

DECLINE AND RECOVERY: CONFRONTING THE CRISIS OF SUBJECTIVITY IN WEST
HARLEM AND THE SOUTH BRONX

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In spring 2007, the Hunts Point Riverside Park opened amidst little official fanfare. “The city did nothing to publicize the opening of the park, so we threw a party,” explained environmental justice activist Majora Carter, former director of Sustainable South Bronx (SSB). Despite a forecast of rain, hundreds of Hunts Point residents enjoyed the Bronx riverfront under sunny skies in the first riverside park built in the Bronx in more than fifty years. A century ago, the Bronx River was “crystal clear and lively,”¹ the social and economic epicenter of the South Bronx’s “industrial spine.”² Today, with the exception of the new park, the riverfront is an impenetrable mass of shuttered warehouses, illegal dumping sites, and operative municipal waste facilities and factories. At the park’s opening celebration, SSB sought to reconnect residents with this forgotten history, bringing about 150 people out onto the river in canoes— a riverfront that many Hunts Point residents did not even know existed before the park planning process.³ About what she was trying to do that day, Carter quoted green developer John Knott: “build them a sense of place and a sense of history.”⁴

The community celebration for the opening of the Hunts Point Riverside Park illustrates the progress toward recovery made in the South Bronx. The deterioration of inner-city neighborhoods, however, remains among the most intractable of problems facing the United

¹ Jonnes, Jill, *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (New York: Fordham UP, 2002), 205

² Gonzalez, Evelyn, *The Bronx* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 118

³ Carter, Majora. 2009. Interviewed by Kevin Rowe. Majora Carter Group offices, Hunts Point, South Bronx, New York City

⁴ Carter

States. In the 1970s and 1980s, the cycle of mutually-reinforcing environmental, economic, social, and political problems that drove urban decay appeared unstoppable. Communities of color in New York City were at the center of the urban crisis at its height, and today places like West Harlem and the South Bronx continue to fight for recovery despite a tide of implacable decline.

This summer I spent time in West Harlem and the South Bronx, thinking about their decline and recent recovery. Here, I delve into their histories, considering some of the broader scale trends in the whole history of New York City and United States but focusing on the period of late modernism in state and city planning. I demonstrate how the obsession with the future and the trend of centralized, rationalized bureaucratic power contributed to urban decay in West Harlem and the South Bronx. More specifically, however, I argue that the modernist orientation contributed to a crisis of spatial subjectivity in these communities—the crisis to which environmental justice and community-based planning organizations began responding in the 1980s. In the final section, I consider these reactions to modernism by two environmental justice organizations, West Harlem Environmental Action and Sustainable South Bronx. Drawing on the themes of difference, experiential knowledge, and self-expression, I will argue that these groups are working to rediscover lost senses of place and time by developing postmodernist narratives of their troubled pasts.

West Harlem and the South Bronx in Decline

On October 5, 1977, President Jimmy Carter helped make the South Bronx America's "symbol of urban decay" when he visited there, walking through the rubble of Charlotte Street.⁵

⁵ Fernandez, Manny. "When Presidents Visited the South Bronx." *New York Times City Room Blog*: <<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/05/when-presidents-visited-the-south-bronx/>>

While Carter drew the nation's attention once again to blight in its cities, it would be long before New York's worst ghettos began recovery. The 1970s was period of transition for city planning and urban policy. Time had expired for future-obsessed late modernism. With the change in urban policy, the likes of Robert Moses, slum clearance, and urban renewal met their demise amidst a growing contempt for centralized government authority. In the decade that followed, the Reagan Revolution and the ascendancy of neo-liberalism would mean "planned shrinkage" of federal funding and services for cities. Juxtaposed in the 1970s, therefore, were these two macro-political orientations, high modernism and neoliberalism. While Carter's visit to the South Bronx suggested that a proactive and powerful federal government might yet save America's cities, the famous *New York Times* headline two years earlier, "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD" foreshadowed the period of neo-liberal urban neglect in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, at ground level decay continued especially in New York City's communities of color. Environmental, economic, and political deterioration arguably reached its height in neighborhoods like the South Bronx and West Harlem around the time of Carter's visit. Violent crime and homicide had been steadily rising since the early 1960s while an epidemic of asthma was evidence of the increasingly polluted urban environment.⁶ Here, I will briefly trace the history of environmental, economic, and political decline in these neighborhoods up to the 1980s, in which successful community efforts toward environmental, economic, and political justice began. The stories of decline in the South Bronx and West Harlem followed similar courses, each ending in what I call a crisis of spatial subjectivity. This crisis was characterized primarily by thinning identification with place, a lost sense of agency, and a lack of collective memory. Its roots are closely tied with the creative destruction of high modernist state and city

