
Contents

Introduction by Kara Murphy Schlichting, Queens College CUNY 2
Comments by Hannah Knox, University College London 4
Comments by Steven H. Corey, Columbia College Chicago 9
Comments by Steven T. Moga, Smith College 11
Response by Melissa Checker, CUNY Graduate Center 14
About the Contributors 19
Introduction by Kara Murphy Schlichting, Queens College CUNY

In the twenty-first century, New York City developers, particularly multinational real estate investors, have discovered the value of “green” development. Political ecology posits that there is a relationship between political, economic, and social factors on the one hand and environmental issues on the other. The idea of nature-as-amenity positions environment as a tool of capital creation. Yet as Melissa Checker shows in *The Sustainability Myth: Environmental Gentrification and the Politics of Justice*, there are environmental and social costs to green development and sustainability, too. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, Checker studies environmental justice activists who pointed out sustainability’s false promises and environmental gentrification’s contradictions in two New York City case studies. On Staten Island’s North Shore, dense with toxic sites, Checker explores “the underside of sustainable initiatives and their unseen effects on non-gentrifying neighborhoods” (205). In Harlem, she charts the long history of how “greening” urban spaces can increase property values, invite gentrification, increase tensions among community groups, and raise the specter of displacement.

This interdisciplinary roundtable, which unites scholarly perspectives from anthropology, planning, and history, digs into the contradictions inherent to using the concept of sustainability as an engine of wealth. Anthropologist Hannah Knox opens the conversation. Knox reflects on Checker’s efforts to capture the irreconcilability of New York City leaders’ devotion to development with frank assessments of the environmental challenges that the city will face in the future. “Green gentrification in one place,” Knox points out, “inevitably means that waste processing, industrial manufacturing, and energy industries are located to a forgettable elsewhere.” *The Sustainability Myth* highlights how the environmental fortunes of New York City neighborhoods have long diverged. Generalized support for sustainability drives can miss how the benefits of “green” projects are unevenly distributed and how environmental risks and harms remain elsewhere.

Hannah Knox and historian Steven H. Corey both reflect on Checker’s coining of the term “sustainaphrenia” to study the idea of sustainability (Checker defines the term as the contradictory politics that sustainability “creates both within and between urban neighborhoods” (15)). Green capitalism and environmental crises are often mutually reinforcing; thus, urban sustainability cannot be both a path to economic growth and a way to mitigate climate change since those goals are often contradictory. Returning to sustainaphrenia, Corey asks Checker how public officials and community organizers respond to the term, and how they positioned themselves in traditions of environmental activism more generally. Did environmental justice activists appreciate or critique the paradox at the heart of sustainaphrenia? Corey also commends Checker’s social justice framework. *The Sustainability Myth* pays close attention to how community activists organized around environmental concerns, at times in opposition to government and at other moments in opposition to private
sector projects. Corey asks Checker to expand on the ways in which local politicians responded to both types of activism.

In the third roundtable reply, urban planner and professor of landscape studies Steven T. Moga highlights that Checker’s careful ethnographic observation of community activism grounds her case studies in compelling details. He identifies Checker’s attention to public participation in environmental planning processes as a key contribution of The Sustainability Myth. Moga also reflects on the benefits and limitations of using both sustainability and gentrification as organizing concepts given the overuse of both. Checker is successful, he writes, when she follows environmental justice work, and related critiques of environmental policy and planning, “beyond the usual gentrification debates.” Moga returns the roundtable to Checker’s focus on the ways in which sustainability for specific sites, such as shiny, new, waterfront LEED apartment buildings, does not translate to sustainable development for the whole city.

In her reply, Checker offers insight into how she came to this research and how she settled on the term “sustainaphrenia.” She writes of the benefits and challenges of coining a term, and an analytical concept, to explore sustainability politics and environmental justice. To answer the many questions Corey, Knox, and Moga raise, Checker reflects on the tensions inherent in “green” development that claims to address both top-down planning and bottom-up civic engagement. As she does in The Sustainability Myth, Checker considers how environmental gentrification and “the sustainable rubrics under which it operated” hamper environmental justice activism. Sustainability plans might advance private economic interests, but they can also have significant, unresolved consequences for both urban residents and the climate. The Sustainability Myth, and this roundtable, forces us to recognize the hidden costs—and contradictions—of New York City’s ambitious sustainability agenda and aggressive redevelopment plans. Checker also highlights the valiant efforts of local environmental justice activists who work across racial, economic, and political divides to challenge sustainability’s false promises and create truly viable communities.

