

# Sports and Environmental Justice

## “Games” of Race, Place, Nostalgia, and Power in Neoliberal New York City

Julie Sze

*University of California, Davis*

This article examines a contemporary and unfolding conflict in downtown Brooklyn in New York City where the siting of a professional sport stadium intersects with the politics of race, class, and the built environment. The Atlantic Yards project is a \$4.2-billion project to bring housing, retail, open space, and most significantly (for the developers in their public relations campaign), a professional basketball franchise, the Brooklyn Nets. The author uses an analytic frame drawing from environmental justice studies through which to analyze the cultural and representational politics of the controversy. In doing so, this case complicates and further illuminates environmental justice and the sports and siting literature in the context of the geography of neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** *environmental justice; neoliberalism; Atlantic Yards; urban economic development*

This article examines a contemporary and unfolding conflict in New York City where the siting of a professional basketball stadium intersects with the politics of race, class, and the built environment. The Atlantic Yards project is a \$4.2-billion project in downtown Brooklyn to bring housing, retail, open space, and most significantly (for the developers), a professional basketball team, the Brooklyn Nets (currently known as the New Jersey Nets). The surrounding community of the proposed site is historically African American, mixed-income, and more recently, a site of intense demographic change and race- and class-inflected gentrification (Freeman, 2006). As an unfolding land use conflict that has garnered much media attention, there is no shortage of reportage, and when the outcome is clear (as it currently is not), the Atlantic Yards project will no doubt be analyzed for decades to come. It is one of the largest development projects in recent memory, in a city where land use disputes and their implications are debated for generations—by historians, citizens, politicians, and journalists. Future academic and popular analyses will invariably focus on various aspects of the development and its opposition, whether or not the

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project is approved and the arena built. But despite not knowing the outcome, research on the conflict as it currently stands is analytically useful for scholars of sports and urban development, among others.

In particular, I use the Brooklyn Nets proposal and the firestorm over the wider Atlantic Yards project to explore how large-scale plans for stadiums and arenas, recreational facilities, and open space embody conflicts about racial politics, land use, and urban development. In the Atlantic Yards project, the professional sports stadium (alongside open space and recreational facilities more generally) is represented by the developer as a “good,” an amenity and a benefit explicitly meant to offset the burdens of land use development on the surrounding community. Thus, in one sense, stadiums, recreational facilities, and open space represent the seeming “reflection” or opposite to the polluting facilities that have been the focus of the vast majority of environmental justice research that addresses harms, specifically racial disparities in exposure to noxious facilities (the definition of open space is contested, used by some opponents to mean public parks, and by the developer to mean nondeveloped land that is privately owned but publicly accessible). However, my analysis suggests that the development and siting of so-called positive amenities follows a similar cultural and political trajectory as that of noxious facilities. But more than acting as a “mirror” to the polluting facilities that have been the focus of two decades of environmental justice research, using environmental justice as the prism to examine Atlantic Yards complicates and deepens both the environmental justice literature and scholarship on sports and siting. Rather, using environmental justice as an analytic frame to study so-called goods reveals just how the politics of race, class, and environment are constantly being renegotiated and redefined. In particular, the developer’s mobilization of the discourse of the environmental justice movement is significant and raises important issues about how corporate actors in neoliberal New York City use sports, race, class, and the environment in deeply troubling and fascinating ways.

Specifically deploying an environmental justice framework, I use Pellow’s (2002) articulation of an environmental justice framework. He suggests that rather than analyzing a siting conflict as a discrete moment in time, as a struggle between victim and perpetrator, conflicts should be analyzed through an analysis that encompasses four distinct factors: the importance of process and history, the role of multiple stakeholders, the effects of social stratification by race and class, and the ability of those with the least access to resources to shape the struggle for environmental justice. The diverse issues, constituencies, and geography found under the umbrella term *environmental justice* are linked through a worldview or “environmental justice paradigm” that emphasizes an injustice frame, primarily (although not exclusively) a racial injustice frame (Taylor, 2000). In general, this research emerged in response to activist descriptions, academic studies, and policy responses to the problem of environmental racism. Because it describes the disproportionate balance between high levels of pollution exposure for people of color and the low level of

environmental benefits they enjoy, *environmental racism* can be defined as the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and pollution burdens based on race. Environmental justice is a research area that has exploded in the last two decades. It began in response to social movements in racial minority communities in the United States that were fighting the disproportionate pollution exposure they faced, particularly from toxic facilities, such as hazardous waste facilities (for an overview of the research field and of the social movements, see Sze & London, 2008).

Using interdisciplinary methods, including analysis of primary materials produced by the developer and opponents and newspaper and media coverage, I analyze both the social processes and the cultural dimensions of the Atlantic Yards conflict, and situate it within the social, political, and historical context of the neoliberalization of urban space in New York City (Davila, 2004; Hackworth, 2007; Smith & Kurtz, 2003). *Neoliberalism* is generally defined as the rubric of economic and urban development politics that favor and facilitate state deregulation, accompanied by privatization and free market approaches. Sports arenas are one key terrain through which intensifying neoliberal economic and cultural development is taking place in New York City, represented by the (failed) New York City bid for the 2012 Olympics (one key component of the bid was a West Side football stadium; Eisinger, 2000). As ideological projects, sports and tourism are a central part of how cities and nations “brand” themselves in the global economy (Whitson & Macintosh, 1996). Sports arenas and high-profile urban redevelopment represent the symbolic spaces of consumption and leisure through which class and race politics are being waged in New York City (Moody, 2007). The Atlantic Yards project privatizes public and open space, promotes free-market development (while heavily dependent on state subsidies and public money), and symbolically promotes the architecture of neoliberalism. Starting with that the assumption that professional sports (both the teams and stadiums) are “cultural commodities” and that stadiums are sites of a continual struggle over the uses and meanings of sports, my analysis focuses on the competing narratives of the Atlantic Yards conflict (SAGE, 1993). Thus, I focus on the rhetorical and symbolic terrain of these debates and constructions of sports, race, and environment.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I use Silk’s (2004) focus on the relationship between space and stories, building on his contention that “space is a site of social struggle in which dominant power relations can be constructed, contested and reproduced.” In other words, competing *narratives* are produced, reproduced, and spread by public and private actors in concrete institutionalized contexts—with varying consequences (p. 356).