⁶ Sze, Julie. *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT UP, 2007), 81

planning, which privileged authoritative, centralized, government action at the expense of continuity, history, and, in many cases, community. While both the South Bronx and West Harlem share this common narrative of decay, their stories contrast in interesting and relevant ways, as well. These contrasts will figure prominently into the next section, “Recovery: New Narratives of a Troubled Past,” but they will not be overlooked here.

The continuity in the histories of the South Bronx and Harlem is not surprising given their shared geographies. The two communities are separated only by the Harlem River, and the Manhattan grid plan simply transposes itself across the river into the Bronx beginning at East 132nd Street. Furthermore, the Bronx and Harlem share several Subway lines, which make rapid transit between them possible without a car. Today the populations of Harlem and the South Bronx are primarily Black and Latino, and these ethnic and cultural identities are a background for many communities in each borough. However, Harlem was a home to Black New Yorkers long before the Bronx.⁷ During the 1910s and 1920s, the Great Migration brought over a million African Americans from the southern United States to northern cities, and a great proportion of the migrants settled in New York City. Harlem, in particular, was the destination of choice for many migrants, and new Black residents from the South helped to make the 1920s a storied age for Black culture—the Harlem Renaissance.

But another migration was beginning as well: Blacks were leaving Manhattan for the outer boroughs, especially the Bronx. In this case, inter-borough migration had perhaps as great an impact on the history of the Bronx as immigration did. Here, we arrive at an important difference between West Harlem and the South Bronx. Whereas Harlem has a history as a Black community dating back to the mid to late 19th century, the South Bronx has only been majority

⁷ Murrasse, David. *Listening to Harlem: Gentrification, Community, and Business* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23

Black and Latino since the mid 20th century. Before the influx of residents of color beginning in the early 20th century, the Bronx was rather affluent and a place to aspire to especially for Jewish and Italian immigrants living in Brooklyn, the Lower East Side and Harlem in Manhattan, and Queens.⁸ The Bronx has often been called New York City's first suburb, as it was a bucolic home or weekend destination for many of Manhattan's most prominent families until the late 19th century.⁹ At the turn of the century the Grand Concourse, the Bronx's main boulevard, was compared to Paris's Champs Élysées for its concentration of art deco architecture.

The tide of disinvestment and deindustrialization that began before the Great Depression and continued well into the 1970s facilitated a remarkable turnover in the character of the South Bronx. By the 1970s, the South Bronx not only had an almost entirely new population, but it also was home to one of the highest poverty rates and one of the highest per capita concentrations of environmental hazards in the country.¹⁰ The significance of this history is that the great majority of residents who now live in the South Bronx have no connection to the Bronx's gilded age. Their parents and grandparents most likely moved to Hunts Point, Mott Haven, or Melrose, neighborhoods in the South Bronx, not because they aspired to prosperity but rather out of necessity. There is, therefore, a tremendous disjuncture in the collective memory of the South Bronx, which I will consider later on.