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, H-Environment Roundtable Reviews is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate widely.
At many moments when I was reading Melissa Checker’s *The Sustainability Myth*, I found myself thinking back to an event I attended a few years ago in Manchester, UK - another post-industrial city grappling with the sustainability myth. The event was at the Mayor’s Green Summit, an annual city-wide celebration of all things green and sustainable where politicians, bureaucrats, business-people, activists, academics and voluntary organisations had come together to take stock of Greater Manchester’s progress on sustainability metrics, and find out about the various things that people were doing to make the city greener and more carbon-neutral. To open the conference, a presentation was given by a climate scientist from Manchester University which established what the city-region needed to be doing to effectively tackle climate change, what its commitments were currently, and whether they were fulfilling them. The message was stark and concerning. The city’s ‘ambitious targets’ to reduce carbon emissions were nowhere near ambitious enough - not fast enough nor extensive enough to delimit catastrophic climate change. The city-region was being urged by ‘the science’ to do more, work harder and be more ambitious in their involvement in tackling climate change. This set the tone for a conference where many would share their frustrations and their attempts to extend, challenge or reformulate methods of sustainable development. And yet, at the end of the day, a strange thing happened. Everyone was ushered back into the room for a final upbeat plenary. Now, up on the stage, in place of the climate scientists with their projections of climate breakdown and their pleas for urban climate action, stood international footballer Gary Neville. Launching an anti-plastics initiative, he excitedly shared with the audience the news that his chain of restaurants were now committed to only using paper straws.

I was not the only one taken aback by this disorienting descent from global climate breakdown to paper straws. There were raised eyebrows among those I was sitting near and one of the people I spoke to afterwards described a feeling of cognitive dissonance as they were asked to hold two images of what it meant to think about environmental breakdown in their mind at the same time. An online review of the event also pointed out that Gary Neville was not only owner of a restaurant chain, but also a properly developer responsible for two controversial development plans, one which would build on a much-cherished urban wild-space at the edge of the city. Whilst the apparent contradiction of a property developer supporting sustainability initiatives is one way the event resonated with Checker’s book, it was the disorientation felt by the activists and others in the audience that I kept recalling in the context of Checker’s account of the sustainability myth and her coining of the phrase ‘sustainaphrenia’ to describe the contradictions of capitalism and green growth.

When I first encountered Checker’s concept of sustainaphrenia, and in particular her engagement with Gregory Bateson’s concept of the double bind, it immediately seemed to provide a language to describe the frustration and anxiety generated by
the irreconcilability of growth-based capitalism and a commitment to ecological relationality that caused people in my own fieldwork to feel like they were living in a madness of sorts. This feeling of disorientation, or cognitive dissonance, or living in two worlds at once is a familiar one for those engaged with attempts to tackle climate change. This sense of madness is not just an internal experience but one which is also externally attributed to those who are seen to be overly concerned about environmental issues, such as the UK members of parliament, interviewed by Rebecca Willis who described their fear that they would be seen as ‘zealots or crazy’ if they raised climate change as a legitimate concern.¹

However on closer reading it seems this is not actually what Checker means by sustainaphrenia. Rather for Checker, sustainaphrenia is proposed as a concept that offers an explanation for why it is that sustainability as an ambition seems not to resolve but to reproduce the environmentally and social destructive ends that sustainability practice often ends up producing. Drawing on the work of Gregory Bateson, Jaques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Checker explains that:

the term ‘sustainaphrenia’ describes the inherently contradictory promise of urban sustainability: That we can stimulate economic growth while mitigating the effects of climate change without any sacrifice. Importantly, sustainaphrenia spills over into politics at the grassroots level. It includes the paradoxes facing environmental justice activists who fight for healthier neighbourhoods that are also affordable. It also includes forms of civic engagement that invoke public participation only to ignore it (7).

*The Sustainability Myth* is a book then, that at is heart seeks to explore “the ruptured logics of pairing sustainability with urban redevelopment” (6). Structured into two parts, the book delves deep into the entangled history of economic development, urban regeneration, environmental improvement and toxicity in New York City, to tell a fascinating story of how current initiatives to develop green and sustainable cities are just the latest incarnation of long running struggles over how to reconcile the city as an economically productive entity and the inevitable environmental effects of this development urge. The first part of the book focuses on three types of environmental gentrification: the green gentrification of Harlem which entailed the creation of urban parks and green spaces, raising property values and changing the demographics of the area; the industrial gentrification of Manhattan, Staten Island and Brooklyn, where heavy industry was replaced over time by small scale manufacturing; and finally the process of ‘brown-gentrification’ whereby private developers have become key agents in the remaking and repurposing of former industrial sites for leisure and housing. My brief summary massively oversimplifies Checker’s account of a complex and tangled story in which plans and practicalities at a local level entwine with global imaginaries, the emergence of financial industries and the constant presence of environmental activism that seeks to remind city

