geographies of black subjects. To the “urban plantation” in Oakland, add “the Middle Passage,” “the underground railroad,” bell hook’s “margin” and “homeplace,” Paul Gilroy’s “the Black Atlantic,” and Sylvia Wynter’s “plots.” As the Young Lords recognized, political marginality is a spatial and environmental condition. Importantly for McKitterick’s concept of black geographies, these spaces of marginality and displacement are not simply sites of domination; they also point us to other ways of knowing, to sites of potentiality and other world-making practices. The concept of black geographies is thus an affirmation of meaningful sites through which to imagine and realize more just and sustainable worlds.

McKitterick develops the concept of black geographies, in part, through Frantz Fanon. Fanon’s writings also help us explore the breath as a black geography—a contested, geographical space through which to critique contemporary relations of power and to imagine other, more life-sustaining environments. We can imagine, for example, the “world with no space” Fanon describes in The Wretched of the Earth as a place where it is difficult to breathe. Indeed, in the concluding essay of Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon uses the breath and the inability to breathe as a metaphor for colonialism. In explaining the material conditions of the rebellion in Vietnam in the 1950s, he writes, “It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because ‘quite simply’ it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe.” Fanon’s words circulate today (in abbreviated fashion and without the reference to Vietnam) on signs used in Black Lives Matter protests, demonstrating that the breath is again a political space—a metaphor for police violence in the United States. As the sociologist Ruha Benjamin writes, “I can’t breathe” “is the clarion call of a renewed movement for social justice.”

In the following section, we present a brief survey of existing ideas and practices of sustainability and conclude that conventional notions of sustainability are implicated within histories of race and racism. Our intention here is not to do away with the concept of sustainability entirely but to suggest that other frameworks and social movements offer an alternative basis from which to develop a more inclusive sustainability praxis. We illustrate this idea through two examples of the breath as a black geography, from our research in San Francisco and New York City.
Critiques of Existing Sustainabilities

As this volume demonstrates, “sustainability” is a conceptually ambiguous term that has been used in widely divergent political projects. Many sustainability projects and policies in fact exacerbate existing social and environmental inequalities and make it difficult for some people to breathe. Miriam Greenberg describes how corporations and urban growth coalitions have embraced sustainability as a market strategy, what she calls a “sustainability edge.” Greenberg describes the contours of market-oriented sustainability in New York City and New Orleans as a form of “green city branding” and shows how sustainability in this context works to reproduce many of the same economic activities that cause environmental problems in the first place. These environmental problems include the ways sustainability in urban planning has been more likely to lead to gentrification and displacement than to affordable housing. In a similar vein, Julie Szé’s study of “eco-desire” in Chinese urban development plans demonstrates the political resonance of sustainability discourses with top-down state and corporate interests. This point is developed by scholars who conceptualize “green gentrification” and the contradictions of urban growth coalitions that seek to both “green” and “grow” cities.

Erik Swyngedouw explores how the fusion of a harmonious “Nature” (with a capital “N”) and a technocratic optimism is characteristic of the mainstream discourse of sustainability today. He argues that sustainability, insofar as it gets defined by a small group of experts as a technical and managerial problem, is “postpolitical” in that it evacuates any real political discussion and therefore the possibility of radical socioenvironmental change. As he puts it, “The fantasy of sustainability imagines the possibility of an original, fundamentally harmonious Nature, one that is now out-of-sync but, which, if ‘properly’ managed, we can and have to return to by means of a series of technological, managerial, and organizational fixes.” Importantly, the idea of needing to return to and sustain a singular, abstract “Nature” also excludes the multiplicity of actually lived and other-possible natures, as well as the question of who, exactly, gets to define what “nature” is worth sustaining.

As Raymond Williams argued, ideas of nature “contain an extraordinary amount of human history,” and this is the case of the “Nature,” or natures, at stake in sustainability discourses as well. In the United States, ideas of nature historically developed through distinct racial projects. Native American displacement and genocide emerged alongside, and in relation to, the desire by U.S. settlers to protect land from urban and industrial development. The idea of Yosemite as a pristine wilderness, requiring state protection as a national park, was only possible after the militarized removal of indigenous Americans. That which John Muir and the Sierra Club—along with today’s visitors to Yosemite and other national parks—experienced as untouched “nature” was once an inhabited, managed landscape. The life-and-death struggle over which “nature” is worth sustaining is also part of the reproduction of colonial social relations in Africa and U.S. militarization in Hawai’i and the Philippines.