Decay: Place, Time, and the Crisis of Subjectivity

The tremendous growth of environmental justice and community-based planning organizations over the past 25 years in New York's working class neighborhoods, especially in the South Bronx and Harlem, is in part a reaction to a crisis of spatial subjectivity that developed

⁸ Jonnes, 66

⁹ Jonnes, 11

¹⁰ Carter

during late modernism. Spatial subjectivity is the capacity to identify with, contest the meaning of, and change places—specifically neighborhoods. Spatial subjectivity is both individual and collective. For individuals, it entails a sense of place: to define and be defined by places. In other words, this subjectivity lends itself not only to identifying with a place but also having an aspiration to its betterment, in whatever way. For the community, this subjectivity entails an exchange and contestation of meanings associated with a place. Spatial subjectivity is not expressly political, but it often involves politics. In New York City, it is through neighborhood planning boards that community groups often develop and direct their subjectivity. This subjectivity stands in some kind of dynamic relationship with spatial objectivity: the terrain of the natural and built environment, the demographic, economic, and political make up of the community. Unlike the subjective experience and expression of a sense of place, these conditions are not matters of contestation, debate, or dispute for communities—although their impact and meaning for the community may be. Instead, they reflect forces largely beyond the control of the community unit. Spatial subjectivity and objectivity are by no means mutually exclusive. Rather, it is the interaction between these forces that makes a community a strong and rooted place.

The concept of spatial subjectivity is inexorably time dependent. Both for the individual and the community, the degree to which places become malleable depends upon a grasp of history and an aspiration for the future.¹¹ Thick places, of course, have a strong collective memory, though a no less contestable one. Past and present are in a dialectical relationship for strongly rooted places. They are co-definitional constituent parts of the present. In Martin Heidegger's terms, without the past there is no "on-the-basis-of-which" to imagine a future, and without the future there is no "for-the-sake-of-which" to re-imagine the past.¹²

¹¹ This concept is something that came largely out of my conversation with Majora Carter. But, I need to find some direction from theorists on place and time.

¹² Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell,

To put this in concrete terms: New York City for most of its history has, more so perhaps than any other city in the world, operated at the neighborhood level. This is in part due to its diversity and the presence of discrete ethnic enclaves of immigrant groups, the contrasts among which helped make a city of neighborhoods, each with its own collective identity and sense of place and time—a rough assemblage of common history from the Old World and a common aspiration to upward mobility in the New World. From the early slave rebellions of the 18th century, to the early stages of the American revolution, the settlement house movement and the struggle for workers' rights, the women's suffrage movement, and the civil rights movement, the history of the city is in many ways the history of grassroots and neighborhood social movements. Even Tammany Hall, who for almost 80 years infamously ruled the city, illustrates the power of the neighborhood: Tammany derived its strength from its extensive neighborhood organizations. In short, the neighborhood unit has for most of the city's history exercised agency and subjectivity in defining and changing the place it inhabited.

In any event, beginning in the 1920s, the subjectivity and agency of the neighborhood in New York began to be eclipsed by a series of tectonic, or we might say objective, forces. These forces are numerous, but to name a few: the period of immense growth in infrastructure and transportation that coincided with Robert Moses's near 50-year tenure; the ascendancy of the finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) industry in the 1920s and then again after World War II; the Great Depression; the war economy and the period of rapid deindustrialization that followed; the housing and welfare policies of the New Deal; suburbanization, slum clearance, and urban renewal; and Reagan-era, neo-liberal "planned shrinkage" of funding for cities and a period of neglect of struggling neighborhoods. These are the forces that both coincided with and helped make New York City into the most modern place on earth. During this period, New York

went from a haphazard conglomeration of cities, suburbs, and farmlands to a powerful, centralized city symbolized by the completion of the Rockefeller's World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan in 1971.¹³

Together, these top-down forces defined the period of late modernism in city and state planning and contributed in large part to a crisis of subjectivity in places like West Harlem and the South Bronx. There is a great deal to criticize about late modernism, and I will do my best to articulate a few of these criticisms here, but I do not intend to paint the period as one of utter decline or reckless authoritarianism. In fact, in these years governments at every level began to take seriously the public health and safety concerns of overcrowding in places like the Lower East Side, the plight of many urban poor and elderly with the New Deal, and the working conditions of the country's countless manual laborers. Indeed late modernism was the period in which the state, and not just in the United States, took it upon itself to improve the human condition, and in some cases it did so quite successfully.¹⁴ The difficulty, of course, was that these endeavors in social engineering too often came from the top-down with "disorienting speed, movement, and change, which self-proclaimed modernists found exhilarating and liberating."¹⁵