¹ Rebecca Willis, *Too Hot to Handle. The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020).
developers of the need for livable and healthy urban space. The second half of the book moves to look more closely at practices of environmental activists who, working within this history and politics of urban zoning, struggle to find ways to make their voices and concerns heard. In Chapter 5 Checker takes us into the halls of various public consultation events to illustrate the failures of public participation, retelling an old story of the fallacy of participation and the role it plays in sustaining the myth of democratic engagement in building sustainable and inclusive futures. Chapter 6 in turn recounts the emergence of new coalitions of citizens that cross racial and class divides as people struggle to articulate their needs in the face of destructive storms, rising seas, and the ongoing presence of waste and toxicity leaching in and near people’s neighbourhoods.

Reading Checker’s account of green gentrification in New York, I gained a powerful sense of the policy-logics which deal with sustainability by partitioning spaces, practices and sites up into zones of cleanliness and waste, industry and commerce, global finance and local community. It is made very clear in Checker’s account that the demand to make cities like New York City greener and more sustainable requires working with and through the already established logics of planning and zoning, continuing processes of gentrification and exclusion that urban scholars have long written about. Checker’s work is centred squarely within a critical tradition, which seeks to give voice to those communities marginalised by sustainability work, emphasising that her “research showed that the more these solutions stimulated economic growth the more they extended environmental problems and sacrificed the health, safety and livelihoods of communities of colour and people living in low-income neighbourhoods (7).

And yet, whilst Checker is clearly concerned to highlight the exclusionary and socially divisive material politics of sustainability, her ethnography also shows how simple oppositions between gentrifiers and gentrified, developers and conservationists do not do justice to the tactics, the coalitions, the interests and the struggles out of which contemporary cities are been forged. Paradoxes run through the book - from the green activists of Harlem whose community gardens stimulated a gentrification process that eventually undermined the very communities they were meant to support; to the activists who wished that they had never applied for a freedom of information request to the Environmental Protection Agency, as it ended up breaking relationships of trust with a grant awarding body that would otherwise have been helpful to their cause. These paradoxes are characterised as sustainaphrenia, in which “capitalistic quick fixes for environmental crises only lead to more extensive and more destructive crises that generate new opportunities for quick fixes and so on” (26). However, whilst Checker is interested in how these quick fixes marginalise and exclude communities of colour and people living in low-income neighbourhoods, her account also shows that these sustainability fixes are actually affecting all the residents of New York. Hurricane Sandy’s impact was not only felt by low-income residents, but as Checker herself explains, brought a wide range of concerned citizens together to campaign for new ways of thinking about urban space. Sometimes this led me to feel that the analytical emphasis on how sustainability impacts on low-income
neighbourhoods felt a bit forced. On the one hand I wanted to see more evidence of how low-income communities were specifically impacted by these policies. There was potential here for a more conventional kind of ethnographic description of chemical exposure, toxic harm or living in blasted landscapes that could have lent weight to the argument that low-income communities were disproportionately affected by sustainability in specific and visceral ways. On the other hand, I wondered whether the evidence provided demanded in fact a more expansive theorisation of the complex, surprising and extensive effects of sustainability on practically all of the residents of New York.

That said, the insistence of attending to the effects of sustainable development on those left out of the glossy brochures celebrating a clean green future city was compelling and lead me to wonder about the effects of green property development, and urban renewal that lie beyond the boundaries of New York City. One of the strengths of *The Sustainability Myth* is the way that the city is explored as an interconnected set of sites whose fortunes as distinct areas are shown to be closely tied to one another. Green gentrification in one place inevitably means that waste processing, industrial manufacturing, and energy industries are located to a forgettable elsewhere. How this happens within the boundaries of the city is a story that is very clearly told. But as Checker’s opening vignette about the supposedly green cleaning products with ambivalent provenance that were on show at an eco-entrepreneurship event in Harlem shows, the tendrils of New York’s sustainable development reach far beyond the boundaries of the city. Here I am reminded of William Cronon’s famous study of Chicago and the way the city emerged out of extensive ecological relations with the surrounding land, or even Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler’s recent socio-ecological analysis of the extensive relations that sustain the Amazon Echo. What, I wondered, does the sustainability myth tell us not only about the relationship between different neighbourhoods within a city, but also about the way that the sustainable development of a global metropolis like New York depends on resources and waste processing which takes place far beyond the municipal boundaries? Whilst outside the scope of this book, it would be a fascinating project to follow some of these connections to other kinds of places and communities entangled in New York’s green gentrification.

