

Environmental Justice In Northern Manhattan: Furthering the Quest for Beloved Community

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In describing the goals of his newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. wrote that “the ultimate aim of SCLC is to foster and create the ‘beloved community’ in America, where brotherhood is a reality.” Dr. King’s vision of ‘beloved community’ is one that evolved over the years from this focus on integration and the peaceful co-existence of individuals of all races to a broadly defined concept of universal community, rooted in the principles of love and justice. This vision was expressed in his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.” By 1968 this vision had expanded to a holistic vision of healthy communities, free from poverty and exploitation.

Let us be dissatisfied until rat-infested, vermin-filled slums will be a thing of a dark past and every family will have a decent sanitary house in which to live. Let us be dissatisfied until the empty stomachs of Mississippi are filled and the idle industries of Appalachia are revitalized. . . . Let us be dissatisfied until our brothers of the Third World of Asia, Africa and Latin America will no longer be the victims of imperialist exploitation, but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy and disease [“Honoring Dr. Du Bois,” in *Freedomways*, VIII, s (Spring 1968), pp. 110-111. Quoted in: Martin Luther King’s Vision of the Beloved Community By Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr. *The Christian Century* (3 April 1974)].

It is this vision of a beloved community that fuels struggles for environmental justice across the country and around the world. Although in many ways the environmental justice movement is one that has been defined by its challenges – the struggle to

eliminate the disproportionate burden of environmental exposures and degradation faced by communities of color and low-income – at its heart, environmental justice is about the creation and sustenance of healthy, economically vibrant and sustainable communities; communities where the bright sun of love and justice eliminates the lingering environmental shadows left by a history of segregation, redlining, and xenophobia.

Since 1988, WE ACT for Environmental Justice has worked to fulfill the vision of environmental justice, a realization of racial justice with community and environmental health. Rooted in community struggles of the late 1980's against the noxious operations of the North River sewage treatment facility in West Harlem, WE ACT builds community power to fight environmental racism and improve environmental health, protection, and policy.

The 1954 Montgomery Bus Boycott revealed the critical role that public transportation plays in promoting or oppressing racial equality, and today public transportation continues to thwart many of the goals of racial justice. WE ACT's longest running campaign, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) Accountability project, seeks to remedy the unfair burden of health and economic risks created by the placement and expansion of six diesel-fueled city bus depots in the communities of color in Northern Manhattan. This campaign has peaked at various points over the years, including the filing of a Title VI civil rights administrative complaint with the United States Department of Transportation. After years of investigation and attempts at negotiation, the US DOT ultimately acknowledged the communities cause for concern, while declining to find actual civil rights violation. More importantly, the complaint put a history of decisions by the MTA to systematically build or expand diesel bus depots in communities of color in the racial injustice perspective that was otherwise unacknowledged by the politically powerful. In 2004 WE ACT and community residents near several of the uptown diesel bus depots entered into negotiations with the MTA and in 2005 arrived at a draft letter of agreement to be signed by the agency. This letter spells out a landmark agreement by MTA to regularly meet with community residents and businesses near each of its six uptown bus depots, and to prioritize the communities of Northern Manhattan for housing the cleanest and newest buses incorporated into its fleet. Importantly, the agency has

also agreed to rebuild the oldest and most decrepit bus depot using green building principles and technology to minimize the energy and noise impact of the facility.

Housing was another bread and butter issue of the civil rights movement. Yet nearly forty years after the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed, people of color continue to live disproportionately in poor quality housing. Faced with a growing body of evidence that all-too-common urban housing conditions – leaks and poor ventilation that contribute to mold growth, cracks and holes that allow pest populations to thrive, peeling lead paint, and well-intentioned overuse of highly toxic pesticides inside the home – can cause severe health problems, in 2004 WE ACT launched our Healthy Homes campaign. Our Healthy Homes campaign is demonstrating the connection between poor quality housing and poor health, particularly in communities of color, and organizing and empowering community residents to win healthier housing through systematic change, from the individual home and building level through broader changes in policy and practice. Community leaders in the campaign have identified both mold and poor waste management practices that contribute to pest populations as key issues of concern in local neighborhoods.