Race and racism have also worked through ideas of nature. For example, social groups have been reduced and essentialized through presumably “natural” characteristics (such as laziness or irrationality) or seen as somehow “closer to nature” (as in the myth of the “ecological Indian”) and thus farther from modernity. The ways race has worked through ideas of nature has had profound consequences for democratic inclusion—for who is imagined as a rational political actor, deserving of rights and state recognition. To the extent that popular discourses of sustainability rely on unexamined ideas of a harmonious and universal nature, they risk inheriting and reproducing these concepts and histories.

Other social practices have always existed alongside these dominant ideas of nature. The Afro-American studies scholar Eritt Rusert finds a precursor of today’s concept of sustainability within the socioecological relations of plantation agriculture in colonial Caribbean islands. Colonial planters of the time worried about threats to the stability of the plantation’s ecology (and its profits) through invasive crops, diseases, inclement weather, and slave rebellions. And yet plantation ecologies—oriented as they were to production for global commodity markets—often did not produce enough food to sustain the slaves who lived on them (a dynamic that resembles farmworker food insecurity in industrial agriculture today). As a remedy to unsustainable life on the plantation, slaves were often allowed to keep small garden plots, or provision grounds. “Another history of sustainability,” Rusert writes,
“might be glimpsed in the everyday acts of enslaved and dispossessed peoples.” More specifically, “despite the production of the slaves’ provision rounds through colonial rule and power, such spaces also produced an alternative ecological vision.”

In making this claim, Rusert draws on the philosopher Sylvia Wynter’s writings of slave plots as containing “secretive histories.” Slave plots were simultaneously produced by the plantation system and were sites of a flourishing folk culture, outside the plantation’s racist logic. Katherine McKittrick also works with Wynter’s notion of slave plots as enacting other possible worlds in her concept of “plantation futures.” She asks: How might we understand the legacies of the plantation in contemporary cities, which include “sites of toxicity, environmental decay, pollution and militarized action that are inhabited by impoverished communities,” in ways that do not reduce and represent them as spaces of “unending black death?” McKittrick turns to Wynter’s concept of the “plot” as prefiguring a different, more humane way of living, to insist on a recognition of plot-life and, by extension, black-life as “anticipatory.”

In the 1970s, as Black Power activists and the Puerto Rican Young Lords struggled for more livable urban environments, black scholars theorized alternative ecologies that might also provide the basis for rethinking the definition of “sustainability.” Nathan Hare, the first coordinator of the Black Studies Department at San Francisco State University (which was famously established after a five-month student strike, and which is now called Africana Studies), developed the concept of “black ecology” in a 1970 article in the Black Scholar, a journal he co-founded. Hare suggests that “the concept of ecology in American life is potentially of momentous relevance to the ultimate liberation of black people.” He draws connections between the built environment and black health outcomes and argues that the problems of the urban “ghetto” constitute an ecological crisis: Spatial concentration and overcrowding, industrial pollution—all affect black psychological and physical health. According to Hare, from a black perspective, the ecological crisis requires a fundamental change in economics as well as a spatial analysis of metropolitan segregation and its environmental and health effects, including air pollution produced by white suburban commuters. Hare concludes that black ecology challenges “the very foundations of American society,” and that “the real solution to the environmental crisis is the decolonization of the black race.”

Together, these insights from scholars and activists offer a critique of the idea of nature in the dominant sustainability movement. They sketch out an alternative notion of sustainability, as it has been long theorized by, and lived through, brown and black lives. Here we focus on the breath and on breathing—that essential act of life that is often constrained or denied to people of color in U.S. cities today. If “breathing spaces” in the United States today are racialized geographies, we believe they are also key sites through which to explore alternative, more just and livable worlds.

Sustainable Urbanism and Air Quality in San Francisco

On December 2, 2015, San Francisco police officers shot and killed twenty-six-year-old Mario Woods in the city’s Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood. Woods was African American, and he was carrying a kitchen knife. His body was ultimately riddled by twenty bullets. The following day, dozens of residents attended a candlelight vigil at the site of Woods’s killing, gathering around a photograph of him and sign reading “Black Lives Matter.” A year before, in 2014, San Francisco police killed Alex Nieto while he was eating dinner on a park bench. Born in San Francisco to Mexican immigrants, Nieto was killed in the once-working-class neighborhood of Bernal Heights, just north of Bayview Hunters Point, where he had grown up. The essayist Rebecca Solnit writes about Nieto in her article, “Death by Gentrification,” in which she details how a white couple, walking in the Bernal Heights park that evening, had called 911 to report Nieto as a suspicious person. Both men in the couple worked in the tech business—an industry that bears much responsibility for San Francisco’s unsustainable housing market, including the wave of evictions currently displacing longtime residents from the city. Today, Nieto’s image joins those of Eric Garner and Michael Brown on a mural in the city’s Mission District, painted to insist that “brown and black lives matter.”