I learnt a lot from reading this book and it left me with many new questions to ask about the site where I have been studying urban sustainable development in the UK. I am now fascinated to find out more about whether British cities like Manchester, deployed similar zoning policies to those used in New York. I want to understand how decisions about the siting of industrial power plants and waste processing facilities were made; to understand more about the historical chemical residues from mining and industry and how and if they are mapped and managed and dealt with today, and to think about how these processes map onto the social geography of a city with its own idiosyncratic ethnic and socio-economic geographies. But in addition to all of this I want to think more with the concept of sustainaphrenia.
Citing Bateson, Checker explains how he developed the notion of the ‘double-bind’ to explain how children raised on multiple, contradictory logics within family settings develop a range of psychological dysfunctions, including schizophrenia. Schizophrenia in this argument, is one outcome or effect of living with fundamental and irresolvable contradictions. Putting aside the question of whether this psychoanalytic understanding of schizophrenia is correct, the point that living with contradictory logics is a way of describing the modern condition is an intriguing one. At the same time, people working in sustainability talk of win-win situations, of turning ecosystems into markets through ecosystem services, of sustainable buildings, electric cars, bio-fuels and carbon offsets. Here the contradictions are downplayed, as the logic of capital is re-established as paradigmatically dominant and the environment recast as just another good. But if we want to get out of this situation and create the conditions for alternative points of view to be possible, maybe we need a bit more madness. Maybe then, sustainaphrenia could offer a glimmer of hope, rather than be simply cause for despair.
Melissa Checker has written an important book. As an urban environmental scholar, I find her use of social justice as a lens to examine what is, and is not, meant by sustainability in American cities compelling. I am drawn to the term “sustainaphrenia” to describe the inherently contradictory promise of urban sustainability to stimulate economic growth and mitigate the impact of climate change. It encapsulates a wide-range of attitudes on what it means to use the rhetoric of environmentalism to reconfigure urban space at the expense of those without access to social and economic privilege, particularly those in lower-income and BIPOC communities. Placing social justice at the center of conversations on environmental justice and sustainability, recasts and challenges lauded notions on the efficacy of public policies that proponent to enact ecologically progressive agendas that result in little, if any, positive outcomes for people living in areas targeted for transition. Checker’s emphasis on how community activists define environmental concerns and form coalitions to oppose government and private sector projects that threaten their quality of life makes the book valuable for students in a range of disciplines and program levels. However, despite these strengths, I do find a noticeable gap between Checker’s deft analysis of the challenges and obstacles facing neighborhood activists for social justice and the process of municipal planning and policy implementation. Government actions seem almost exclusively top down, even monolithic in terms of decision making, with little discussion of local politics in terms of what plays out in the public discourse (mainstream and social media in particularly) and resulting modifications to controversial projects due to public criticism. In other words, there is little sense that the adage of all politics being local holds any sway in New York City.

After reading The Sustainability Myth, and in the spirit of the roundtable format, I have three central questions to offer Checker.

Urban development has long been a flashpoint for a range of controversies in New York City, often with locally elected politicians joining in with their constituents against City Hall. As such, how responsive were local elected officials, as well as community-based civic and business organizations, to environmental concerns within their own electoral districts? Beyond the extraordinary example of Staten Island Republicans lining up behind their borough president, mayor, state legislators, and governor to close Fresh Kills landfill, were there other examples of locally elected officials (especially city council members) and even members of Community Boards and civic groups who lobbied the mayor, city commissioners, and agency administrators to address the concerns of community activists (even if the result left activists feeling betrayed and abandoned)?

As an historian, I am curious how environmental justice/community organizers drew from activists before them, no matter what the specific concern or political context. I appreciate the book’s broad overview of and the links between Harlem’s Black Power Movement in the 1960s and the Young Lords’ Garbage Offensive in 1969, community organizing against gentrification, and the national environmental justice movement.
How informed were the activists you interviewed and got to know by these and other earlier movements? In other words, what history worked to inform and/or inspire their environmental justice activists?

