Greensplaining environmental justice: A narrative of race, ethnicity, and justice in urban greenspace development

Mariela Fernandez a,*, Brandon Harris b, and Jeff Rose c

aClemson University; bUniversity of Arizona; cUniversity of Utah

ABSTRACT
While urban greenspaces play an important role in shaping the cultural and social dimensions of cities, these spaces are also inherently political, often serving to perpetuate the exclusion and subordination of racially marginalized populations. Drawing upon critical race theory, the purpose of this research is to use narratives to highlight how race, structural racism, White privilege, and power continue to shape environmental injustices in the urban landscape. By sharing these stories, we illustrate how (a) environmental injustices stemming from structural and overt racism are often positioned as ordinary experiences, (b) the racialized state continues to foster environmental injustices in Latinx communities, and (c) how techniques of what we refer to as “greensplaining” are deployed by environmentalists and conservationists as further justification for White privilege, racialized marginalization, and processes of gentrification.

Introduction
While urban greenspaces (UGS) play a vital role in shaping a city’s cultural and social dimensions (Ellis & Schwartz, 2016; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2014), these are inherently political spaces (Walker, 2009; Zimmer et al., 2017), serving to perpetuate the exclusion and subordination of racially marginalized populations (Byrne, 2012; McCammack, 2017; Ravenscroft & Markwell, 2000). When examining an urban landscape, subordination and exclusion can be seen through the “monopolization of space” by the powerful and the “relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments” (Sibley, 1995, p. ix). Indeed, much of the environmental justice research focused on U.S. communities highlights how racially marginalized communities have been more likely to live in or near toxic landscapes, with limited quantity of, and access to, clean and desirable open spaces (Mizutani, 2018; Pastor et al., 2001), while non-Hispanic Whites live in neighborhoods near parks with better quality amenities and maintenance (Rigolon, 2016, 2017). The environmental justice literature has expanded, yet it continues to show how racially marginalized groups are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity (Williams, 2005), limited transportation options (Bullard et al., 2004), and even the negative impacts and aftermath of natural disasters (Sze, 2006).

Although the environmental justice literature is diverse, here we leverage the works of various scholars (Kurtz, 2009; Schlosberg, 2001; Walker, 2009; Young, 1990) when we argue...
that this stream of research needs to go beyond demonstrating the “proximity and socio-spatial patterning” of injustices (Walker, 2009). Rather, we contend that studies that focus solely on the socio-spatial patterns may obscure injustices (Walker, 2009), and the environmental justice framing should also consider the processes that shape injustices (Walker, 2009; Young, 1990). According to Young (1990), the injustices affecting marginalized groups are outcomes of “social structures, cultural beliefs, and institutional contexts” (as cited in Schlosberg, 2001, p. 3), and often these structures serve to oppress groups by not recognizing their differences and by excluding them from the political processes that shape their communities (Walker, 2009). To further expand the environmental justice frame to recognize some of these processes, Kurtz (2009) recommended the use of critical race theory (CRT) to explicitly acknowledge how race, structural racism, and White privilege have been central in reproducing injustices.

Our purpose is to utilize critical race theory to offer novel insights for contemporary environmental justice research. The use of CRT allows us to highlight how race, structural racism, White privilege, and power continue to shape environmental injustices in the urban landscape. This is fitting in the case of the U.S., where the system of racism has historically been used to oppressed racially marginalized groups, and it has also been used to determine which groups have access to resources (Omi & Winant, 1986; Takaki, 2008), including environmental amenities. Following CRT, we present a narrative inspired by research conducted in two Latinx1 neighborhoods in Chicago. By developing and analyzing the account, we illustrate how (a) environmental injustices stemming from structural and overt racism are often positioned as ordinary experiences, (b) the racialized state continues to foster environmental injustices in Latinx communities, and (c) how techniques of what we refer to as “greensplaining” are deployed by environmentalists and conservationists as further justification for White privilege, racialized marginalization, and processes of gentrification.

We begin with a discussion on environmental justice literature pertaining to urban Latinx communities. Next, we outline the tenets of CRT and discuss its importance to environmental justice research. After presenting the method we used to develop our narrative, we engage with the account to analyze the practices taking place. We conclude by situating our research within CRT and demonstrating how city officials and planners use greensplaining in racially marginalized communities to highlight the benefits of UGS while simultaneously dismissing and suppressing the residents’ concerns.

Environmental justice

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA; United States Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 2018) defines environmental justice as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (para. 1). Environmental justice can be broken down into four separate dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice (Low, 2013, 2016), and recognition justice (Holfild, 2012; Whyte, 2011). The relationship between greenspace and distributive justice is based on equitable access for all residents (Holfild, 2001; Low, 2016; Walker, 2009; Whyte, 2011). Early environmental justice research mostly focused on the disproportionate placement of toxic landscapes and sites near racially marginalized
communities (Bullard, 1983; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1983). More recently, the environmental justice literature has focused on the disproportionate placement of non-Hispanic White communities near environmental benefits (e.g., parks, urban greenways; Boone et al., 2009; Byrne, 2007; Caputo, 2014; Frumkin, 2005; Rigolon, 2016, 2017; Sister et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2007; Wolch et al., 2005).

Various scholars have argued that issues of environmental justice should not be reduced to questions of distribution (Schlosberg, 2001; Walker, 2009; Young, 1990). Rather, researchers should also examine the processes that lead to the disproportionate distribution of environmental amenities. According to Young (1990), distributive injustices were direct outcomes of “social structures, cultural beliefs, and institutional contexts” that have kept certain groups dominated and oppressed (as cited in Schlosberg, 2001, p. 3). When groups are oppressed, they are often excluded from political processes, which is a violation of procedural justice.