Deploying a sports metaphor, I focus on two different, competing “teams”: Forest City Ratner Companies (referred to hereafter as “Ratner”), the company owned by Bruce Ratner, the corporate developer of the Atlantic Yards proposal, and the organized opposition, primarily held under the umbrella coalition known as Develop, Don’t Destroy Brooklyn (DDDB).<sup>2</sup> Bruce Ratner is a well-known and politically connected real estate developer in New York City, whose past developments

(Metrotech Center and Atlantic Mall) in Downtown Brooklyn have been a focal point for Atlantic Yards opponents, as discussed later. The project area has been the focal point of intense gentrification and conflicts that are primarily influenced by race, primarily between White elites and African Americans, and by class (homeowners vs. renters, both Black and White). Although the neighborhood also has a Latino population, the opposition is primarily constructed along the Black–White binary, with exceptions discussed below. The community board area for the project is located in Community Board 2, which comprises Downtown Brooklyn, Fort Greene, Brooklyn Heights, and Boerum Hill. According to the 2000 Census, the Community Board area is 34.4% White and 40.5% Black (and 16.8% Latino), and between 1990 and 2000, the Black population *dropped* 10.6% whereas the White population *increased* by 12.6%. The area is sharply divided by class, with the most expensive housing in Brooklyn Heights just a mile away from public housing projects in Fort Greene. The highest income census tract in Brooklyn Heights has a median income of \$112,414, whereas in areas of high public housing populations, the median income is just \$9,876 (New York City Dept. of City Planning, 2008a).

My analysis draws heavily on the material produced by these teams to support their respective positions, primarily Web sites, marketing documents, and events, as well as data and testimony from public hearings.<sup>3</sup> The data on this dispute reinforces the findings of scholars who have studied stadium siting controversies and their critical and political implications. For example, SAGE (1993) articulates three faces of power in stadium siting disputes: the public and institutional face of power, held by decision makers and institutions; the barriers and roadblocks that work to leave certain groups of people and issues out of public decision making; and subordinate groups who come to accept their powerlessness and illegitimacy and the inexpressibility of their grievances. Through an analysis of competing narratives in this dispute, I argue that the Atlantic Yards project reveals a fourth hidden face of power, one that comes to light through an interdisciplinary analysis of urban neoliberalism, the contemporary politics of race, space and culture, history and nostalgia, and environmental justice politics.

This new hidden face of power shows how the discourses of social and environmental justice movements and community empowerment are adopted and managed under conditions of intensifying neoliberal economic and urban development. The Atlantic Yard project exemplifies another dimension of what Silk (2004) calls the “social production of sterile sporting space, consumption and urban imagineering under late capitalism.” But the Atlantic Yards case reveals not only what Silk describes as a tale of “two cities,” one hegemonic and the other subaltern. By examining how conflict by public agencies and private interests is managed and manipulated, the Atlantic Yards project represents the increasing sophistication of state and government boosters in managing development controversies, specifically the race and place-based politics in urban economic development that may have implications outside of the New York City case. Specifically, in this campaign, the

developer co-opted the racialized discourse of social movements for economic, environmental, and social justice, and in doing so, highlighted long-standing class divisions within African American communities in Brooklyn within the context of gentrification trends and antigentrification activism. The developer made alliances with fair housing and labor groups, who focused on the racial benefits of their alliance with the corporate developer, to refute the opposition to the project and control the racial discourse around the project. The significance for environmental justice and other social movement scholars is in how to understand the complex politics of race and place under neoliberal urban development. This complexity is inherent in Pellow's call for an environmental justice framework that avoids a simple us-versus-them analysis, whereas the Atlantic Yards project shows how the developer adopted a simplistic and dualistic rhetoric of race, justice, and belonging, and thus co-opted the aims of radical social movements. This move reveals the dangerous flexibility of social movement discourse and the genius of capital to co-opt this rhetoric under neoliberal urban economic development.

### **Race, Sports, and Nostalgia in Brooklyn**

In January 2004, Bruce Ratner announced the Atlantic Yards project, by any measure a large and ambitious undertaking. Covering 22 acres in the heart of Downtown Brooklyn, the centerpiece of the \$4.2-billion project is a professional sports arena to house 20,000 fans, for the New Jersey Nets (of which Ratner is principal owner, and which would be renamed the "Brooklyn Nets").<sup>4</sup> It would create an 8-million-square-foot "Atlantic Yards" development proposal and more than 6,400 units of mostly market-rate apartments in 16 high-rise buildings (up to 60 stories as originally proposed) in Prospect Heights and Fort Greene. Ratner commissioned internationally renowned architect Frank Gehry to design the site, which would combine the arena, business, and open space. The site's current owners are divided between public agencies and private owners—one third of the area is on rail yards owned by the Long Island Railroad whereas the remaining two thirds are under private ownership.