How have scholars, public officials, and activists themselves responded to your use of the term “sustainaphrenia” to describes the series of double binds—such as advocating for healthier neighborhoods which in turn become unaffordable or government officials encouraging and then ignoring citizen engagement—that exposed the inherent contradictions of urban sustainability? I particularly enjoy the use of this term and positioning of environmental and social justice at the center of assessing what is meant by sustainability. However, would activists themselves see the term as apt to describe their own understandings and experiences with their specific environmental concern?
Melissa Checker’s *The Sustainability Myth* focuses on the politics of environmental activism in New York City, particularly Staten Island, from 2001 to 2019. As a participant observer Checker attended dozens of public meetings, strategy sessions, and community gatherings across the borough, but especially in the neighborhoods of the North Shore. The protagonist of this narrative, and the heart of the book, is environmental justice advocate Beryl Thurman, the indefatigable leader of the North Shore Waterfront Conservancy. Checker weaves stories of Thurman’s experiences working with elected officials, government employees, consultants, community members, lawyers, and many other people and organizations throughout the book. She describes battles to clean up contaminated industrial land, combat flooding problems and coastal erosion, address air pollution, oppose harmful new development, improve transit, and build a better community. Readers learn about a remarkable series of land use conflicts and landscape changes in Staten Island over the approximately 18 year long period of the author’s study, including the failed proposal for a mega-sized ferris wheel, the redevelopment of the Fresh Kills Landfill into a park, the destruction of coastal communities caused by Superstorm Sandy, the reconstruction of the Bayonne Bridge to accommodate super-sized container ships, and the phenomenon of self-storage businesses locating in toxic floodplains. This book is an excellent and rare ethnography of environmental planning processes.

Checker sets these richly detailed examples within the framework of an overarching argument about sustainability as “discursive cover” for profit making through real estate development that typically neglects, and sometimes harms, the collective interest (206). Public and non-profit institutions, she argues, including government agencies, foundations, and universities are often complicit. The inability of people in these organizations to see beyond their own institutional objectives causes more work and needless distractions for environmental justice activists seeking positive change in their own neighborhoods, she contends. These are critical and significant observations about policy and planning. From Checker’s vantage point, rooted in close observation of community activism in North Shore neighborhoods, the use of the word sustainability is a ruse. False promises and bogus rhetoric accompany the failure to address the toxic legacies of the industrial city in working class communities of color. Inaction and inattention characterize the governmental response to urgent environmental problems.

In the author’s view, sustainability has become, in New York City at least, a delusion, an expression of profoundly disordered thinking in our public discourse about urban development and environmental justice in the 2010s. Checker therefore suggests that our current era is best described as one beset by “sustainaphrenia,” introducing the term to describe “the inherently contradictory promise of urban sustainability” in the book’s introduction and using it throughout the book (7). While the point is a sharp
one, perhaps usefully intended to provoke academic argument, the goofiness of the term unfortunately detracts from the book’s overall message.

As I read it, the book’s most effective critique of contemporary sustainability politics in New York City is grounded in an analysis of patterns of spatial distribution at the urban scale. That is, it directs attention away from the generalized claims that certain “green” projects are good for the whole city and looks at how the benefits and amenities of urban life (like well-designed and well-maintained parks) and urban environmental risks and harms (like exposure to toxins) are unevenly distributed. The location and regulation of industrial land uses, past and present, receive particular attention from North Shore activists and the author. Questions of distance and proximity, how near or how far, run throughout the book: How close is too close to a dangerously polluted site? How close is too close to an eroding shoreline? How close is too close to long lines of idling trucks and their poisonous emissions? By bringing in questions of distribution across the city’s entire territory, Checker pushes us to consider how far is too far, conceptually and materially, from a polluted site, a vulnerable shoreline, or congested truck traffic? In other words, what use is a general rhetorical commitment to sustainability at the city scale when fundamental problems are hidden (to most, but not all, city residents) by virtue of location in specific neighborhoods, bounded and separated from the rest of the city.

Checker structures her discussion of patterns of spatial distribution, using parallel phrasing in the titles of the first three chapters, around the contention that there are three identifiable types of “environmental gentrification”: green, industrial, and brown. The adoption of gentrification as an organizing concept is problematic because, like sustainability, its overuse has rendered it largely ineffective as a critique and watered it down as a descriptor of urban landscape change over time. Gentrification as a term is inadequate to the task of analytical description of spatial distribution of industrial, commercial, and residential land uses across the scale of the city. Gentrification theory typically, and too often, directs us towards the scale of the building, the block, and the neighborhood, and population change over time within that defined space. Not to mention that many New Yorkers and other urban observers still incorrectly consider gentrification to be a good thing, an inevitable phenomenon, or the natural result of investment in urban property. Checker’s close attention to the details of environmental justice work and critique of environmental policy and planning extends well beyond the usual gentrification debates. At issue here are the structural forces and material processes that shape patterns of urban spatial organization in a capitalist democracy.