Procedural justice refers to the notion that communities are given an adequate and fair say in policies and procedures directly associated with planning, integration, and trajectory (Low, 2013; Whyte, 2011). In the neoliberal climate of many urban areas, policy makers often team with private investors to develop new greenspaces without consulting racially marginalized communities or considering equity issues, such as residential displacement or community gentrification (Gould & Lewis, 2016; Rigolon & Németh, 2018). Given that park development and distribution has become highly dependent on private funding, policy decisions, including those that spur gentrification, often favor affluent, White residents because of their profitability in the marketplace (Caputo, 2014). This is a direct violation of procedural justice practices, as it suppresses/eliminates voices within a community.

Interactional justice is founded on the principle that individuals should perceive greenspaces as welcoming environments where they can recreate and engage with others in a manner that is reasonably safe, respectful, equal, and just. Researchers have also shed light on the discrimination and violence that racially marginalized residents are exposed to when visiting greenspaces that are mostly frequented or territorialized by non-Hispanic Whites (Blahana & Black, 1993; Fernandez & Witt, 2013; McCammack, 2017). Simply put, interactional justice describes a condition in which marginalized populations experience latent and overt forms of discrimination and exclusion while visiting greenspaces.

The fourth dimension (recognition justice) is the most underdeveloped (Coolsaet & Neron, 2021). With roots in “Hegelian ethics, critical theory, and post- and decolonial studies” (Coolsaet & Neron, 2021, p. 52), recognition justice is enabled when institutions, policies, and programs are able to fully understand and respect the “cultures, values, and situations of all affected parties” (Holifield, 2012; Schlosberg, 2001; Whyte, 2011, p. 199). Recognizing and respecting these differences goes beyond examining the cultural differences of groups, rather it requires a deeper understanding of environmental injustices as outcomes of groups’ historical and ongoing challenges with colonization, limited political clout, and general subordinate position in society (Whyte, 2011).

Until groups and their unique histories and values are recognized, distributive, procedural, and interactional justice will not be possible. For example, when analyzing institutions, policies, and programs, researchers should investigate whether these promote the environmental heritage of the dominant group, and should reflect on how these might impact racially marginalized groups (Whyte, 2011). Regarding distributive justice, Walker (2009) made the claim that terms such as greenspace should be interrogated and contested.
He argued that greenspace is often posited as a “good thing,” yet this fails to account for how marginalized groups value, experience, interact with, and are impacted by greenspaces.

Although environmental justice research has discussed issues of harassment and exclusion within the context of park spaces (Harris et al., 2019), more work is needed to critically assess how UGS produce and reproduce environmental privileges for White, affluent residents while perpetuating the marginalization of “the Other” (Pellow, 2017). Aligning with the idea of environmental racism, which is defined as any “policy, practice, or directive that differentially affect or disadvantages (whether intended or not) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color” (Bullard, 1993, p.23; also see Pulido, 1996, 2000; United Church of Christ. Commission for Racial Justice, 1987), we use the term green-splaining to refer to techniques used to exclude, silence, and/or dismiss concerns levied by racially marginalized groups regarding sustainable urban infrastructure placed in their communities.

**Critical race theory**

In expanding understandings of environmental justice, CRT was used to guide this study. According to Matsuda (1991), CRT developed from progressive legal scholars who aimed to “account for the role of racism in American law and [who] work[ed] toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination” (p. 1331). Since then, CRT has been used as a viable lens in other disciplinary fields (Glover, 2007; Ladson-Billing & Tate, 2006).

CRT has several tenets, including that racism is an ordinary and pervasive fixture of society “governing all political, economic and social domains” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27), and that racism is so ingrained in society that it often remains unacknowledged and unquestioned (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). According to Solorzano et al. (2000), society generally does not endorse blatant forms of racism, instead, “it is in the subtle and covert ways that racism manifests itself” (p. 61). Various scholars have noted how non-Hispanic Whites have power, privileges, and prestige in the U.S. in comparison to other groups, such as African Americans and Latinx (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Kahn et al., 2009). Non-Hispanic Whites’ power, privileges, and prestige have translated into disproportionate political influence, economic opportunity, and resource access (American Sociological Association, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2006; Fulbright-Anderson et al. 2005; Massey, 2007; McDonald, 2009; McIntosh, 1998; Omi & Winant, 1986). Exacerbating the racialized privileges assumed by non-Hispanic Whites has been the population’s proclivity in actively resisting the attempts of racially marginalized groups to change the status quo or passively benefit from shifts in the racial order that would afford them similar privileges (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). When policies and practices are introduced to provide racially marginalized groups more power or access to resources, these policies and practices are often implemented “to the extent that they [are] not seen (or exacted) as a major disruption to a ‘normal’ way of life for the majority of Whites” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 28).

CRT also acknowledges that many policies and practices are “colorblind” and claim to be implemented equally across groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Given that legislation such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination, racially marginalized groups are often held personally responsible for not attaining social mobility, as discrimination is perceived to no longer be a problem (Lipsitz, 1999).
Racially marginalized groups who do not achieve social mobility are often blamed for their own victimization, regardless of institutional and structural constraints that may impede such mobility (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Hankins et al., 2012).

Furthermore, CRT considers race as socially constructed (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Parker & Lynn, 2002), dependent on various political, social, and economic factors (Abizadeh, 2001; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cornell & Hartmann, 2006; Inwood & Yarbrough, 2010; Nash, 2003). Finally, CRT often relies on the use of storytelling and counterstories to demonstrate how racism continues to operate (Parker & Lynn, 2002, 10); in these stories, various underrepresented perspectives are often brought to light, and are sometimes juxtaposed against each other.