There are numerous *economic*, *legal*, and *architectural* issues in a project of this scope. The project was fast-tracked out of the normal City public review process through the Empire State Development Corporation and the State of New York. The project is supported by many politicians, among these Governor Pataki, Mayor Bloomberg, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, and U.S. Senator Charles Schumer. Three of the four local elected officials, most vocally City Council member Leticia James, oppose the plan. Almost 2 billion of the project's cost will come from public funds, in the form of direct and indirect support.<sup>5</sup> The project is another example of what sports economists have consistently shown: that stadiums

depend heavily on public financing and fail to bring its promised economic benefits.<sup>6</sup> As Baade and Dye (1988) write in their classic article, “It is fairly easy to identify the obvious direct private gainers from a Stadium development project: the franchise owners and the developers. Those who are displaced by the project are the obvious losers. This is similar to any big bang local development project. Such simple categorization helps in understanding the politics of the debate.” As of the summer of 2008, the economic slowdown, lack of commercial tenants, and a 2006 IRS rule change governing the use of tax-exempt bonds are threatening to sideline the project. The creative financing measures (specifically the tax-exempt bond measures) reveal just how much state and public support is key to the developer and how changes to rules governing these subsidies will derail these developments (Bagli, 2008).

The *legal* issues are focused largely on eminent domain and on the environmental impact statement.<sup>7</sup> The Supreme Court Case *Kelo v. City of New London* (2005) held that the use of eminent domain to transfer land from one private owner to another to further economic development was legal, if the general benefits for a community were such that redevelopment was allowed as a permissible “public use” under the Takings Clause of the Fifth Amendment. The federal eminent domain lawsuit filed in 2006 by plan opponents was thrown out (Confessore, 2007), and an appeal to the U.S. Court was unsuccessful (Chan, 2008).

Lastly, there is an architectural and spatial critique of the project, mostly on the grounds that the high-rise buildings are out of context with the surrounding neighborhood, and because the project takes 13 acres out of public space and places them into private hands.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, open space and recreation are key components of the developer’s public relations campaign according to a flier that read “A Garden of Eden grows in Brooklyn” (Schwartz, 2006). Open space and recreation are a key focal point for project critics, who focus on the privatized nature of the open space. For example, the developer counts the so-called Urban Room as open space, which is actually the lobby of the arena. Similarly, the developer also touts an acre of “green” space, which is actually a rooftop, reserved for the exclusive use by building tenants.

Ratner has already enjoyed large public subsidies for projects seen as “failures” on economic, architectural, and social grounds. These include both his Metrotech development in Downtown Brooklyn that received \$300 million in state subsidies and the Atlantic Mall that is adjacent to the proposed Atlantic Yards site (Gelinis, 2005). The Atlantic Mall, in particular, was built to be inhospitable to the public housing residents, from the projects that ring the area. As one article described, the mall is composed of “vast expanses of nothingness and dead corridors leading, it seems, to nowhere” (Cardwell, 2004). The same article goes on to quote Ratner explaining the design rationale of the mall: “It’s a problem of malls in dense urban areas that kids hang out there, and it’s not too positive for shopping. . . . Look, here you’re in an urban area, you’re next to projects, you’ve got tough kids.” In short, the presence of public housing, primarily occupied by low-income African Americans

(the “urban, tough kids”) was why the Atlantic Mall was built like a fortress. But why is the same area now a prime candidate for high end development of the Atlantic Yards? Gentrification and the recent attempt by the City to “upzone” and “improve downtown Brooklyn” are two of the important factors that make the area appealing to (high end) development in ways impossible just a decade ago.<sup>9</sup>

As the literature on sports siting suggests, stadium and arena siting campaigns are as much an *ideological* project as a legal, economic, and political one, and this is certainly the case with the Atlantic Yards project. Scholars have noted how noneconomic factors, community solidarity, promoting the city, community self-esteem, and community collective consciousness are often mobilized for stadium development (Eckstein & Delaney, 2002, p. 236; Johnson & Sack, 1996). These ideological factors are evident in New York City, which witnessed the failed 2012 Olympics bid and the attempt in 2006 to site the Jets football team on the West Side of Manhattan (Eisinger, 2000). In addition, new stadiums are being built for two New York City baseball teams, the Yankees and the Mets. As Fainstein and Stokes (2002) argue in their discussion of Yankee stadium, “no purely economic analysis could justify a billion-dollar investment by New York’s impoverished public sector in a private enterprise where the city would share a little of the profit, consequently, much of the rhetoric surrounding pleas for the city’s involvement rests on the symbolic importance of the Yankees for maintaining New York’s world-class status” (p. 161). In each of these proposals, the symbolic and rhetorical demands were linked, and although it is beyond the scope of this article to compare the Atlantic Yards project to other stadiums and the Olympic bid, they constitute part of the rhetorical, political, and economic contexts of the Nets arena proposal (Moody, 2007).