A few things are missing from the book that would be useful for readers. First, it would be helpful to have a map of Staten Island that shows neighborhood names with boundaries. Many neighborhood names and specific geographic features such as the Kill van Kull and the Bayonne Bridge are referenced in the text but do not appear in maps. Second, additional text description and a map of the spatial extent of the Port of New York and New Jersey, including major shipping lanes and truck traffic routes,
would provide greater geographic context for understanding the North Shore's surroundings.

The real strength of *The Sustainability Myth* is in one of its prominent secondary themes: the meaning of public participation in environmental planning processes and the challenges community advocates face when navigating these systems.

Checker makes excellent points about what planning looks like from the perspective of an activist. Indeed, it is relatively rare and, I would argue, uniquely valuable to bring ethnographic insight to the workings of organizational processes from multiple different agencies at city, state, and federal levels related to a specific set of issues (environmental justice) in a community (the North Shore). It is striking in reading this book how fragmented the planning process is, and, simultaneously, how difficult it is to address problems affecting whole communities in a comprehensive manner. I got the familiar sense that most of the opportunities for input or comment were narrowly framed according to legal constraints, organizational objectives, and/or bureaucratic processes. Often, it seems, this narrowness is in service to highly specialized or siloed policy functions or pragmatic concerns about completing a specific set of tasks. I wonder how the agency staff, department representatives, consultants, and facilitators would describe these same meetings. And I wonder how they would respond to seeing the process as described from the participants’ point of view.

These stories about community meetings and public workshops brought to mind many of my own experiences as a VISTA volunteer, resident services coordinator, urban planning student, preservation planning consultant, and field services representative. They also brought to mind two classics in the planning field: Sherry Arnstein’s “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” (1969) and Paul Davidoff’s “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning” (1965). Questions of power, expertise, local knowledge, insider versus outsider politics, values, and ethics are central to planning theory. Checker’s descriptions of the “budget games” hosted by the New York City Economic Development Corporation and the process of selecting a consultant to assist a neighborhood organization involved in New York State’s Brownfield Opportunity Area program in chapter 4 were fascinating and they should be of special interest to planning scholars. Unfortunately, as these examples make clear, the problems with public participation identified by Arnstein and Davidoff remain with us more than a half century later.

---

Response by Melissa Checker, Queens College CUNY

I begin with an enormous thank you to Kara Murphy Schlichting for honoring me with an invitation to participate in this scholarly conversation. I am also grateful to the three reviewers for their insightful and incisive comments, and for sharing some of their personal experiences. Each review prodded me to think more deeply, and more broadly, about *The Sustainability Myth: Environmental Gentrification and the Politics of Justice*. Here, I focus mainly on reviewers’ overlapping questions and concerns. I start with the key question driving my research. Next, I address my use of “sustainaphrenia” and then respond to consolidated reviewer questions.

In 2008, when I began the research for this book, sustainability had just become a ubiquitous concept in U.S. urban planning. In New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg had just released the city’s first sustainability plan, for which popular media outlets dubbed him “the world’s greenest mayor.” Based on my previous research with grassroots environmental justice activists, I knew that the term had been an organizing principle for nearly a decade. In this activist context, sustainability centered on environmental equity for present and future generations. To what extent, I wondered, would this vision of sustainability intersect with the public and private initiatives that were so rapidly changing New York City’s urban landscape?

To answer this question, I spent nearly ten years conducting participant observation, interviews, archival and secondary research with environmental justice activists in Harlem and on Staten Island’s North Shore. This approach allowed me to take both a contextual and an intimate look at how sustainable development was understood and contested in everyday life.

1. Sustainaphrenia

All three reviewers commented on “sustainaphrenia,” a term coined for this project (see below). Their mixed reactions mirror those of my audience. Some readers find the term potentially insulting, “goofy” (Moga), vague, too difficult to say aloud, or gimmicky. Some take the opportunity to voice their complaints about term coinage in general. Others enjoy the term (Corey) or find it useful to think with (Knox). To me, sustainaphrenia is most of these things.

What I hope it is not, however, is an offensive appropriation of “schizophrenia,” the grave and often devastating mental disorder. I do not mean to make light of, or minimize, the seriousness of this condition. Instead, I meant sustainaphrenia to be a resonant and provocative analytical concept that works on several levels.