**Method**

**Narrative development**

Following other CRT exemplars (Harper, 2009; Martinez, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), we crafted our narrative based on examining theoretical concepts and humanizing empirical data. The final narrative is a series of composite stories, represented through various characters, that incorporates direct quotes from 13 Latinx and five White residents of Chicago’s Humboldt Park and 21 Latinx residents of Little Village, as well as historical documents, newspaper articles, social media posts. The authors’ research was used during and in post hoc development of the composite stories to complete a coherent discourse. Justification for the creation of composite stories can be found in the work of Solórzano and Yosso (2002), Harper (2009), and Solórzano and Yosso (2002); they explained that narratives and counternarratives of marginalized groups can be constructed in three ways—personal stories, other people’s stories, and composite stories. Given the amount of empirical data stemming from the authors’ previous research, the use of composite stories provided the most effective way to create and communicate a narrative salient to the experiences of our participants. As shown by Harper (2009), composite stories are effective in “representing the often disregarded experiences of a larger group through a smaller subset of ‘characters’ who represent the group” (p. 702).

Although the experiences presented in this narrative are salient to the lived experiences of the participants involved in the aforementioned communities, the challenges experienced by those residents transcend these settings and provide an increased understanding of environmental injustices through the lens of the oppressed (hooks, 1994). In reading the narrative, the reader should not focus solely on the words presented, but their coherence, arrangement, and most importantly, meaning (Fisher, 1998; Glover, 2007). For this reason, we have chosen not to highlight direct quotes from participants that exist in the body of the narrative, fearing that doing so may disrupt the harmony of the discourse, distracting readers from the greater context and meaning presented. However, some of the quotes appear in previous works (citations to be inserted after the peer-review process).
Character context

Aligning with the CRT tenet of storytelling, we developed a narrative based on the observations and interactions of three main characters: Michael, Alejandra, and Conner. Michael is a White researcher examining influences of urban greenways on Latinx communities. Michael’s latest research project centers on an urban greenway that traverses a Latinx neighborhood in his hometown of Chicago. Michael wants to understand how the greenway may be helping to foster interactions between non-Hispanic White newcomers and Latinx residents, stimulating the local economy, and benefiting Latinx residents’ recreational endeavors. In the narrative, Michael shares his field notes with his personal reflections, observations, and excerpts from interviews conducted. Alejandra is one of Michael’s study participants. She is a Puerto Rican woman, a mother of two young boys, and a local business owner who has lived in the neighborhood her whole life. Connor, as described in the narrative, is a middle-aged White male whose landscape architecture firm has been hired by the city to plan, design, build, and implement the new greenspace. Other minor characters are introduced in the community meeting, and they represent the non-Hispanic White newcomers.

Trustworthiness

Similar to Moss (2004), we view the construction of critical narratives as part science, part art (also see Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). As a science, the data informing our story followed trustworthiness procedures for qualitative data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rose & Johnson, 2020). These procedures being member-checks, peer reviews and debriefings, and journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Recognizing that the narratives that comprise our story should reflect participants’ experiences, several steps were taken to establish trustworthiness. First, all interviews and field notes associated with the established characters were reviewed and discussed prior to narrative construction. This process allowed us to discuss and develop a composite character framework based on empirical evidence and individual experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The narrative culminates in a community meeting, where the concerns and objections brought forth by Alejandra are suppressed by those in power using a hegemonic political narrative disguised as endemic knowledge of green spaces (i.e., greensplaining). Prior environmental justice research has shown that while community forums are seen as best practices in fostering a dialogue between officials and local community residents, they often reinforce racialized power hierarchies (Rigolon et al., 2020).

As an art, we strived to construct a narrative that offers readers a series of voices that serve to highlight the complexities of UGS. In oscillating between the voices of the dominate and those of the oppressed, we seek to challenge readers to critically examine how power hierarchies and claimed expertise are used as weapons of authority to minimize the knowledge and experiences of a Latinx resident during community forums. While the characters of Alejandra and Michael were constructed based on empirical data, the character of Conner is based on a composite of the authors’ common observations working in Latinx communities (Moss, 2004).
Authors as political actors

According to Moss (2004), writers of critical stories must reflect on their experiences as political actors, and this reflection must also be acknowledged so readers can determine how the writers’ experiences may have shaped the story. It should be noted that the lead author of this project identifies as Latina. She began her research in Little Village with the intent to examine how the nonprofit sector could advance environmental justice in a Latinx community. When presenting some of the findings, the audiences, mostly those identifying as non-Hispanic Whites, appeared to understand the blatant forms of discrimination and racism that affected this community. Yet, when discussing the subtle forms of discrimination and racism that often remain unacknowledged because they were so ordinary and mundane, the audiences often had trouble accepting these as acts of racism. In other segments of her life (e.g., place of employment, friendships), the first author noticed that individuals were able to label blatant acts as racist, but the subtle forms were often explained away.

The first author decided that storytelling would be a good avenue to present the findings from this particular research study as it would contrast the various perspectives/realities of those in a community meeting, and it would also help readers examine how racism can be hiding in the mundane tasks of everyday life. To help craft the story, the first author realized that she felt comfortable writing the parts of Alejandra, but felt she could not speak for the White characters. She then sought out the help of her two colleagues, who identify as White males and conduct research on topics related to social and environmental injustice.