In the context of these gentrification-related police killings and economic displacements, it may seem paradoxical that many of the gentrifying development projects in San Francisco take place through a discourse of sustainable urbanism. A short walk from the site of Woods’s killing is the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, an abandoned military base
and an Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site, currently undergoing redevelopment by the real estate company Lennar. Lennar’s seven hundred-acre project (which includes the site of the former Candlestick Stadium, adjacent to the shipyard) seeks to transform the area into a landscape of expensive townhomes, office buildings, and waterfront parks. The project is advertised through pictures of eco-friendly buildings and green spaces replacing older industrial areas. Design plans for the development have included solar panels, energy-efficient streetlights, native plant landscaping, and a project for monitoring nesting birds. In 2012, it was certified as a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) “Neighborhood Development” by the U.S. Green Building Council. On its website, Lennar advertises its development project as “sustainable living in the twenty-first century,” relying on pictures of bicycles and the phrase, “Explorers welcome.” The image of new home buyers in Bayview Hunters Point as “explorers” recalls the geographer Neil Smith’s foundational writing on gentrification, specifically the centrality of a frontier discourse. As Smith shows, one of the effects of imagining a place as a frontier—as empty and available for settlement—is to erase the histories of a landscape and contemporary opposition to gentrifying development.

The Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood, which surrounds Lennar’s redevelopment project, is a mixed industrial and residential place. Historically one of San Francisco’s black neighborhoods—a legacy of postwar racial segregation—it is also a site of civil rights and environmental justice activism. Today Bayview Hunters Point is racially diverse, a population that is (according to U.S. census categories) predominantly one of African Americans, Asian Pacific Islanders, and Latinos. It is one of the poorest neighborhoods in San Francisco: 18 percent of the population lives at or below the poverty line, while the unemployment rate in Bayview Hunters Point is 14 percent, which is twice the average for San Francisco as a whole. In addition to the naval shipyard, Bayview Hunters Point has housed San Francisco’s heavy and noxious industries since the late nineteenth century and currently contains one-third of the toxic brownfield sites in the city, including underground leaking fuel tanks and the remains of chemical and metals manufacturers. The neighborhood also houses many current hazardous waste producers, the city’s main sewage treatment plant, and a large waste transfer station. Until 2008, an oil-fired power plant operated near the shipyard, sending emissions of nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and volatile organic compounds into the breathing space of several public housing developments nearby. As one woman testified in a letter to the city attorney in 1995, as part of an environmental justice campaign,

The air pollution in Hunter’s Point is so bad I can’t hang my laundry outside. I’ve tried and it gets so filthy that I have to wash it again. . . . I have breast cancer. . . . How many girls who go to school across the street. . . . from me will grow up and become victims of breast cancer because of the filthy air they breathe? If filth sticks to my sheets as they dry in the “fresh” air, think about the filth that adheres to the lungs. I can wash my sheets but I can’t wash my lungs.

Her words speak to a feeling of environmental vulnerability, how the involuntary but necessary act of breathing—of life—renders her vulnerable to premature death. The anthropologist Tim Choy writes about the “many means, practices, experiences, weather events, and economic relations that co-implicate us at different points as ‘breathers.’” Today, Bayview Hunters Point residents also breathe in diesel particulates from nearby freeways, trains, idling trucks, and emissions from the sewage treatment plant and industrial manufacturers. In the 2000s, the asthma hospitalization rate for Bayview Hunters Point residents was four times that of the San Francisco average, which local medical researchers called an “asthma epidemic.” In Bayview Hunters Point, the act of breathing has, historically, been inseparable from histories of racism, urban planning, and industrial and military waste.