It originated on a wintery afternoon in 2013 over coffee with my friend and colleague, sociologist Steven Steinberg. In between sips, we discussed the seemingly limitless number of “green” office and apartment towers sprouting up around New York City,
especially along its waterfronts. Regardless of their green roofs, energy-monitoring systems, electric vehicle charging stations, etc., we noted that these (almost ubiquitously) glass-fronted structures defied the very definition of sustainability, as we understood it. First, constructing these buildings use considerable natural resources. Second, that construction generates substantial air pollution and waste. Third, new buildings—and their inhabitants—tax the city’s aging infrastructure, exacerbating the risks associated with climate change. For example, heavy rains caused sewer back-ups, street floods and massive discharges into New York’s waterbodies. Building-based flood protections often displaced flood waters onto nearby properties, and all that glass traps heat (which is why some architects and engineers have called for bans on buildings that use excessive amounts of glass and steel and cities like New York and London now require that new buildings adhere to energy efficiency standards).³

As we discussed this and other sustainability-related paradoxes, Steve chuckled, “it’s like sustainaphrenia.” For Steve and me, as well as two of the reviewers, the term evokes both external and internal circumstances. Externally, it describes “the inherently contradictory promise of urban sustainability to stimulate economic growth and mitigate the impact of climate change” (Corey). Internally, this term captures what Hannah Knox describes as “the frustration and anxiety generated by the irreconcilability of growth-based capitalism and a commitment to ecological relationality.” As Knox also points out, this internalized dissonance caused “people in my own fieldwork to feel like they were living in a madness of sorts.” Indeed, the activists I worked with knew that feeling of “madness” all too well.

Some activists won years-long battles for environmental improvements in their neighborhoods, only to find that those same improvements accompanied a wave of high-end, “sustainable” development. In other cases, I watched as activists spent countless hours voicing their concerns at public meetings, providing input into planning documents, and sitting on steering committees, only to be completely ignored. This kind of civic engagement theater was, in activists’ words, “crazy-making.” But when they complained, they were written off as unstable, shrill or uncooperative (Knox). The scope of sustainaphrenia thus appeared to extend to those community-level political arenas where sustainable initiatives were promoted, presented, and debated (however futilely).

On a theoretical level, “sustainaphrenia” describes a Batesonian “double-bind,” whereby capitalistic solutions intensify, rather than solve, environmental problems.⁴

---


In addition, the concept provided me with possible insights into the allure of green consumerism and sustainable development, and the denial of their fairly obvious contradictions. On a psychological level, consumer-based approaches to sustainability provide a familiar way to channel desire and offer a salve for mounting anxieties about impending climate crisis.

As my fieldwork continued over the years, I also recognized faint traces of political philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of the schizophrenic. According to Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism imposes order on society by structuring social categories, norms and codes, as well as wants and desires. The behaviors and thoughts of the schizophrenic, or schizo, however, refuse external logics and defy convention. While this unboundedness liberates schizophrenics’ desires from capitalism’s grasp, it also subverts and threatens the status quo. As a result, “schizophrenics” are ostracized, if not institutionalized.

Deleuze and Guattari’s perspective on schizophrenics loosely reminded me of a trend I noticed among certain long-term environmental justice activists. Frustrated and exhausted by continually confronting the contradictions of sustainability and participatory planning, I noticed that some activists were saying “no” to requests to participate in superficial forms of civic engagement, or to jump through the byzantine hoops required by their funders. They also became more outspoken about the mental, emotional, and financial price they were paying in order to engage in these frustrating politics.

While such refusals can be seen as heresy, for Deleuze and Guattari, they are the stuff of revolution. Even more importantly, they believe that this revolutionary potential lies within every person. As Hannah Knox suggests, “Maybe we need a bit more madness.”

2. Questions

Knox asks how sustainability affected low-income communities, which tells me that I did not paint a clear enough picture of Staten Island’s North Shore, where I conducted

---


8 Deleuze and Guattari’s version of schizophrenia has captured the imagination of the right as well as the left. In recent years, some online communities have spawned a host of memes, hashtags, videos, and discussions valorizing those who stand outside the mainstream and espousing racist, homophobic, misogynistic, or radical leftist ideas.
most of my fieldwork. Comprised of 15 small neighborhoods, the North Shore is considered one of New York City’s fastest growing immigrant neighborhoods, with exceptionally large communities from Liberia and Sri Lanka, as well as Mexico and Central America. Because the area attracts a fair number of undocumented immigrants, it is difficult to get an accurate snapshot of its income levels. According to the 2020 Census, approximately 17% of people lived below the poverty line, a rate that was 20% higher than that of New York City overall. 48% of North Shore residents identified as Black or Hispanic, 37% as White and 10% as Asian.9

At every public meeting I attended with North Shore residents, they recited long lists of the environmental affronts they faced on a daily basis. In Port Richmond, beginning at 4 a.m., large diesel trucks idled on narrow residential streets as they waited for the port to open. They ran their refrigerators and sometimes turned around in neighbors’ driveways. For several years during the raising of the Bayonne Bridge, thick layers of dust covered the cars and homes of Elm Park residents, and they were relocated to hotels during all-night blasting sessions. Fears about flooding, and the toxins that it might distribute, haunted everyone. As I argue in the book, sustainability did not mitigate these harms. Rather, as neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan gentrified, it seemed that more industrial facilities were permitted for the North Shore.