The expansion of government power by the towering figures of the time, Franklin Roosevelt, Robert Moses, and Lyndon Johnson, was only one manifestation of late modernism. It was not only government; power was also centralized in industry, especially the FIRE industries, as well as in the burgeoning culture industry.¹⁶ The term modernism captures a sense of a broad yet distinct political, cultural, social, and geographical orientation that has roots in as

¹³ *New York: A Documentary Film*. 1999. Produced and directed by Ric Burns. 14 hrs, 30 min. PBS. DVD

¹⁴ Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1998), 92

¹⁵ Scott, 93

¹⁶ See: Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

far back as the 16th century, but began in earnest sometime in the late 19th century and continued until the end of the 1960s. This orientation grew upon the hegemony of “unlimited progress, unchecked development, the privileging of Western scientific notions of objective truth and control of nature.”¹⁷ In short, power was centralized not simply in government or industry, but more broadly this single, totalizing discourse—the rational discourse of the modern West. The macro-forces of late modernism, in this sense, acted objectively upon individuals and communities, wresting control of their subjective experience of past and future.

The result for neighborhoods like the South Bronx and West Harlem was not only a decline in political power. More importantly, it was a deeper loss of spatial subjectivity—a growing inability to identify with, contest, and, most of all, impact the places people inhabited. This whole era was marked by periods of rapid change. In the South Bronx, for instance, the 1910s began a half century of remarkable demographic changes. Before World War II, the South Bronx was two-thirds white. Because of the in-migration of Blacks and Latinos from Harlem and outside the city, white flight, and later the relocation of welfare recipients, the South Bronx is today more than 99 percent Black or Latino.¹⁸ The built environment underwent rapid changes as well. The best examples here are Moses's Tri-Borough Bridge and the Cross-Bronx Expressway, both of which literally split South Bronx neighborhoods in half, destroying some entirely, like East Tremont, and displacing thousands of residents and businesses along the way. Perhaps worst of all was the federal urban renewal program, which, as we know, caused the displacement of thousands while providing ill-conceived "towers in the park" housing for the rest. But the massive construction projects brought destruction as well. In West Harlem, an asthma

¹⁷ Di Chiro, Giovanna. “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice.” *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995): 298-320, 310

¹⁸ “In My Backyard: A Profile of Hunts Point with Recommendations for Realizing Community Members’ Vision for their Neighborhood.” Sustainable South Bronx and Warnke Community Consulting. Feb. 2008: <<http://www.ssbx.org/pdf/Warnke%20Community%20Consulting.pdf>>, 18

epidemic was the side effect of new bus depots and a new sewage treatment plant on the Hudson River.¹⁹ These indirect impacts of municipal infrastructure centralization soon became a focusing point for environmental justice groups around the country.

The worst of modernism hit the South Bronx and disconnected it almost entirely from its past. Evelyn Gonzalez noted in her history of the Bronx that at the worst of its blight, there were no discernable neighborhoods in the South Bronx.²⁰ In other words, the structural changes in terrain, demographics, and economics had flattened out the defining differences among neighborhoods. Part of a subjective experience of the places that people inhabit is a sense of coherence and boundaries, however porous and open to contestation they may be.²¹ The objectivist policies of urban renewal, welfare relocation, and slum clearance literally bulldozed over the particularities that made for communities cohere. The result, as Di Chiro describes it, is “a disabling alienation that breeds hopelessness in local communities.”²² This hopelessness is a lost sense of place and time. Neighborhoods devastated by environmental hazards, crime, drug abuse, and neglect scarcely afford visions of a better past or future. Describing the planning process of the Hunts Point Riverside Park, Majora Carter described this disconnection from place and time as a lost imagination: “[residents of Hunts Point] couldn’t see the park here. They couldn’t imagine a park like this.”²³ The park, which I examine more closely in the next section, replaced an illegal dumping site on the Bronx River.²⁴ Carter explained that so few of her