The Nets arena and professional basketball are at the symbolic and literal center of the development project. At the press conference announcing the project, developer Bruce Ratner was joined by Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Governor George Pataki, and U.S. Senator (and Brooklyn resident) Charles Schumer, holding props. Pataki, Ratner, and Bloomberg all had Nets jerseys printed with their names along with a “#1” on their backs (*Brooklyn Matters*; Hill, 2005). The Web site for the project proclaims, “Atlantic Yards: A Vision for Downtown Brooklyn. Welcome to Atlantic Yards, the development dedicated to building a new vision for downtown Brooklyn and creating an exciting new home for Brooklyn’s very own NBA franchise: the Brooklyn Nets.” Although the next paragraph begins “the development is not just about basketball,” that belies the site and campaign itself, which is centered on the sports arena, basketball images, and players. For example, the lead image on the Web site is of the Nets logo (“Bring it to Brooklyn”), and one of the four sections of the Web site (after Housing, Benefits, Community) is Nets Basketball. The Web site also actively promotes basketball clinics for youth and a “best in Brooklyn” hoop contest, to garner public support.<sup>10</sup> One of the images is of a basketball with “Brooklyn” emblazoned on it, with the text “Bring the Nets Home to Brooklyn.”

But why does it read “Bring the Nets *Home* to Brooklyn”? What is the symbolic meaning of that “home,” given that the Nets never played in Brooklyn to begin with? The answer is historical and deeply tied to nostalgia and the politics of race and place in Brooklyn. The *actual* site for the stadium is at the intersection of Flatbush and Atlantic Avenues between the neighborhoods of Prospect Heights and Fort Greene. This site holds much symbolic resonance as the proposed (and ultimately rejected) site for the Brooklyn Dodgers. In 1955, Brooklyn Dodgers owner Walter O’Malley rejected city builder Robert Moses’ proposal for a new stadium in Queens (where the New York Mets now play), taking his team to Los Angeles in 1957.<sup>11</sup> As many historians have documented (and many older Brooklynites concur), the Dodgers’ leaving Brooklyn was a hugely significant psychological loss (Anderson, 2007). A recent 2007 HBO documentary produced with Major League Baseball, *The Brooklyn Dodgers: The Ghosts of Flatbush*, shows how interest in the team persists. This sense of loss, nostalgia, and the feeling of decline was not just true in Brooklyn but throughout New York City and nationally in the era of urban renewal during which populations increasingly became Black and poor and replaced the White ethnics who moved into the suburbs (Berman, 1982). Thus, as Brooklyn Borough President (and lifelong Brooklynite who repeatedly brings up the Dodgers) Marty Markowitz said in a speech, “Brooklyn needs this arena because Brooklyn’s best . . . deserve a place in Brooklyn where they can compete at the highest levels, and watch the stars of the game. . . . Just as the Dodgers thrilled Brooklynites in the first half of the 20th century, the Nets will be the team that unites us in the 21st.”<sup>12</sup> One critic of the Atlantic Yards project, Julia Vitulla Martin from the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, notes, “Ratner shrewdly appealed to Brooklyn’s sense of loss and nostalgia for the Brooklyn Dodgers’ moving to Los Angeles” (*Brooklyn Matters*). These images and memories are deeply political and mobilized to promote the “symbolic reproduction of city space,” which represents “who belongs in specific places” (Silk, 2004, p. 358). Here, Pellow’s (2002) environmental justice framework is useful. Specifically, he highlights the importance of process and history, the role of multiple stakeholders, the effects of social stratification by race and class, and the ability of those with the least access to resources to shape the struggle for environmental justice. What is clear in the Atlantic Yards project is that the importance of process and history are central to how the multiple stakeholders (who differ sharply by race and class) understand the nature of the contemporary conflict. Thus, the competing representations of the past, specifically of large-scale urban renewal projects and of relatively recent projects (such as Atlantic Mall), are key to how the project is promoted and also disputed by the environmental justice movement (Sze, 2006).

Thus, what the Nets bring *home* is what nostalgia promises to Brooklyn boosters like Markowitz, and used by Ratner: the feeling of vibrancy and neighborhood intimacy lost by the traumas of Brooklyn’s economic decline and racial transformation through the second half of the 20th century (Wilder, 2000). However, the Atlantic Yards project is not a rosy-eyed return to the White working class and pre-Black



ghetto Brooklyn. Rather, the development is predominantly targeted to high-income skyscrapers, akin to the development at Battery Park City in the late 1980s and what critics call the Manhattanization of Brooklyn. What distinguishes this development from the general up-market real estate development that is seemingly ubiquitous in contemporary New York City (aside from its large scale and scope) is its dependence on basketball to make the case. The focus on the stadium is equal parts pragmatic (because Ratner owns the team) and symbolic, geared specifically to the racial populations most affected by the development, the immediate area that is historically African American, and the borough at large. This is why basketball-related imagery and symbols are so central to promoting the developer's plan, and why basketball clinics in the community are a key part of the public relations campaign. Footage of a rally for the project shows how Nets basketball stars Vince Carter, Kenyon Martin, and Jason Kidd signed autographs and young African American kids held signs that read "Bring b-ball to Brooklyn" (*Brooklyn Matters*).