Drawing upon their own previous encounters/interviews with White actors involved in planning, designing, and/or using UGS in communities of color, the second and third authors each worked to craft remaining parts of the narrative that featured White characters. Similar to the first author, the second author used previous research to create Michael, positioning him as a White researcher who is so eager to highlight the benefits of UGS, that he often misses (or dismisses) the creation and reproduction of both latent and overt racialized injustices. Simply, he is colorblind.

While both of the White authors are familiar with social justice and critical race scholarship, we recognize that these subjectivities may additionally and inadvertently co-opt voices of the marginalized (Bergerson, 2003). In response to these concerns, we draw upon the stance of those CRT scholars who have not only advocated for the use CRT by White activists and scholars, but noted that doing so may have utility in overthrowing White people’s own racial privileges (Glover, 2007; Haney Lopez, 2000; hooks, 1994).

Reflexivity

In addition to reflecting on ourselves as political actors, we used a series of guiding questions for reflexivity in critical research as detailed by Duffy et al. (2020). As explained by the authors, these questions were designed to “strengthen standards of goodness within interpretivist constructivist and critical leisure scholarship” and provide a tool to help facilitate the reflectivity process (Duffy et al., 2020, p. 9). Using this tool, we collectively reflected on other aspects of our relationship with the research topic, including the social/relational context of situated knowledge, representation and voice, embodiment and positionality, and unconscious/emotional entanglement. This practice allowed us to critically reflect on our own ideologies and values and acknowledge how these influenced the construction of the narratives.
Narrative

The narrative is divided into five parts with each representing a week of observations and interviews by the researcher, Michael. The first 4 weeks of observations and interviews presage a community-wide meeting regarding the integration of an urban greenway into a Latinx community. Week 4 is the culmination of the narrative, intertwining the voices and perspectives of Michael, Alejandra, and Conner at the community forum. Week 5 serves to highlight Michael’s reflections following the forum.

Week 1

Michael: As I walk along the greenway, it is hard not to see the potential of this new infrastructure. For the first time, community members have a greenspace for their recreational needs. While I recognize that Chicago has been segregated for decades (Bowean, 2016), infrastructure like this can help bring people closer. I think about how residents from all of the communities traversed by the trail will finally be able to visit other places without having to worry about traffic or crime. The Trust of Public Land’s vice-president mentioned that park deserts across Chicago are difficult to find (Vivanco, 2017). This just goes to show that the city is really making a push toward equity and making sure that residents finally have the access they deserve. This space was abandoned, derelict for so long, now it is a space that promises long-term social and environmental benefits for everyone.

Lastly, I have noticed that in close proximity to the greenway, a few new businesses have planned openings for this month, including a new coffee shop I hope to frequent. With unemployment in this area high, these new businesses can really help local residents. The only thing I am a little worried about is the new residential development scheduled to begin next year on the park’s south side. I saw that the city was holding a couple of meetings at 3 p.m. downtown next month. I hope that when I speak with residents, I can convince them to show up and provide their input. I already know Connor will be there, and he’ll be able to explain all the environmental benefits of this project to residents who have questions or concerns. Really though, I agree with residents, “the city should be applauded for making an investment to improve this area.”

Week 2

Michael: My second week on the greenway has given rise to more questions and increased concerns over localized development. Regarding the latter, while I still see the greenway’s benefits, some of the Latinx residents here have communicated that there is an ever-growing fear that rents will rise and their time enjoying the greenway may be truncated. Although I informed Latinx residents that the public meeting in a couple weeks would provide the opportunity to express their concerns and work with local policymakers on proactive solutions, many informed me that either work or a lack of transportation would prevent their attendance.

I also have questions about trail maintenance. Graffiti that I noticed last week remains present, but only in the areas passing through the Latinx parts of the community.
Additionally, some of the vegetation in the community has grown rather unsightly. Some of the female active recreationists have expressed apprehension about traveling through these areas at night. Another question that remains unanswered is the lack of interactions between residents. Everyone on the greenway appears to exist in isolation, only speaking and interacting with those in their party or who they know from the community. Latinx residents have told me that many of the White trail users are disrespectful and feel the way Latinx users engage the space is incompatible with the design. White residents have reiterated this point, explaining that the trail is too congested, and their trail experience is compromised because too many people socialize in the areas meant for runners and bikers. While these individuals have not blatantly named Latinx as the perpetrators of these inconveniences, the direction of their blame is unmistakable. I think that these issues may simply stem from a lack of knowledge and believe this divide will dissipate over time as more interactions occur.

**Week 3**

**Michael:** I met with Alejandra. I asked for her perceptions of the trail, how she used the trail, and how she believed the trail was impacting her community. Her interview really stood out:

**Alejandra:** You know, for years we were asking for a park so our kids can have a safe place to play. And now we have that trail, and well, sometimes I look around at all the new construction, and I think about how different my children’s experiences will be from the ones I had growing up. I want my kids to take pride in their culture and in this community. I tell them that this neighborhood raised me. I explain to them that because my mother and father both worked a lot that it was just me and my sister alone most of the time. I tell them that while we would be all over the neighborhood, at friends’ houses, in the park, by the store, there were always people in the community watching over us.

That is all changing now. Some people can’t afford to live here anymore. That’s not something we expected when we asked for some a park. You know, the city also likes to say that they have cleaned up the neighborhood. They take pride over the fact that the gangs are gone. But you know, I feel like they just didn’t want to deal with the problem—the poverty that creates issues with gangs in the first place. Instead, they made sure they couldn’t afford to live here, and those gangs are someone else’s problem now. Unfortunately, the city didn’t just push away the gangs, but also the respectable families who were here for a long time. I don’t know how long my family will be able to hold on living in this area. Sure, the new trail is a good place for my children, but my kids have ultimately lost part of their culture. I mean can you believe that the city already took down some of our murals; the ones featuring our culture. A lot more people and businesses are soon going to be gone too because of this park. Gentrification is happening, and people who have lived here their whole lives are going to be gone like they never existed.