Corey and Moga ask questions that are both contradictory and complementary. On one hand, Corey questions whether my depiction of the “monolithic” and “top-down” planning process is over-stated. What kinds of negotiations and modifications ensued from activists’ opposition to these projects? “How responsive were local, elected officials, as well as community-based civic and business organizations, to environmental concerns within their own electoral districts?” he asks. On the other hand, Moga takes the constraints of the planning process at face value, confirming his own, similar experiences in a variety of civic engagement contexts. As Moga also points out, back in the 1960s, Arnstein and Davidoff identified many of the same weaknesses in participatory planning. At the same time, both Moga and Corey want to know more about the perspectives of “agency staff, department representatives, consultants, and facilitators... And I wonder how they would respond to seeing the process as described from the participants' point of view” (Moga).

To Moga’s point, it is true that elected officials (from both sides of the aisle) occasionally supported the positions of environmental justice activists. Some attempted to limit building variances or require that a new project hire a certain number of local workers. In most cases, however, local elected’s favored all forms of economic development, and community board positions tended to fall in line. As

---

much as I wish it were not the case, the gap between politicians’ rhetoric about sustainability rarely translated into practical support for environmental justice activists’ goals.

While I have not collected data from elected officials, agency staff, department representatives or consultants, I do frequently run into representatives from these groups at public talks and certain academic panels and lectures. Inevitably, I steel myself for criticism and critique, but it does not come. If anything, agency staffers appear to be as disillusioned by the participatory process as activists and I are. Hopefully, these mutual frustrations (and experiences of dissonance) will some day provide the common ground necessary to effect real change.
About the Contributors

Melissa Checker is a Professor of Anthropology and Environmental Psychology at the CUNY Graduate Center and Urban Studies at Queens College. Her work examines whether urban sustainability policies and practices support – or circumscribe -- the goals of grassroots environmental justice activists, and how the uneven distribution of environmental improvements across today’s cities reproduces racial inequities. In addition, she explores how environmental justice activists build coalitions across political, cultural and racial divides, and how they sustain their activism over long periods of time. She is the author of the book discussed here as well as Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town (NYU Press, 2005). She co-edited, with Cindi Isenhour and Gary McDonough, Sustainability in the Global City: Myth and Practice (Cambridge, 2013) and with Maggie Fishman, Local Actions: Cultural Activism, Power and Public Life (Columbia 2004).

Steven H. Corey is Professor of History and Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Columbia College Chicago. He previously served as Professor and Chair of the Department of Urban Studies at Worcester State University in Massachusetts after completing his PhD in History from New York University. He is co-author with Elizabeth Fee of Garbage! The History of Politics and Trash in New York City (New York Public Library, 1994); with Lisa Krissoff Boehm of America’s Urban History (Routledge, 2015); co-editor with Krissoff Boehm of The American Urban Reader: History and Theory (Routledge, 2011, 2nd ed., 2020); and Carl Zimring of Coastal Metropolis: Environmental Histories of Modern New York City (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021).

Hannah Knox is Professor of Anthropology at University College London. Her work explores the relationship between technology, environment and the state with a particular interest in communications and data infrastructures. Her books include: Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise; Ethnography for Data Saturated World; Digital Anthropology and her most recent monograph, Thinking like a Climate: Governing a City in Times of Environmental Change.

Steven T. Moga is an urban planner and scholar of the built environment. His research examines the history of cities and city planning in the United States, particularly questions about how Americans have described the built environment and city life, framed urban problems, and proposed visions for the future city. He is the author of Urban Lowlands: A History of Neighborhoods, Poverty, and Planning, published in the series Historical Studies of Urban America by the University of Chicago Press in 2020. He is chair of the Landscape Studies Program at Smith College where he teaches courses on urban landscapes, photography as method, cultural landscapes and historic preservation, and urban ecological design. His approach to research and teaching is deeply informed by his extensive experience in local communities as a VISTA volunteer, resident services coordinator, preservation
planner, and field services representative, and his service on non-profit boards in Massachusetts, Minnesota, and California.

Kara Murphy Schlichting is Associate Professor of History at Queens College, City University of New York. Her work in late-19th and 20th-century American history sits at the intersection of urban and environmental history. She is the author of New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Copyright © 2022 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Environment, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online.