¹⁹ Sze, 82

²⁰ Gonzalez, 114

²¹ Cannavò, Peter F., *The Working Landscape: Founding, Preservation, and the Politics of Place* (Cambridge: MIT UP, 2007), 23

²² Di Chiro, 314

²³ Carter

²⁴ The City of New York. 19 July 2004. “Mayor Bloomberg breaks ground on \$3.2 million construction of Hunt’s Point Riverside Park: Former illegal dumping site to become waterfront park”
<http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor_press_release&catID=1194&doc_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2004b%2Fpr200-04.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1>

neighbors connected with the history of their neighborhood, and that even fewer could envision a better place. According to a recent report on the state of Hunts Point, "Hunts Point lacks a strong positive identity."²⁵

Once again, the story of West Harlem diverges. Even in the worst of periods of decline, the storied history of Black culture and the Harlem Renaissance survived. David Maurrasse, who has written about gentrification in Northern Manhattan, is not alone in referring to the recent recovery of many Harlem neighborhoods as a "new renaissance"²⁶ However co-opted, this more or less coherent sense of Harlem history has provided a ground for imagining and reimagining Harlem's recovery.

Recovery: New Narratives and a Troubled Past

By the 1970s, New York City had become a colossus of objective forces, imposing a geography of power, within which neighborhoods had little agency. Responding to this crisis of subjectivity, the regeneration of West Harlem the South Bronx has been a process of developing self-expression, power, history, and community. The evidence of this is the tremendous activity of community organizations in Harlem and the Bronx beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing today. Both the environmental justice and community-based planning movements have taken up the mantle of a long legacy of community-based movements in New York City. Political agency and distributive justice are the goals of these movements, but their implications run deeper. The narratives that groups like WE ACT and SSB have developed speak about basic human subjectivity, self-expression, and difference.

These narratives are a rejection of the totalizing modernist discourse of rational progress.

²⁵ "In My Backyard," 10

²⁶ Maurrasse, 31

Instead, they emphasize plurality and difference, experiential knowledge of local particularities, and subjective experience of environmental racism, discrimination, and disempowerment.²⁷ As one SSB document puts it, "this project is distinguished by its bottom-up approach and reliance on community members themselves for the articulation of local needs."²⁸ Fundamentally the narratives of WE ACT and SSB are an assertion of subjectivity against the objectivist excesses of high modernism. The focus in these discourses falls not upon structures of inequality but rather upon localized relationships of power and subjective, even personal experiences. These discourses, therefore, demonstrate not only the movement's reactions against modernist development and power centralization, but also a departure from the Left of modernism. For Marxists and socialists, preeminent among the critical modernist Left, the focal point of criticism was objective macro structures, namely the capitalist means of production. The subjectivist approach of environmental justice groups owes its theoretical grounding in large part to the critical social and political theory of the Frankfurt School and to the theory and politics of second- and third-wave feminism. The influence of and parallel with feminism is especially important. As Di Chiro points out, leaders in the environmental justice community have been, more often than not, female.²⁹ Many environmental justice groups have included sexual and reproductive rights as part of their efforts. WE ACT, for instance, used to operate a program called Diverse Individuals Fighting for Environmental and Reproductive Rights Now 'Til Tomorrow (DIFFERENTT), which "developed the leadership potential of young women of color by empowering them to become trained, outspoken advocates for the clean and healthy environment necessary for good reproductive and overall health."³⁰