Basketball specifically and the politics of race generally are also at the symbolic and contested center of the opposition. One critic of the plan, Bob Law of the National Leadership Alliance, focused on the promotion of basketball arena to Blacks, symbolized by the "Jobs/Housing/Hoops" Information Sheet for the project that highlighted the Nets logo and a picture of a Nets player dunking the ball. Law says, "As if black people are to be particularly pleased by the professional basketball team, like we are going to make some of the money . . . but they promoted it like basketball is so important to black people that you can always convince black people to endorse and embrace a project by pointing out that the main piece of this is a basketball team . . . didn't even say basketball team, said 'Hoops,' like we're are so silly, so childlike that if you just wave basketball games in front of us, we'll swoon and fall in love with the project" (*Brooklyn Matters*). Rev. Dennis Dillon of the Brooklyn Christian Center, also a project critic, extends this focus: "As if the only thing black people can do for recreation or relaxation or for sports is basketball" (*Brooklyn Matters*). Race and basketball are also at the center of a controversy regarding naming rights to the arena. Barclay's bank paid \$400 million for naming rights. Arena opponents focus on the history of that bank in terms of its role in slavery and in supporting the South African apartheid regime in the 1980s (Ramirez, 2007). The opponents' focus on racial oppression and slavery contrasts markedly with nostalgia for the Brooklyn Dodgers, although both are linked through symbolism and the history of race relations. This contrasting focus on African American slavery and South African apartheid is meant to sway Black support away from basketball and toward issues of racial justice.

### **Atlantic Yards and Environmental Justice: "Playing Games With Race and Class"<sup>13</sup>**

Understanding racial politics is also key to understanding how the environmental justice movement is mobilized by different constituencies in the Atlantic Yards

dispute. As Whitson and Macintosh (1996) ask in discussing sports development and marketing, “Who is the city for?” Ultimately, they suggest that the politics of development pivot around this question: “Is the city a product to be sold on the tour . . . or as a location in which to invest money? Or, is it a community where people—including those without much disposable income—can *live, work, play and belong?* [italics added].” This quote is significant because Whitson and Macintosh’s “live, work, play and belong” discursively maps and parallels a central tenet of the environmental justice movement, which defines the environment as the place where we “live, work and play” (Cole & Foster, 2000). This definition of the environment is meant as a rejoinder to older, wilderness preservationist conceptions of the environment as Nature, where privileged people escape to and recreate in. From a social movements perspective, this discursive expansion has been very effective. But what has been less well understood is what happens when this live–work–play rubric is adopted and transformed in other contexts. For example, contrast the developer’s marketing materials touting “Housing, Jobs, and Open Space” in a mailing to 300,000 Brooklynites in the May 2006 brochure *A Vision for Downtown Brooklyn* with placards that read “Jobs/Housing/Hoops” held by project supporters at a raucous public hearing on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) held in August 2006 (*Brooklyn Matters*).

Whether marketing focused on Jobs/Housing/Hoops or Housing/Jobs/Open Space, these slogans map to the environmental justice movement slogan of “living, working, and playing.” I am not claiming that the developers and their marketers *consciously* adopted the discourse of the environmental justice movement, but its appearance is nonetheless significant. The adoption of the environmental justice discourse by developers reiterates that environmental justice scholars need a better analytic sense of the “we” in the environment in which “WE live work and play,” analytic complexity first suggested by Pellow (2002). In other words, what is contested and not self-evident is who constitutes the “we.” Also, what does “living, working, and playing” mean and in what contexts? To whom and why? The Atlantic Yards conflict thus also forces the environmental justice literature to take more seriously the complexities of *intra-racial* conflict as well as issues of class. Pulido and Peña (1998) argue that the distinction between mainstream and environmental justice issues is based not only in issue identification but on positionality, or a person’s location within the larger social formation shaped by factors such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Although Pellow (2002) and Sze (2007) discuss *intra-racial* conflict, generally the environmental justice literature does not adequately account for what happens when different constituencies who occupy the same subordinated or disenfranchised subject position conflict. Part of the significance of the Atlantic Yards campaign is that it forces environmental justice theorists to think about discursive claims of the movement applied in different symbolic and political contexts. This case study demands a more nuanced look beyond the movement slogans, which can easily be mobilized by corporate interests in a neoliberal urban development context.

Environmental justice is an important analytic frame for the dispute because of the ways in which environmental justice topics, issues, and symbols are used by both sides. At the DEIS public hearing, several of these were prominent. For example, City Council member Leticia James, a major opponent, testified against the project: “I went to a funeral of a seven-year-old girl who died of asthma. This [the Atlantic Yards project] would increase pollution” (*Brooklyn Matters*). Asthma, specifically minority-youth asthma, has been a major environmental justice activist issue in New York City for more than two decades (Corburn, 2005). James is referencing the increased traffic that the development would usher in on what is already the busiest intersection in the borough. On mentioning this girl’s death, James was booed by the audience. She was booed not primarily because it was perceived as politically cynical or manipulative, but because the hearing was jam-packed with supporters of the plan affiliated with construction unions and ACORN. ACORN supported the plan because they were “community partners” in a “Community Benefits Agreement.”<sup>14</sup> Many of these supporters were holding signs that read “Yes In My Backyard,” and wearing construction hard hats, lured by Ratner with the promise of jobs and housing. This term, of course, references “Not in my backyard,” caricatured and better known as NIMBY-ism.

Furthermore, environmental justice discourse was used by supporters in their statements at the DEIS. According to Darnell Canada, a young African American male in reference to the problems of local youth, “You got 50, 60 people running around a day look for a job . . . you know what, most of them got released (from prison), and they live in your neighborhood. Every day I got to fight to train, to come out, to keep trying. . . . You all talking ‘bout save the environment, better save yourself. Better make sure this process go through, cause I’m telling you if it don’t, you the victim” (*Brooklyn Matters*). His contention is that “you” (i.e., stadium opponents) are elite and environmentalist, whereas “we” need jobs. This references both the longstanding conflict between jobs and the environment as well as the environmental justice movement critique of the mainstream environmental movement that historically interprets “the environment” as an elite space, and one that historically excluded racial minorities (White, 1996). Canada uses this dual construction to support the project as a way to bring jobs to the (presumably Black) community. Another speaker at the public hearing, Carlton Campbell, wore an orange construction hat as he testified about the need for jobs (*Brooklyn Matters*). Outside, in the line waiting to enter the crowded public hearing room, a chant rang out: “We need a J-O-B so we can E-A-T.”