In August 2000, an underground fire at the toxic Hunters Point Naval Shipyard added a new complexity to the local atmosphere. The fire, which burned for nearly a month, emanated from the site of the shipyard’s landfills, which contain asbestos, industrial chemicals, and radioactive waste. Residents of the public housing developments reported respiratory problems—the military’s waste constricted their breathing—as they watched the fire’s occasional but eerie, yellow-glow smoke climb into the air near their homes. Based on air-sampling data collected two weeks after the fire, the California Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) concluded that the Bayview
Hunters Point residents would only have experienced (what it calls) “short-term” health effects, such as “burning, itchy or watery eyes and sinuses, headache, nausea, breathing difficulty and asthma-like symptoms.” Against the ATSDR’s conclusion that the fire was an inconsequential event, many Bayview Hunters Point residents connected this experience of physical vulnerability to a long history of environmental racism in the city. The fire and its aftermath rendered the often-invisible relations of breathing visible, as it became an event through which Bayview Hunters Point residents challenged the U.S. Navy’s neglect of the shipyard’s environmental hazards and the ways residents have been left vulnerable to its toxic effects.

The anthropologist Ali Kenner writes that breathing is “typically unnoticed, unconsidered, unseen—an invisible other”—that becomes visible in particular moments or for particular groups of people. Asthmatics, for example, have a sensitivity to air and breathing that is different from those who do not struggle to breathe. Bayview Hunters Point residents have also politicized the local breathing space through protests against the dust and particulate matter produced through Lennar’s work of demolishing old buildings and its new construction activities.

These protests call attention to the exclusions and inequalities constitutive of market-based versions of “sustainability” and raise questions that include: Who is the urban redevelopment project sustainable for? Whose bodies bear the burden of this sustainable development project? Who is imaginatively and physically displaced in the process? Inclusive sustainability practices would begin from an understanding of political economy and histories of racism, and these considerations would be part of the design and development of sustainable projects and policies. Inclusive sustainability would also build from local knowledge and histories of activism in places like Bayview Hunters Point, where generations of activists have fought to make the neighborhood a healthier place for people to live.

“*I Can’t Breathe*”: From Metaphor to Materiality and Back Again

When Eric Garner was murdered by New York City police officers on a “quality-of-life” offense—selling loose cigarettes—by being put in an illegal chokehold, he pleaded thus with the officers: “I can’t breathe.” Garner, who suffered from asthma, repeated “I can’t breathe” eleven times. The violent encounter represented one of the worst instances of the abuse of police power, the only new element being that it was caught on cellphone video and widely disseminated. The mantra “I can’t breathe” became—and remains—a common chant in the Black Lives Matter and anti-police brutality movements. It became a meme, worn on T-shirts by high-profile black athletes (LeBron James and Kobe Bryant), supported by entertainers like Jay-Z and even President Barack Obama. The phrase “I can’t breathe” encapsulates a broader critique of police violence, and it also resonates with an environmental justice and public health standpoint.

Communities of color throughout the United States face elevated exposure to pollution, especially air pollution. This is, in part, an outcome of the history of urban renewal in the United States, through which federal highway policies and the active destruction and forced removal of working-class and black communities (often by highway building, which leads to air pollution) produced a racially structured metropolitan space. According to recent federal health data, African Americans were 20 percent more likely to have asthma than non-Hispanic whites in 2012; African American children had asthma death rates seven times that of non-Hispanic white children. Asthma is a complicated disease and has become a signature environmental health issue for urban communities of color. The disease is shaped by many factors—political, racial, and technological—that are both external and internal to bodies and that can exacerbate existing health and environmental inequalities. Asthma contributes to overall levels of poor health, high stress, and premature death.

Asthma remains a central concern of contemporary urban environmental justice activism and has been a focal point of activism since the 1960s. In New York City, racial disparities saturate occurrences of asthma. Child asthma rates reach 25 percent in some communities of color, four times the citywide average. Low-income women of color in particular are often blamed for these rates, owing to individual prenatal exposures or what is deemed poor housekeeping, which some say leads to asthma. In response, environmental justice activists in New York have pushed back at public rallies and in campaign documents by emphasizing the environmental factors at play in the disease.
critiques, we think about asthma as a specific embodiment of racial and gender inequalities in the United States.68

Breath and the racialized difficulties of breathing are therefore both real in the sense of Eric Garner’s asthma and an effective symbol of neglect. News accounts reported that Garner’s asthma, as he lay on the ground, was ignored by the medical first responders, who thought he was “faking it.” At the same time, prosecutors in the grand jury trial that followed settled on his asthma as one of the main factors in his death.69 In addition to asthma, Garner suffered from hypertension and diabetes, other environmentally related illnesses common in low-income communities of color.

Although the city medical examiner ruled Garner’s death a homicide, the officer who put Garner in the chokehold was not prosecuted. Garner’s asthma, hypertension, diabetes, and obesity were all listed as factors that contributed to his death. We pause here to note that Garner’s body was already vulnerable to police violence, in part, because of these preexisting health and environmental conditions. And yet, although these chronic illnesses were recognized as contributing to his premature death, they were understood as an individual issue rather than a social problem—rather than as an embodiment of race and racial residential segregation in the United States.