²⁷ Scholosberg, David. *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 19

²⁸ "In my backyard," 10

²⁹ Di Chiro, 314

³⁰ Sze, 185

As Carter made clear in my interview with her, “a sense of history” is a critical foundation upon which communities build spatial subjectivity, political empowerment, and ultimately livable, desirable places. Indeed, as I argued in the previous section, past and future are related, even inextricable, parts of a sense of place. In reacting against future-obsessed modernism, environmental justice activists like Carter have recognized the importance of reconnecting with the past. This task has often proved difficult, however, for modernism has all but erased the past in many neighborhoods—both by tearing down its physical remnants and by uprooting communities from their collective memory. Furthermore, the past for environmental justice communities is often quite an embattled one. Even in Harlem, the legacy of slavery and successive eras of discrimination ends not far from where the proud legacy of the Harlem Renaissance begins. And for the primarily Black and Latino residents of the South Bronx today, the pleasant memories of the burgeoning Bronx of the 1910s and 1920s cannot omit the fact that there were as few people of color in the Bronx then as there are white people today. Finally, a conflict remains for environmental justice between a desire to build community by reconnecting with the past and commitment to new postmodernist discourses of difference, plurality, and inclusion. David Schlosberg describes this as the movement’s elusive search for “unity without uniformity.”³¹

The ways in which WE ACT and SSB have dealt with the past differently and the conflicts they have each encountered in doing so illustrates the significance of history and collective memory to the environmental justice movement. Both organizations have developed agency out of the experience of alienation from their own environments,³² successfully planning public spaces to improve community life. In West Harlem, the Harlem Piers Park just opened

³¹ Schlosberg, 92

³² Di Chiro, 318

this past spring on the Hudson River, part of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's aspiration for a single, continuous greenway along Manhattan's westside. In the South Bronx, the Hunts Point Riverside Park, described at the outset of this paper, opened in 2007. WE ACT and SSB each led open planning processes in planning their respective parks, and both faced similar challenges from government, developers, and other antagonists. The most instructive differences between the two planning processes concerns the particular histories of West Harlem and the South Bronx and each organizations effort to confront or reconnect to its past.

In West Harlem, the proud history of black culture has been a source of aspiration for a "new renaissance." Community organizations like WE ACT have been active in West Harlem since the mid-1980s. Fighting for environmental justice for over 20 years, WE ACT has developed an established place in the community and even more broadly in the Harlem and Manhattan power structures. Like Carter was to SSB, Executive Director Peggy Shepherd has gained a great deal of recognition for her leadership of WE ACT's successful campaigns against environmental racism.³³ Encouraging community involvement in the planning process of the Harlem Piers Park was little trouble for WE ACT. Hundreds of West Harlem residents attended community meetings, visioning sessions, and even design workshops in 1999 before the community approved the plan in a final meeting.

The real challenge for WE ACT in the process was a broader fight against appropriation of their narrative history by developers and gentrification, as the struggle over the Harlem Piers demonstrates. "Anchor of the community in the early 1900s,"³⁴ the Harlem Piers serviced ferry and rail transit between West 131st and 133rd on the Hudson riverfront. Until the 1930s, when

³³ "Harlem on the River: Making a Community Vision Real." West Harlem Environmental Action. 2004. <<http://www.weact.org/Portals/7/Harlem%20on%20the%20River-Making%20a%20Community%20Vision%20Real.pdf>>

³⁴ "Harlem on the River: Making a Community Vision Real," 6

ferry and rail services were redirected, the area surrounding the piers was a hub of recreational and business activity.³⁵ As for much of the rest of West Harlem, big changes were afoot for the piers already by the outset of the Great Depression. In 1937, Robert Moses's Henry Hudson Parkway opened along Manhattan's westside, cutting off the piers from the rest of West Harlem. Around the same time, slum clearance and urban renewal had quietly begun in Harlem, and many residents were forced out of their homes near the now-empty piers.³⁶ This was a history that many residents of the Manhattanville neighborhood, where the piers are located, were not familiar with, even though many of their grandparents and great-grandparents were likely employed by or around the piers. Nonetheless the piers' history formed a central part of the community visioning process for the park in 1999, in which community members committed "to preserve and promote the architectural and historic character of the area."³⁷