Who constitutes the “we” for Canada and Campbell? Although the primary beneficiary of the project is Ratner, the developer rhetorically, symbolically, and pragmatically widened the “we” to include labor and housing groups through the Community Benefits Agreement, and the “public” and borough writ large, with the focus on sports (the Nets) and recreation (“Urban Room” and green space). Thus, the public hearing was a performance of Ratner’s proxies. The politics of gentrification

and authenticity are central factors in how to interpret the ways in which project proponents and their opponents are discursively constructing their respective positions.

### **“I’m Not Playing That Game”: The Racial Politics of Gentrification and Authenticity**

The broad question of who constitutes the “we” is complicated by the politics of gentrification and displacement in downtown Brooklyn, specifically in the neighborhoods that surround the site. As Freeman (2006) suggests, racial and class dimensions of gentrification in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill are complicated and fraught. Although gentrification has been ongoing for more than 30 years, the recent phase of gentrification brings extremely divided racial and economic populations in close proximity with one another. The neighborhood has historically been perceived as “Black,” although there are great class divisions between the public housing residents and the Black elite, who are homeowners.<sup>15</sup> The influx of White gentrifiers in the past decade has rendered even more visible the race and class differences in the neighborhood. The Atlantic Yards project lies between the two neighborhoods of Fort Greene and Prospect Heights, which have undergone considerable gentrification, in an industrial area between the two. The presence of large public housing developments in Fort Greene, specifically the Walt Whitman and Ingersoll Houses on Myrtle Avenue, ensure that a large population of low-income, largely African American populations, remain in the neighborhood, despite the high increase in real estate values in the surrounding areas.<sup>16</sup> These highly conflictive racial and class politics of authenticity and belonging were highlighted at the Atlantic Yards DEIS hearing.

On the line to enter the public hearing, an argument erupted between a middle-aged African American woman and an older White woman. The Black woman, who supported the Project, asked a White woman who opposed it how long she had lived in the area. The Black woman then argued with another White woman who opposed the project about whether the community was blighted and asked how long she had lived there: “How long have you been here?” The White woman’s answer was “31 years,” to which the African American woman responded, “Well I’ve been here 41 years.” The White woman responded, “Well, I’m not playing that game” (*Brooklyn Matters*).

The “game,” in other words, is not just about basketball or the arena itself but about who belongs where and who speaks for the community. What do race, class, and the recent history of gentrification in the neighborhood have to do with Atlantic Yards, and what do all these factors mean for different social and racial groups in the face of intensifying conditions of neoliberalism? Similarly, at the DEIS hearing, John Holt from the Carpenters Union, which supports the project on the belief that it would lead to more construction jobs, framed his support as, “This is about the haves and the have-nots. We pay taxes, we don’t want our kids to go to jail. We don’t

have nannies. We don't have people cleaning our houses, and if we did, we wouldn't be like you people and pay no taxes on them. We would give them a fair wage. Because that's what we believe in" (*Brooklyn Matters*). He does not focus just on the economic benefits of having a job, but draws attention to divisions in the community between the "haves and the have-nots." This appeal depends on an already existing sense of anxiety and precariousness, to which a job brings some measure of financial relief, if not security.

These rhetorical appeals to the project's elitism is rooted in the fact that some of the project's most vocal opponents are White, professional, young, and relatively recent arrivals to the neighborhood. For example, Daniel Goldstein, a prominent activist with Develop Don't Destroy Brooklyn who has been the focal point of much of the media coverage of the opposition, lives in a recently developed loft building that is where center court for the arena would be located if built. The building opened just before the Atlantic Yards project was announced, and although it was fully occupied at the time of the announcement, he was (as of 2007) the only resident of the building with 31 apartments. The rest sold out to Ratner (Green, 2005). Although Goldstein lives at "ground zero" of the Project, his belonging in the "we" is complicated by his race and class status as a perceived interloper and gentrifier. This exclusion of plan opponents from the "racial" we by African Americans, people like Holt, Canada, and Campbell, can be explained in part by Freeman's (2006) discussion of Black resentment and rage. This resentment and rage is directed at the gentrification process more generally and people specifically, thus directed both at Whites and White privilege. There are exceptions that complicate the particular representation of Black rage versus White privilege set forth by labor and fair housing groups that are part of the so-called Community Benefits Agreement with the developer. For example, activist groups like Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE), which has organized against the Downtown Brooklyn plan since 2003, also uses a racialized (and gendered) framework as the basis for their analysis. But where Holt and Canada use the racial discourse of Black rage at gentrification to exploit class differences (and to render invisible their own co-optation by the developer), FUREE uses their racialized analysis to encompass other non-Black working people under its umbrella. Although they have not focused specifically on Atlantic Yards, their focus on multiracial communities of color, particularly women of color, reveals how an intersectional race- and class-sensitive analysis of urban development can avoid the co-optation in the Atlantic Yards case (<http://www.furee.org/>).