Moreover, the physical chokehold on Garner—the direct, overt violence by the police—was not recognized as a factor in his premature death. In a sense, then, the state criminalized Garner’s own body: his chronic illnesses and his socially produced difficulties in breathing became the causes of his death. We find this criminalization of embodiment similar to the ways Michael Brown’s body, in Ferguson, Missouri, was described as a “demon” and like “Hulk Hogan” by the police officer who killed him—racist stereotypes that deprived Brown of his humanity.70 Whereas Brown’s body was too dangerous, Garner’s body was too sick (although the officer also feared him as large and menacing).71

In the renewed attention to police violence in the context of Black Lives Matter, mainstream accounts of air pollution and its differential exposures have refocused attention to this classic environmental justice concern. For example, an article by Max Ehrenfreund in the Washington Post was titled, “The Racial Divide in America Is This Elemental: Blacks and Whites Actually Breathe Different Air.”72 He writes at the end of this piece: “Of all the measures of equality we deserve, the right to feel assured and safe when you draw a breath should be paramount.”73 In this vein, we interpret the phrase “I can’t breathe” as condensing the histories of persistent patterns of pollution and police violence, both of which have denied breath and healthy breathing spaces to low-income communities of color. In this sense, the inability to breathe can be understood as both a metaphor and material reality of racism, which constrains not just life choices and opportunities but also the environmental conditions of life itself.

In “Death by Gentrification,” Rebecca Solnit explicitly ties police killings with gentrification and the increased policing of “quality-of-life crimes” (defined as “disorderly conduct” or “loitering”) and, thus, the fates of Alex Nieto and Eric Garner.74 Gentrification can be fatal. Solnit writes, “Displacement has contributed to deaths, particularly of the elderly. In the two years since Nieto’s death, there have been multiple stories of seniors who died during or immediately after their eviction. . . . It also brings newcomers to neighborhoods with nonwhite populations, sometimes with atrocious consequences. . . . White people sometimes regard ‘people of color who are walking, driving, hanging out, or living in the neighborhood’ as ‘criminal suspects.’”75 “Quality-of-life” policing in a context of economic and spatial inequalities in cities can lead to direct physical violence. Criminalizing minor nuisance crimes (for example, selling “loose” cigarettes) directly leads to the deaths of people of color deemed “dangerous” or “out of place.”

Green gentrification in New York, as in San Francisco, contributes to spatial displacement and growing economic inequalities. In Sunset Park, Brooklyn, real-estate developers took over what was historically known as the Bush Terminal, a group of seven massive buildings on the waterfront that was the iconic site of a Brooklyn industrial development. The developers called it Jamestown and partnered with other investors to buy a controlling interest in the site from the previous owners who had defaulted in the wake of the massive damage from Superstorm Sandy.76 The real estate developers are best known for Chelsea Market, a development in what used to be a dilapidated meat market district of Manhattan but is now an extremely high end residential area. The developers renamed the site “Industry City” and sought to brand the area through artisanal food, “innovation economy” companies, and through
events like large DJ, dance parties. The community group UPROSE, which is fighting Industry City, objects to the developers’ plans on gentrification grounds. UPROSE developed a climate resiliency plan based on local, situated knowledge, grounded in relationships. Social and environmental justice is at the center of their resiliency plan. Their approach to climate adaptation takes capitalism and racial justice seriously and together.

Conclusion

Since the killing of Eric Garner, most news has focused only on the conditions of his death. The poet Ross Gay responds in a different vein in “A Small Needful Fact”:

A SMALL NEEDFUL FACT
Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures.
like being pleasant to touch and smell, like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier
for us to breathe.

As Gay told the PBS NewsHour, “What that poem, I think, is trying to do is to say, there’s this beautiful life, which is both the sorrow and the thing that needs to be loved.” The poem can also be thought of as an assertion of black life in the context of an overwhelming focus on black death. Gay’s poem centers on the freeing of breath (“...making it easier / for us to breathe”) by planting trees, rather than breath’s constriction.

It centers on life rather than death. Garner’s work in horticulture—as a gardener, tending a small plot of the earth—is a small but needful fact because it asks that we understand him not as a criminal or victim (the two roles he is allowed in the current media discourse) but as a complex being who played a role in making the city a more livable place. Writes McKitterick, “This black urban presence—black life—uncover[s] a mode of being human that, while often cast out from official history, is not victimized and dispossessed and wholly alien to the land; rather it redefines the terms of who and what we are vis-a-vis a cosmogony that, while painful ... honors our mutually constitutive and relational versions of humanness.”