First, however, the community had to fight earlier proposals for the piers by real estate developers. From the 1970s to the 1990s, a series of proposals by developers sought to completely redevelop the piers area to resemble the Chelsea Piers development between West 17th and 22nd streets on the Hudson. These "grand scale vision[s]" included hotels, sports, recreation, and entertainment facilities, and sizable market-rate housing units, but ultimately failed in large part due to lack of funding and community opposition.³⁸ Many community members recognized these gentrification efforts as yet another attempt to appropriate or co-opt the cultural history and resources of Harlem.³⁹ Unlike the South Bronx, West Harlem has experienced a growing push toward gentrification during its recovery, and despite opposition from community groups, market-rate housing developments are becoming increasingly common

³⁵ "Harlem on the River: Making a Community Vision Real," 6

³⁶ Gonzalez, 111

³⁷ "Harlem on the River: Making a Community Vision Real," 26

³⁸ "Harlem on the River: Making a Community Vision Real," 11

³⁹ Murrasse, 118

throughout Harlem. Today Harlem faces a growing tension between noxious land uses, of which many remain, and gentrification.⁴⁰ As investment drives clean-up efforts, Harlem residents are increasingly faced with a trade-off: cleaner, safer streets but the prospect of displacement or preserved low-income housing but a continued struggle with environmental hazards.

Largely disconnected from the better times of the Bronx's history, reappropriating the past has been particularly difficult for SSB. The South Bronx has largely avoided gentrification pressure thus far. One of the reasons for this is location: while Harlem is only minutes from Midtown Manhattan and growing financial centers in Jersey City and Brooklyn, the South Bronx is removed from the city's most prized financial and cultural resources. In the South Bronx, however, there is no lack of history, picturesque architecture, or waterfront property—three things on which gentrification has thrived in other parts of the city. What the communities of the South Bronx seem to lack is a tangible connection to any of these things, the commodity goods of gentrification. The hopeful story of the Hunts Point Riverside Park celebration in 2007 suggests the real possibility of a reimagined Bronx history, but the planning process for the park left Carter less optimistic. While the park was planned jointly by community organizations, SSB, The Point Community Development Corporation, and the Bronx River Alliance, resident participation in the process was almost non-existent. Carter described the planning process as “bizarre,” and she explained that the community meetings that SSB organized for the park visioning session were poorly attended.⁴¹ The lack of participation is evidence of the alienation and hopelessness that still looms large over Hunts Point and the South Bronx. Finding the good in more than a half century of decline remains a central challenge for SSB.

Places like the Hunts Point Riverside Park, Carter argued, are what the community needs

⁴⁰ Angotti, Tom. 2009. Interviewed by Kevin Rowe. Hunter College, New York City; Angotti, Tom, *New York For Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT UP, 2007)

⁴¹ Carter

to begin building a proud new history. The environmental justice movement, for her, is fundamentally about “self-respect.”⁴² The theme is repeated in SSB’s mission statement: “Sustainable South Bronx seeks to inspire area residents to demonstrate their own strength and vision by helping to create a more livable, breathable, and vibrant community from the grassroots level up.”⁴³ Like WE ACT, SSB sees public green space as a site for place and history making, in which subjectivity, self-expression, and difference can thrive.

Recovery for West Harlem and the South Bronx is a goal yet unrealized. In both places, environmental justice and community-based planning activists are fighting to answer the questions “recovery of what?” Doing so has forced WE ACT and SSB to confront the best and worst in their neighborhood histories. Their stories both tell of remarkable success in penetrating the cycle of urban decay. Both communities, however, continue to face the pressures of poverty, environmental hazards, crime, and disinvestment—pressures likely renewed by the new economic crisis. Nonetheless these stories offer hope and possibility for breaking through the crises of subjectivity not unique to the inner city.

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⁴² Carter

⁴³ “Sustainable South Bronx Fabrication Lab.” Sustainable South Bronx: <<http://ssbxfab.org/about/>>

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