## **Conclusion: The (Not-So) Hidden Face of Power**

The co-optation of the environmental justice movement (both discourses and symbols) and of community, labor, and housing support of Ratner's plan offers

another example of the age-old and effective “divide and conquer” strategy. On the other hand, it reflects something new: the fourth hidden face of power that is, in other words, not so hidden. Rather, the paradoxical *centrality* of race reflects the sophistication of the developer in garnering community, labor, and affordable housing constituencies to support his plan. This rhetorical centrality of race, despite the fact that the development will almost certainly further gentrify the neighborhood in terms of both race and class, is significant. This move reflects not just a clever and well-managed publicity campaign (although it may also be that), but also the power of corporate actors to *manage* the racial politics of place and authenticity in a neoliberal urban economic development context. This is accomplished by absorbing and placing at its center the symbols and stories associated with sports and environmental justice.

There are at least three important interlinked themes in this campaign, for environmental justice scholars in general and for others pondering the implications of the project and its opposition: on race, power, and history. For environmental justice scholars, the first is on the slippery role of race. Pellow’s environmental justice framework calls for a focus on the effects of social stratification by race and class, and the ability of those with the least access to resources to shape the struggle for environmental justice. But what if the very same constituencies who fight for environmental justice also support neoliberal economic development that will ultimately act against their interests by ushering in their own displacement? What are we to make of this? One response is to use simple “delusion” or “co-optation” as an explanation. The other end of the explanatory spectrum (which is not to deny either delusion or co-optation) is to focus on the powerful and adaptive possibilities of capitalism in the neoliberal moment to absorb, transform, and use for its own ends the language, analyses, and aspirations of social movements. Thus, environmental justice scholars need to problematize the “we” and not assume that the “we” is self-evident, that is, composed of the low-income, non-White, and politically disenfranchised. The “we” in other words, can make alliances with corporate developers that are behind projects that further accelerate gentrification. The primacy of race in environmental justice discourse is also open to debate. In Pellow’s (2007) most recent work on global toxics and social movements, he argues that racism remains central to environmental justice scholarship, but that environmental racism must also be analyzed *vis-à-vis* gender, class, and nation-state formation in a larger global framework. I agree with Pellow about the need for environmental justice scholarship to think more deeply and in more complexity about how environmental inequality manifests in both local and global or transnational contexts.

The Atlantic Yards project reveals that environmental justice scholars need to better address power, specifically issues of gentrification and displacement, and to use more nuanced analyses of race and class. They/we need to focus not only on politics of race and identity *vis-à-vis* environmental pollution but on amenities such as open space and recreation. There also needs to be more sustained analysis of

power and democracy construed broadly, including how corporate capitalism and neoliberal urban economic development are privatizing space and reducing the public spheres of decision making and democracy.

Lastly, the project suggests a better understanding of the interplay between the past and the present. This interplay is evident in the project's nostalgic invocation of the past as well as the opposition's focus on urban renewal and slavery. Ballon and Jackson (2007) have argued in a recent revisionist account of Robert Moses' legacy in New York City that Caro's (1975) classic take on the "Master Builder" is unfair. That is, despite his generally negative impacts on local communities, Moses could get big projects built in a way that contemporary builders cannot. As Fainstein (2005) argues, the overwhelming focus on mega projects in New York City's development agenda (Manhattan's West Side, the Bronx Terminal Market, and the Atlantic Yards projects) harken back to the Moses reign and represent a "rejection of timidity" in the wake of failures of urban renewal. Yet nostalgia for the era of big projects and decisive action also obscures the real impacts of urban renewal and displacement on whole neighborhoods, often (although not exclusively) communities of color, and people's lives, as Caro trenchantly reminds us (Pogrebin, 2007). Similarly, Fainstein (2005) both endorses the focus on urban planning and vision, at the same time that she warns that "the methods by which the plans are developed, the emphasis on sports complexes, the encumbrances on the city and the state's public integrity, and the sheer magnitude and density of the proposed projects can only cause serious misgivings." These misgivings are real, and nostalgia for the era of Moses and all he represents obscures the larger political, economic, and social stakes of the Atlantic Yards project. Interestingly, Moses' refusal to allow the Flatbush and Atlantic site to be built for Dodger Stadium is what O'Malley used as his excuse to move the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles. However, interviews with team managers showed that Moses' refusal was just an excuse. In fact, O'Malley was following the money available out West and had long ago decided to move over the objections of everyone on his top staff (Anderson, 2007).

Ultimately, a number of complex factors all matter in the dispute over Atlantic Yards, including *contemporary* race and class conflict over who benefits and who bears the burden of urban development as currently conceived (power), and the *cultural and political history* of the neighborhood, urban renewal, and the Borough. There are multiple and competing environmental justice implications of stadium development, depending on the positionality of the analysis (ranging from Jobs/Housing/Hoops from the Ratner P.R. machine, to Council member James's invocation of asthma). Part of the success of the environmental justice movement is evidenced by how the language of the movement has been co-opted in the context of intensifying neoliberal urban economic development. Thus, environmental justice scholars and scholars of stadium siting need to be *particularly* sensitive to how complex and competing factors shape contemporary stadium development, including race and class stratification (and how they sometimes conflict), and the interplay of the past

and the present. At the end of the day, whether or not the Atlantic Yards project and stadium is built and in what form, the project and its opposition reveal much about the complicated state of race-, class-, and place-based politics in neoliberal New York City.