Moving beyond housing and transportation, the conditions of the places we work in and our ability to earn a wage that our families can prosper on is another crucial factor determining the health and vibrancy of communities. Yet in too many low-income communities and communities of color across the nation, many are forced to make unacceptable choices between working in a job that doesn't pay a living wage and harms their health or being unemployed or consistently underemployed. What is often trumpeted as a resurgence of economic development turns out to be just more environmentally intensive, pollution-generating retail, industrial, or academic activities that in fact do little to generate real wealth for local residents, and do much to generate even more environmental health risks to already burdened communities. Sadly, in what we now know were the last days of Dr King's life he would go to Memphis, Tennessee and connect the Civil Rights struggle to economic justice for those working to keep our environment clean, sanitation workers. "It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey", but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preachers must talk about the New York, the

new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. We begin the process of building a greater economic base,” Dr. King noted in his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech of April 1968. WE ACT, like a growing number of organizations engaged in environmental justice campaign, continues this process by incorporating health and sustainability criteria into local economic development. Our development of a Health and Urban Environment Guide sets out specific environmental and health standards and criteria for new economic development projects along the 125th street corridor -- the heartline of Harlem.

Beloved communities have beloved spaces, places and institutions where the bonds of friendship and neighborhood are forged, where the rituals and customs of a group of people are developed, challenged, and transformed and transmitted, and where the lines of respect and communication that connect different histories are strengthened. Without beloved spaces communities cease to be communities and become nothing more than shared residences, overlapping lives with no meaningful connection. With the goal of restoring some of the beloved spaces of Harlem in Northern Manhattan, WE ACT has worked since 1997 to help bring a waterfront park to West Harlem, rebuilding the valuable social and recreational space that were once embodied in three piers at the western end of 125th street. Following the city’s fall 2005 groundbreaking on this waterfront park, the product of a community visioning session led by WE ACT and the local community board for the area in 1999, we have shifted our focus to the creation of a Harlem Waterfront Council, which will act as the custodian, in concert with the community, of the park working to manage, maintain and program the park. Upon its anticipated 2007 completion, the park will stand as a testament to the ability of a community to realize (as in, make real) its visions for healthier and beloved local land uses.

Dr. King focused on the creation of the ‘beloved community’ in America, but today we recognize that the world and its people are interconnected, interdependent and mutually vulnerable and as a result the notion of working for the ‘beloved community’ cannot end at the borders of the “United States of America”. Indeed those of us who work on

environmental health and protection from an environmental justice perspective recognize that our ecosystems don't recognize national borders and that the pollution that plagues people of color and low-income communities doesn't stop for border patrols and Minute Men. The Rio Grande flows from Texas into Mexico, the air that is polluted by diesel trucks crossing the Peace Bridge in Buffalo impacts communities in Canada and in 2005 we witnessed how the temperature of the waters in the Caribbean can produce hurricanes that destroy small communities in Florida or one of our nation's largest cities, the land of jambalaya and jazz, New Orleans.

On December 10th, 2004, forty years after Dr. Martin Luther King's acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, Wangari Maathai stood behind the same podium in Oslo, Norway, and accepted the same prize. In awarding the prize to an environmentalist, the prize committee clearly recognized the links between environmental integrity, community health, and world peace. Dr. King's legacy and vision of creating a 'beloved community' resonated loudly in Maathai's work. In 1977, she launched the Green Belt Movement where for almost three decades she has inspired poor women to become stewards of the environment through the simple yet revolutionary act of planting trees. Dr. Maathai saw a direct connection between deforestation and soil erosion and the failures of her native Kenya's one party state. Her work is remarkable for its ability to bridge the divide between environmentalism, feminism, democratization, and human and civil rights advocacy. The Green Belt Movement worked at the grassroots level to train communities about environment, nutrition, family planning, and how to fight corruption that limited the possibilities of the Kenyan people. Like the Civil Rights Movement the Green Belt Movement confronted power nonviolently. But most importantly the Green Belt Movement has thrust into the world's eye the idea that peace cannot be attained while we allow the degradation and/or the destruction of our environment.

In her Nobel Lecture, Dr. Maathai exhorted us all to recognize "there can be no peace without equitable development; there can be no development without sustainable management of the environment in a democratic and peaceful space. This shift is an idea whose time has come." In her book, *The Green Belt Movement*, Dr. Maathai urged "Those of us who understand the complex concept of the environment have the burden to act. We must not tire, we must not give up, we must persist." We concur and WE ACT. The 'beloved community' is within our grasp but we still have much work to do. So

as we celebrate the 20th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day we at WE ACT are inspired by the legacy of Dr. King and the ongoing work of Dr. Maathai and we rededicate ourselves to work for the realization of that day where justice, love, strong environmental policies and empowered communities are the foundation for the 'beloved community' in New York, the new Washington, D.C., the New Orleans, the New Delhi, the new Nairobi and other 'beloved communities'.