**Michael:** Do you know about the city meetings?

**Alejandra:** I know all about the city meetings. Sure, I’ll be there, but I know the city could care less about our opinions. First, they have these meetings at the most inconvenient times
downtown. A lot of people in this community don’t have the ability to attend because some are working and can’t afford to take time off work. Even if they can get an hour off of work to go to the meeting, some of the residents work in the suburbs, in the factories. They could never drive to the meeting and make it back to work on time.

Anyway, I’ve been telling my neighbors and customers about the meeting because I doubt the city did a good job about informing any of them about it. I don’t know how many of them will even go. I have heard people worry that they’ll show up and not understand anything because interpreters aren’t always there. Also, we notice how people look at us sometimes when we go, like if they look down on us. Sometimes people from our community speak up, but their voices are ignored or talked over. And don’t even bother bringing up issues of racism because you can see people get uncomfortable right away. They then try to change the subject as fast as they can. And the worst is when those other people from outside the neighborhood start talking about our community—they start using words like “those people” or start talking about the crime and litter as if it’s the whole community that does that. God forbid I say anything about their communities.

It’s sad, but the fate of this community was predetermined as soon as construction started. Most people on the outside are just going to praise officials for cleaning up the “bad” parts of town. You know how this city works, the rich get richer, the poor get evicted. While they will never admit to it, if the city could do it over knowing what they know now, they would still sacrifice this community for the trail and the money it is going to bring in.

Michael: I’m also curious about the local programs on the trail. Have you ever attended?

Alejandra: No one has told me about any programs on the trail. I think programs would be great, especially if they are in the summer and designed for the kids because they need something to do. If programs are free, community residents will show up. But I can promise you that if the classes are held in this neighborhood, you can forget about White people showing up. White people are not showing up for programs in a Latino community. It’s like, as soon as there are more of us then them, they want no part of it. Or you know, if we see too many White people, sometimes we don’t go because we don’t know if we’ll experience discrimination. I read in the paper last week that in another city these two women were attacked because they were speaking Spanish. I can just imagine what it would be like here with many of the residents speaking Spanish. Like, will we get attacked if we speak Spanish? Or like will the White people try and call the police or ICE because they think that we’re all undocumented even though many of the residents are Puerto Rican so we’re U.S. citizens. Yeah, no thank you.

Week 4

Michael: I had a great meeting with Connor this morning. It’s a good thing that he has lots of experience with this kind of community development project. He told me about all the environmental benefits of the trail and promised to relay these same points tonight at the meeting. I am excited to introduce Connor to Alejandra, so they can talk about issues
surrounding the greenway and come to some consensus on what is best for the local communities moving forward.

Speaking of the communities, I observed the tear-down and clearance of two single-family homes directly next to the greenway this morning on Alejandra’s block. When I stopped and asked one of the individuals working on the project what was going to be put in the place of these homes, I was told that a local developer was planning on constructing new condos. I asked if either would be affordable housing or rent controlled. This question drew laughter and a short response, “not in this neighborhood, not anymore.”

After speaking with White residents and trail users the last few weeks, there is a general hesitancy among individuals to enter the trail area that passes through Alejandra’s neighborhood. The pervasiveness of this is shocking, but long-standing stereotypes of the Latinx community and historic segregation between the communities has seemingly carried over to the recreational space. Although users vowed that the greenway was an inclusive space, they often contradicted themselves, explaining that they hoped the trail would bring increased development that would eventually expunge disorder (and those responsible) from the area. When asked if these residents had ever spoken with or knew the history of the community, most admitted that they only knew about the neighborhood through media portrayals and information passed to them from family and friends. The racialized history of these areas suggest that many of these residents viewed the neighborhood through an acute lens where the space, and the residents themselves, became inseparable from its history and anecdotal narratives. When taken into consideration that the trail is a public space and can be occupied by any person, White residents and users inadvertently connect ALL persons of color to a bound space regardless of actual residency. I really hope that my research can help mitigate some of the issues associated with stereotypes and attribution errors.

I have discovered that while the greenway has various benefits, it exists in paradoxical fashion. For all of its benefits, the greenway is varnished with a number of environmental justice issues including unequal development, residential displacement, and both overt and latent forms of discrimination. These inequities are not equally distributed, with Latinx residents facing a rapidly changing environment and an uncertain future. Right now, feels like the liminal stages between a cultural centric neighborhood’s birth and death. Hopefully this meeting will help ease my own concerns regarding these issues and provide insight into strategies the city is using to ensure the greenway remains a beneficial space for all people.

**At community meeting**

**Michael:** Thank you for having me at tonight’s meeting. I am happy to share some of my research findings. First, it appears that the trail has benefited the community in many ways. Participants mentioned that the trail has served to improve their health as now there is a place to walk, run, and bike. Some participants even reported using the trial to walk or bike to work. It has also provided a place for families and friends to enjoy time together, especially now that crime has decreased. My research also showed that the greenway has increased property values, and it has increased the desirability to live in this neighborhood.
As this neighborhood gets more amenities, I expect to see more tourists and residents come to the neighborhood for shopping, eating, and relaxing.

One of the major challenges that arose was the rise in property values. Although some property owners are benefiting, others are no longer able to afford where they live. This has led to many residents being displaced. I’m hopeful the community can work through this challenge together. Another major challenge was crime, but there does appear to be a decrease in gang activity after the development of the greenway.