## Notes

1. Although my method is not ethnographic, as a former resident of the neighborhood in question, my lived experience in the neighborhood shapes my knowledge of the complex race and class politics of the area, specifically the context of gentrification in Downtown Brooklyn in general and the Fort Greene and Prospect Heights areas in particular.

2. DDDDB is a volunteer-run organization and a coalition of approximately 51 community organizations formally aligned in opposition to the Ratner plan. Retrieved November 21, 2007, from <http://dddb.net/php/aboutdddb.php>

3. Many of the direct quotes are drawn from an anti-Ratner/Atlantic Yards documentary titled *Brooklyn Matters*. *Brooklyn Matters* is an insightful documentary about the Atlantic Yards proposal and highlights “how a few powerful men are circumventing community participation and planning principles to try to push their own interests forward.” Despite its clearly partisan nature, it is also a useful record of one of the few public hearings on the proposal that took place on the Atlantic Yards Draft Environmental Impact Statement (<http://www.brooklynmatters.com/>).

4. The broader context for the transformation of Downtown Brooklyn was the 2003 rezoning “enacting major zoning changes, creating high-quality public spaces, providing adequate parking facilities, improving transit infrastructure, strengthening retail, expanding cultural resources, and enhancing the pedestrian environment (New York City Dept. of City Planning, 2008b).

5. New York State is to contribute \$100 million, and New York City \$205 million in direct contributions as well as numerous tax breaks and subsidies, bringing the total known public money to be used in the project to approximately \$1.929 billion. The Long Island Railroad rejected a higher bid on the Rail Yard site (\$150 million) in favor of Ratner’s lower \$100 million bid (the LIRR is closely allied with the politicians that support the proposal). This also includes the project’s dependence on a controversial financing tool, Payments in Lieu of Taxes, or PILOTS. Ratner’s other developments depend heavily on PILOTS, which cities offer to companies threatening to leave. PILOTS are privately negotiated deals, in which companies pay a fraction of their property taxes. Forest City Ratner paid just one third of its tax bill for its existing downtown properties. Critics lambast PILOTS because the taxes are not paid into City coffers (Gonzalez, 2007).

6. Because the project has yet to be built, the specific data on the latter point does not yet exist, although unsurprisingly, a number of competing reports focus on these projected benefits. For a report that supports the project, see Zimbalist (2005). Andrew Zimbalist of Smith College, a long-time critic of public financing for stadiums, is a supporter of the Atlantic Yards Report. As a paid consultant, he wrote this report on the fiscal impact of the project for New York City and State. For a report that disputes the developer estimates, see Kim and Peebles (2004).

7. One lawsuit against the Empire State Development Corporation is focused on the Environmental Impact Statement. For the petition, see <http://dddb.net/FEIS/summary.php>.

8. Julia Vitulla Martin from the Manhattan Institute says, “Jane Jacobs. Didn’t we learn about Jane Jacobs principles? We’re throwing these out. De-mapping of the streets. World Trade Center. Catastrophe for neighborhood. Dead street life, dangerous. No vitality,” quoted in *Brooklyn Matters*. Also, as one critic describes Gehry, “You’ve got an architect who builds suit-of-armor buildings that repel people from their edges. The exterior of the Bilbao Museum is famously unsafe. And you’ve got a developer who builds tower-moat projects” (Schwartz, 2006).

9. For an activist description of the Downtown Brooklyn plan, see <http://furee.org/downtownbklyn.html>



10. <http://www.atlanticyards.com/>.

11. As Lipsitz (1984) and Avila (2004) show, this move had its own racial and spatial consequences in Los Angeles in the Chavez Ravine area where Dodger Stadium was built.

12. [http://www.brooklyn-usa.org/Pages/State\\_of\\_the\\_Borough/stateoftheborough04.htm](http://www.brooklyn-usa.org/Pages/State_of_the_Borough/stateoftheborough04.htm).

13. This is a quote from Council Member Leticia James, quoted in an interview in *Brooklyn Matters*.

14. For details on the Agreement, see <http://www.atlanticyards.com/html/community/cba.html>. Community Benefits Agreements in general are controversial because of the lack of clarity of who “represents” the community (a community group vs. an elected public official). Also, this specific agreement has been criticized on other grounds, that there is not enough affordable housing (or that the threshold for affordable is too high), that the agreement is not legally enforceable, and that the community organizations are on the developer’s payroll.

15. Freeman (2006) argues that the development of downtown Brooklyn in the 1970s and 1980s was a key moment that facilitated gentrification, because of the neighborhood’s proximity.

16. But even this fact is highly contested. The New York City Housing Authority relocated 647 families for a \$150-million renovation (Grace, 2006). Residents fear this is a prelude to eviction. This fear has some context, as a similar renovation in another area of Brooklyn has led to the de facto removal of the families from public housing (Tucker, 2007). The area around the Whitman and Ingersoll houses lost its only supermarket and numerous local services, which were evicted for residential development.

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**Julie Sze** is an Associate Professor in American Studies at the University of California at Davis and founding director of the Environmental Justice Project of the John Muir Institute of the Environment. Her research investigates environmental justice and environmental inequality; culture and environment; race, gender, and power; and community health and activism. Her book *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* examines urban inequality, environmental justice, and contemporary culture, focusing on asthma and air quality and garbage and energy policy in the age of privatization and deregulation. *Noxious New York* won the 2008 John Hope Franklin Prize for the best book published in American Studies. Sze has also worked with community-based environmental organizations in New York City and California for the past 15 years.