We have suggested that black and brown activists and scholars who have theorized and struggled for more livable urban environments can help uncover alternative genealogies and practices of “sustainability.” These alternative genealogies and practices are sorely needed to contest the conventional, market-based notions of sustainability—so amenable to corporate interests, to state surveillance and policing—that have exacerbated social and spatial inequalities, constricting the breathing spaces of already marginalized social groups.

Rather, we have argued that the question of which natures to sustain, and who gets to answer this question, can be asked within the context of the racially segregated U.S. city and the anti-racist social movements and political critiques that have emerged from it. The social movements and critiques we explored in this chapter challenge conventional sustainability by foregrounding race, class, and other relations of power in the task of building better, more livable worlds. They offer a basis for articulating alternative notions of sustainability, oriented not to markets but to valuing and sustaining multiple natures and “versions of humanness.”

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Jenny Cookson and English Language Notes for their allowing us to reprint portions of this article. We also thank Ross Gay for permission to use his poem.

NOTES


15 Traci Brynne Voyles, Wastelanding (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); and Valerie Kuletz, "The Tainted Desert," Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West (New York: Routledge, 1998). Nixon's Slow Violence also elaborates on what he calls "displacement in place" by focusing on the effects of extractive industries on local communities, but this can also describe the wasting of indigenous lands.

16 Gilmore, Golden Gulag, 28.


19 Self, American Babylon; Murch, Living for the City; and Nelson, Body and Soul.

20 Robert Self makes this argument in American Babylon.

21 Quoted in ibid., 211.

22 Ibid., 226.

23 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 4.

24 Ibid.

25 Katherine McKittrick, Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).


28 Italics added. See Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 226.


31 Julie Sze, Fantasy Islands: Chinese Dreams and Ecological Fears in an Age of Climate Crisis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).


34 Ibid., 23.


40 As another example, Julie Guthman has shown how many alternative food practices are “coded as white”—including those that are associated with a “sustainable” lifestyle. In her study of farmer’s markets and community supported agriculture programs in a university setting, Guthman details the cultural politics that work as barriers to non-white students’ sense of inclusion or identification with these alternative food practices. As she puts it, this sociospatial coding “not only works as an exclusionary practice, it also colors the character of food politics more broadly and may thus work against a more transformative politics.” See Julie Guthman, “‘If They Only Knew’: The Unbearable Whiteness of Alternative Food,” in Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability, ed. Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeeman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 263–282, quote at 264.


42 Sandy Brown and Christy Getz, “Farmworker Food Insecurity and the Production of Hunger in California,” In Alkon and Agyeeman, Cultivating Food Justice, 121–146.


45 Ibid., 373.


47 Ibid., 10.

48 Ibid., 11.


50 Ibid., 2.

51 Ibid., 8.


63 Kenner, “Invisibility: Provocation.” Also see Mitman and Rocking, Breathing Space, and The Asthma Files.


68 Krieger, “Embodiment.”


73 Ibid.

Solnit, "Death by Gentrification."


Ibid.

McKitrick, "Plantation Futures," 12.

AFTERWORD

From More than Just Sustainability to a More Just Resilience

DAVID N. PELLOW

SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Julie Sze's Sustainability: Approaches to Environmental Justice and Social Power is a welcome and much needed collection that advances our thinking and material possibilities around sustainability in the twenty-first century. Ideas concerning sustainability gained great prominence in the 1980s and 1990s among scholars, activists, policy makers, and media around the globe as the socioecological crises facing the planet and its denizens came into focus with the publication of the World Commission on Environment and Development's (1987) report Our Common Future and the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Critics have rightly noted the myriad and gaping limitations of the sustainability discourse, including Julian Agyeman (2005), who pointed to what he called the "equity deficit" that persists in the language, theory, and practices associated with sustainability. In response, he and his colleagues coined the term "just sustainability" to address the urgency of social needs, social welfare, and economic opportunity for people within any "ecological" sustainability framework. Specifically, "just sustainability" is defined as "the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems" (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003, 5). While I agree fully with Agyeman and his colleagues and the contributors to this volume that we have much work to do with respect to deepening, grounding, and situating our understanding of sustainability and its possibilities, I am reminded that we can learn from important moments when some of this work was undertaken in the recent past.