**Patricia:** I for one am very thankful to see those gangs gone. They were always up to no good, and it wasn’t safe for my child to be out playing by themselves. My dad told me about the gang problems here dating back to the 1970s. It seems like this trail was the only thing going to save the neighborhood from itself.

**John:** Yeah, and I don’t understand why people are complaining about the property values going up. That’s a good thing. If you don’t like the changes in the community, you can sell and I’m sure you’ll even make a good profit.

**Alejandra:** I’ve lived in the community my whole life. I think a lot of us were happy to get the trail because our kids have a safe space to play, but now it seems like we might have been better off without it. It’s not fair that some of us can no longer live here because of the increased prices. Although some people own their homes, most of us rent. With rents increasing, it’s getting harder for a lot of residents to pay.

**John:** I hear your concern, but really, we need to remember to focus on the big picture. Although some people may not be able to live here, there are other Chicago neighborhoods. This is a situation where the pros outweigh the cons. I mean we get this awesome amenity, and soon more businesses will want to move into the community. Soon we’ll all have the neighborhood we always wanted.

**Alejandra:** Who is “we”? Our neighborhood has had issues, but this is a community of families and Latino culture. Most of us love the neighborhood how it is and don’t need you to tell us how you think it should be. You don’t seem to recognize that the more new businesses move in, the more our culture gets pushed out. I don’t know that the city really took enough time to think about how our Latino neighborhood was going to be impacted. It seems like it was just catering to newcomers, and like always, the environment is not a space for the poor or Latino people.

**Connor:** I do want to comment on that. We held some meetings and did some surveys, and all the Latinos wanted the trail. We tried for the most part to incorporate what they wanted into the design of the greenway.

**Patricia:** I also want to say that I’m sorry you feel that way, but I know that my family and I moved here because of the diversity. It was never our intention to make others feel like they are losing their culture. In fact, we want to be able to partake in the culture. I mean, my family and I have gone to the big neighborhood celebrations that have lots of different types of people. We are very supportive of the culture. We embrace it and use it as a way to teach our children about people’s differences.

**John:** My family has also gone to the different Latino restaurants and festivals. I see the culture everywhere. I haven’t seen it disappear since I’ve been here. Sure, we have some new faces in the neighborhood, but that’s a good thing. We don’t want segregation in the 21st century.
Michael: I want to add that I did not see there being a lot of interaction between groups. But the city is making tremendous effort to host community programs, where residents, regardless of their culture, can interact. I anticipate that we will see more interactions between groups as more programs are hosted.

Connor: I agree, and also what I envisioned for the greenway is similar to what the founding fathers of America’s parks really wanted. See, Alejandra—is that your name, ma’am?—they wanted parks to be spaces for everybody, for democracy, spaces where we could all get along. Whether it was philosophers like Henry David Thoreau or John Muir, or park designers like Frederick Law Olmstead, they all wanted these really special places to be saved, and that’s what we’re doing here, just continuing that tradition. Historically, there was nothing here, no city or anything, and then these places got settled and urbanized, and they needed protecting, just like they need protecting now, these green jewels in the city. There’s absolutely nothing about this effort that was about pushing out one group of people and their culture. It’s about the environment, and making sure we save it not only for future generations, but for its own sake as well.

Alejandra: Well, whose future generations are we talking about, because our group might not be here in the next few years with the way the housing costs and gentrification are going. I know that we noticed that our murals have been painted over. Those were important in telling our story here, but now they’re gone.

Connor: I’m sorry you feel that way. I know lots of local Mexican folks would absolutely love to participate in outdoor recreation activities here, which is why I’m fighting for them. Outdoor recreation. Connecting with nature. It’s relaxing. It’s healthy. It’s a better quality of life. Overall, it’s just a wonderful experience to have these amazing resources, and right here in our backyard. This isn’t really about race. This is a resource for everybody, equally.

Regarding the murals, I’m not sure which ones you are referring to. The city received numerous calls about graffiti, and it was decided that certain sections along the greenway were going to be painted. The thing about graffiti is that you really want to tackle it as soon as you see it because research shows that it attracts crime. As soon as we get the calls, we address the problem right away because we want a safe community. We know that this area has had some issues with crime in the past, and we want to make sure we are taking the proper steps, including removing any graffiti that may acknowledge localized gang culture, to mitigate future occurrences. Again, this isn’t really about race, it’s about keeping the community looking good and being safe.

Alejandra: Every time issues of safety are brought up, our youth of color are always implicated. I’m wondering how the city is making sure that they can use the park safely without being targeted by police, because we all know that this city is well-known to go after our young men.

John: Well, police don’t go after people if they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing. When they are sitting there, hanging out ... loitering ... instead of using the trail how it’s supposed to be used, then police should tell them to move on. People need to feel comfortable on the trail if they are going to use it.

Alejandra: They are just kids! They need a space they can relax and socialize.
**Patricia:** Well, we’ve only had great experiences on the trail. We see Latino youth on the trail all the time. They seem to enjoy it, too.

**Connor:** It’s true we have had a few incidents where we’ve had to break up large groups, but we make sure to work with the police department to make sure the trail is safe for our patrons. You have to understand, ma’am, that having law enforcement on and around the trail is a good thing for everyone.

