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Community Land Trusts, Environmental Justice, and Diasporas: A New Take on Human Rights



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Communities besieged by environmental justice struggles are usually afflicted by a host of other related and unrelated ills. In fact, it is rare to find a community affected only by a single environmental problem; usually, the environmental concerns in a community are multiple (e.g., toxic dumping, flooding, poor air quality, lack of access to green space, lead exposure). Often, the environmental injustice portfolio in these communities intersect with other social, political, and economic ills related to public health, institutionalized racism, community displacement, poverty, lack of access to quality education, etc. Moreover, these challenges typically cluster geographically and spatially.

Specifically, it can be argued that almost all local environmental justice issues are rooted in questions over who controls land and for what purposes. And while it is still relatively uncommon to see environmental problems being fought at the level of land ownership or property-tenure regimes in the United States, increasingly activists are framing their arguments around a radical critique of land-ownership regimes. Take, for example, the case of local activists in the South Bronx, where environmental challenges are being framed not only around what happens on the land, but also on who owns it and under what conditions.

What activists in the South Bronx and elsewhere are rediscovering is the idea that not all movements for justice and equity need to be identity-centric; but, rather, that questioning inherent notions of ownership within the context of place (whether site- or land-specific) can offer both a theoretically relevant and politically effective way of articulating broader demands for change. Just as labor-centric articulations of social justice have been important in acquiring increased security for workers and identity-centric articulations have pushed society to be more inclusive, land-based demands can play an important role at a political level in advancing equity and justice, particularly in matters of environmental concerns.

We are all residents of a *place*, whether that place be a street, neighborhood, city, nation, or region, and we all have place-based allegiances. Land-centric demands for justice have the potential to turn residents—the people that inhabit a place—into primary agents driving demands for justice and equity — ‘resist-dents.’

If social and environmental ills are clustered on the land, it only makes sense to challenge them from a perspective that goes to the heart of this land problem. In recent years, more groups and communities are rediscovering the idea of [community land trusts \(CLTs\)](#), land-centered mechanisms that can give residents the power to determine, in a democratic, transparent, and accountable manner, what transpires on the land.

Community land trusts are a relatively old idea; influenced by the politics and vision of the kibbutz movement in Israel and the community land grant ‘Gramdan’ movement of post-independence India, the idea was originally developed and sharpened in the United States during the Civil Rights era to help black farmers preserve their access to the land in the Deep South post-Jim Crow. CLTs help communities organize in order to acquire land *in perpetuity* for the benefit of the community. Through perpetual community ownership, land is removed from the speculative market, and decisions about what happens on the land are taken by the community through a unique voting process that includes members living within the CLT’s so-called ‘catchment area’ (i.e., within the CLTs’ borders), members leasing land owned by the CLT, and outsiders sympathetic to the community land trust idea (e.g., academics, activists, non-profit organizations, funders, etc.). Ultimately, this unique institutional voting dynamic gives the community both *control* over the land in the present for those living today, and the ability to *steward* the land well into the future for the enjoyment and benefit of future generations. CLTs help communities avoid [presentism](#), “a bias in favor of present over future generations.”

CLTs are especially well-suited to assist communities that have been exposed to environmental emergencies, like the Caribbean islands devastated by the 2017 hurricane season (especially Puerto Rico). Communities that had either well-established CLTs or CLT-friendly organizations (e.g., the community of [El Caño Martín Peña](#) in San Juan, and the town of Adjuntas where the organization [Casa Pueblo](#) is located), or that were organizing along CLT lines (e.g., the [Río Piedras](#) community around the Universidad de Puerto Rico), were much better positioned to help their communities rebuild, and bring much needed relief right after the hurricanes.

Efforts to spread the CLT model as a way for communities to gain control over environmental matters, anti-speculation initiatives, emergency protection, democratic and accountable governance, and trusteeship of the land are intimately tied in large urban areas in the United States. It is no accident that the neighborhoods with working CLTs in New York City, like East Harlem, Mott Haven in the South Bronx, and Cooper Square in downtown Manhattan, are communities with large Puerto Rican populations. The diasporic dynamics and networks of support coupled with intercultural information flow and similar challenges concerning gentrification, displacement, and environmental racism, have created a virtuous

cycle in which activists in Puerto Rico and New York City constantly exchange information and support each other's environmental justice goals.

Addressing the problems of land ownership through a shared history of activism that supports CLTs has allowed communities of color and diasporic networks to develop a new language and framework to combat environmental injustice. The efforts made by these communities have the potential to dramatically alter the meaning, value, and legacy of human and environmental rights struggles.

About the author:

Monxo López teaches Latino Studies and politics at Hunter College's Department of Africana, Puerto Rican and Latino Studies; he is a cartographer/GIS specialist, South Bronx-based environmental activist, founding member of South Bronx Unite, and board member of the Mott Haven/Port Morris Community Land Stewards, the South Bronx's local Community Land Trust. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from CUNY's Graduate Center, and an MA from Université Laval in Québec, Canada. His academic research revolves around spatiality, mapping, social justice, political theory, and Latino communities. His political writings on spatial and social justice have been published on Salon.com, LatinoRebels, and NACLA, among other places; his activist work has been profiled by *The New York Times*, *UrbanOmnibus*, and *Corriere della Sera*.

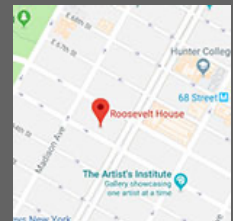
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