**Week 5**

**Michael:** After attending the community meeting, I am optimistic about the greenway and its potential to foster interactions between the communities. Although interactions currently seem to be hindered by both White residents’ fear of crime and long-time Latinx residents’ resistance to a new, sustainable urban model, both of these issues can be solved with additional community meetings. Before the meeting last week, I was concerned that these forums would be defined by acedia, rather than productivity, as members of the Latinx community tried to come to terms with the localized changes. However, I think my presence at the meeting as a voice for those Latinx residents unable to attend and Connor’s explanation of the long-term environmental benefits of the trail provided some comfort to residents, helping them understand that in this case, change is a good thing. I am certain if Connor and I continue to attend these gatherings and speak to Latinx residents about what a privilege it is to have trail access, we can quickly gain consensus that the corridor is a social and environmental asset for everyone. Once we have some type of community concordance, then we can really focus on getting the trail programmed.

**Discussion**

Although there is no ending to the story, research has shed light on similar communities where racially marginalized residents have advocated for UGS, only to be displaced from their neighborhood due to environmental gentrification (e.g., Rigolon et al., 2020; Rigolon & Németh, 2018). We crafted the narrative not to tell the story of gentrification, but to highlight the subtle, mundane, and often unacknowledged acts by institutions and individuals that serve to create environmental injustices (Walker, 2009; Young, 1990). We used CRT to interrogate how race, racism, White privilege, and power are central in these subtle and unacknowledged acts, and we created a narrative to shed light on how processes of greening and greensplaining mostly benefit White residents while disadvantaging Latinx residents. The narrative also highlights how Latinx residents were, and continue to be, the victims of procedural, distributional, interactional, and recognition environmental (in)justices.

What becomes apparent in the narrative is that distributive, procedural, and interactional justice may not be possible given that recognition injustices exist. Alejandra hints at recognition injustices when she states that residents feel uncomfortable with how they are treated in community meetings, as “their voices are ignored or talked over.” Throughout the
community forum, Alejandra brings to light various concerns residents have with the trail, but the concerns are either minimized or explained away with little discussion on how best to address these.

Latinx culture and values are also not acknowledged nor respected in the case of the city removing the Latinx-themed murals. Connor does not acknowledge the cultural importance of the murals, rather he dismisses the concerns and justifies their removal by linking it to concerns over graffiti. He elaborates further on this decision by citing research that postulates how graffiti may serve to cultivate an environment of disorder and deviance if allowed to persist, statements that denigrate Latinx communities. Conner uses the research to gain a superior position and legitimize his proclamations as undisputable fact. In doing so, he places Alejandra in an inferior position, rending her concerns as anecdotal perceptions of an uninformed individual.

Conner additionally fails to give attention to concerns regarding the potential discrimination against Latinx youth by new residents and police. In their dialogue, Conner, along with other White residents in attendance, adhere to the idea that Latinx youth, and their salient behavior, are solely responsible for their removal from the trail. Some of the attendees also express relief in the displacement of gang members. Conner and the others fail to recognize the historical and ongoing abuse Latinx residents have faced by police (Harris et al., 2020). The group also appears incognizant of the fact that Latinx gangs in Chicago derived in part from the racism that Latinx residents experienced by White gang members during the 1960s, and Latinx gangs formed to protect the neighborhood from these injustices (Serrato, 2014). This lack of recognition stems from examining the issue solely from the perspective of White residents and not taking into account the complicated history of Latinx people. It is important to note that it is unclear whether those displaced were indeed gang members or simply Latinx individuals who were stigmatized and criminalized. The latter is related to Pellow’s (2017) notion of expendability, as Black and Brown bodies are often stigmatized and viewed as “deserving . . . obliteration” (p. 231).

Further, Walker (2009) argued that greenspace is often posited as a “good thing,” yet this fails to account for how marginalized groups value, experience, interact with, and are impacted by greenspaces. In this narrative, Alejandra’s interview brings to light how the residents advocated for the UGS, but ultimately, they are not the ones to benefit from the resources, as issues of gentrification begin to push residents out of the neighborhood. Throughout the meeting, Alejandra’s concerns about gentrification are downplayed or disregarded through the use of “greensplaining.” We deploy the term greensplaining to analyze the rhetorical and material practices of environmentalists, conservationists, and municipal leaders. As illustrated in the narrative through Connor, greensplaining may align closely with terms like mansplaining and Whitesplaining to indicate the sociocultural silencing of supposedly subordinate identities through “proper” (Lutzky & Lawson, 2019) discourse that is commonly associated with maleness and Whiteness, respectively (Thomas et al., 2017). While such pejorative terms are unstable and deployed unevenly (Bridges, 2017), they nonetheless connote processes of power-laden dominance, while the person speaking simultaneously being seemingly unaware of power imbalances or the social silencing taking place.

As critical feminist approaches consider the consequences of mansplaining, and critical race theorists engage with issues like Whitesplaining, here we interrogate the ways in which critical environmental justice scholars might consider how greensplaining is both a subtle
and overt tactic in decision-making processes, but also leverages racial, gender, and class privileges through a green lens. Greensplaining is aligned with subtle and overt processes of erasing race, gender, class, and other social markers, attempting to make these categories either neutral or arbitrary; greensplaining is a naively colorblind environmentalism, unaware and unaffected by social hierarchies. Here, because city officials often tout UGS restoration projects as apolitical in nature, race and class privilege are hidden under a veil of sustainability and ecological improvements (Anguelovski, 2016). As Anguelovski (2016) explains, the planning and promotion of new UGS “seem to give greening some form of moral authority or economic imperative that demotes or conceals any equity issues” (p. 23). In short, greensplaining provides a mechanism in which to minimize equity issues and concerns in the context of UGS.

Connor, representative of various “official” voices in public stakeholder meetings, leverages the supposed value neutrality of environmental amenities, environmental histories, and environmental knowledges to extol the virtues of, in this case, public greenspace provisions and development in a marginalized neighborhood. However, the values that are displayed are not, in fact, universal values concerning green space, parks, open spaces, or any other supposed environmental amenity. They are socioculturally located, with centuries of outcomes, effects, and ethics interwoven into them. Processes of greensplaining effectively neutralize these histories for marginalized groups, as pro-environmental messaging concerning the supposed universality of environmental benefits has often been a rhetorical and political economic packaging to smuggle in a variety of gentrifying and culturally suppressing actions and policies. In other words, greensplaining may often be the unacknowledged conduit for processes of environmental gentrification (Harris et al., 2019; Immergluck & Balan, 2018). Greensplaining leverages racial, gender, and class implications to present particular environmental knowledges and values as superordinate, inviolate, and unquestionable, and is often heard and echoed as value-neutral “hard science” by policy makers.

By the city not fully recognizing and respecting the Latinx culture, environmental histories, and values, other forms of environmental injustices are able to occur. In the case of procedural injustices, recognizing Latinx residents as important stakeholders may translate into scheduling community meetings that are accessible to residents (e.g., meetings with convenient times and locations). Regarding interactional injustices, issues of race, racism, White privilege, and power are visible when considering how Latinx residents have been cast in a subordinate status in their own community. Recognition justice is central to this problem, as the narrative highlights how perceptions of Latinx residents have been defined through a lens of racialized deviance and internalized by White residents. Environmental (in)justices are shown to play-out in the form of microaggressions and discrimination predicated on latent stereotypes that occur against Latinx youth bodies and an unrealistic view that Latinx culture can continue to thrive in the wake of gentrification (Harris et al., 2019). The critical juxtaposition between John’s statement of “soon we’ll all have the neighborhood we always wanted” and Alejandra’s retort of “Who is ‘we’” helps to highlight both John’s lack of understanding and how in a racialized society the racial privilege of Whites is endemic, and their viewpoint given precedent.

The creation of Michael, a researcher, was also intentional to demonstrate how researchers much also be careful to not contribute to injustices of recognition. Michael’s attempts at synthesizing oppositional viewpoints of Alejandra and Connor make his role seemingly transformational, though not sufficiently transformational such that overlooked
A system's concerns are actually realized and addressed. What is primarily assuaged, then, is not the material circumstances of concern but the social and emotional feelings and analyses of the (White) researcher and facilitator. Part of Whiteness, after all, is making things comfortable; social situations should be comfortable first and foremost for Michael, but also in the efforts to pacify and soothe dissenting voices of others who express discomfort. Everyone being perceived as being comfortable re-inscribes existing power dynamics, including the dominance of Whiteness. In this way, “Whiteness may function as a form of public comfort” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 158) to act rhetorically as a means of silencing and further marginalizing others. Throughout the accounts, Michael keeps naively advocating for programming, the thought being that more contact between Latinx and White residents will lead to improved interactions between the groups. Although this can surely be an outcome of the interaction, what may also occur is that the interactions provide yet another opportunity for Latinx residents to experience racism in the forms of overt or covert racism (e.g., micro-aggressions), especially if programming opportunities are crafted by institutions and individuals who do not fully understand, recognize, nor respect marginalized groups (see Glover, 2007).

Conclusions

As our narrative shows, UGS are often disseminated to Latinx and other marginalized communities under an innocuous rhetoric of sustainability and increased access. When residents challenge these elements, as Alejandra does in the story, their voices are often silenced, drowned out by dominant ideologies that position them as either shortsighted or misinformed (Wilson, 2018). In short, criticisms and voiced tribulations related to park integration and potential environmental gentrification are greensplained away under a narrative of environmental utility and virtue. This greensplaining and environmental gentrification are intimately interconnected with issues of Whiteness and White privilege.

Additionally, the usage of CRT prompts us to ask questions about the racialized experiences people have with their local environments. The usage of narratives and counterstories brings to light how environmental injustices are ordinary experiences for Latinx communities and Whites have “little incentive to [fully] eradicate” a system which has systematically favored them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Glover, 2007). Part of White privilege is assuming that the system (in this case, an UGS) is static, unchanging, and a priori existing as is, and that achieving diversity requires only adding racially marginalized groups. As our story shows, UGS may be used to remake the social character of a neighborhood based on that which is idyllic for White residents, giving credence to the racialized adage that community change should “not bring the street to the rest of [the city], but instead correct and rebuild the street at its source” (Wilson, 2018, p. 73).

Note

1. Note, the term Latinx is used throughout the paper unless citing other research studies where other terms (e.g., Hispanic, Latino) were used or quoting study participants.
About the authors

Mariela Fernandez is an Assistant Professor in the Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management Department at Clemson University. Mariela’s research examines environmental injustices affecting Latinx urban communities, with primary focus on their limited access to community-based parks. She is also interested in how Latinx communities organize against environmental injustices.

Brandon Harris is an Assistant Professor of Practice in the Teaching, Learning and Sociocultural Studies Department at the University of Arizona. Brandon’s research examines the influence of green amenities on the physical and social environments in urban communities; environmental justice issues related to environmental gentrification; and the impacts of neighborhood stigma on the recreational choices and behaviors of urban youth.

Jeff Rose is an assistant professor-lecturer in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah. His research examines systemic inequities that are displayed through class, race, political economy, and relationships to nature. He has used this justice-focused lens on homelessness in parks, park and protected area management, outdoor recreation and education, and place attachment in unbuilt environments.

ORCID

Mariela Fernandez http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4838-6294
Brandon Harris http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3286-2380
Jeff Rose http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3171-7242

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