

Nature, Environmentalism, and the City

ENG/ENV M30: Environment across Cultures
Prof. Heise
25 April 2023

Lecture Overview

- Recap: Toxic Narrative
- Environmental Justice and Biodiversity in the City (LENS podcast)
- Environmentalism and the City (Price)



Recap | Elements of Toxic Storytelling:

- A **moment of awakening** to the reality of contamination
- Images of an **entire world that is polluted** and from which there is no escape
- **Moral passion of the injured powerless party against the powerful:**
often victims, neighborhoods, communities described as rising up against political authorities and/or corporations
- **Gothic elements:** descriptions of deformed bodies, polluted landscapes
- Portrayals of the **family as what is centrally endangered by toxicity:**
emphasis on how exposure to toxicity endangers individual bodies, but along with them also family ties.
- **Tension between scientific and spiritual/religious views** of toxic disaster or illness

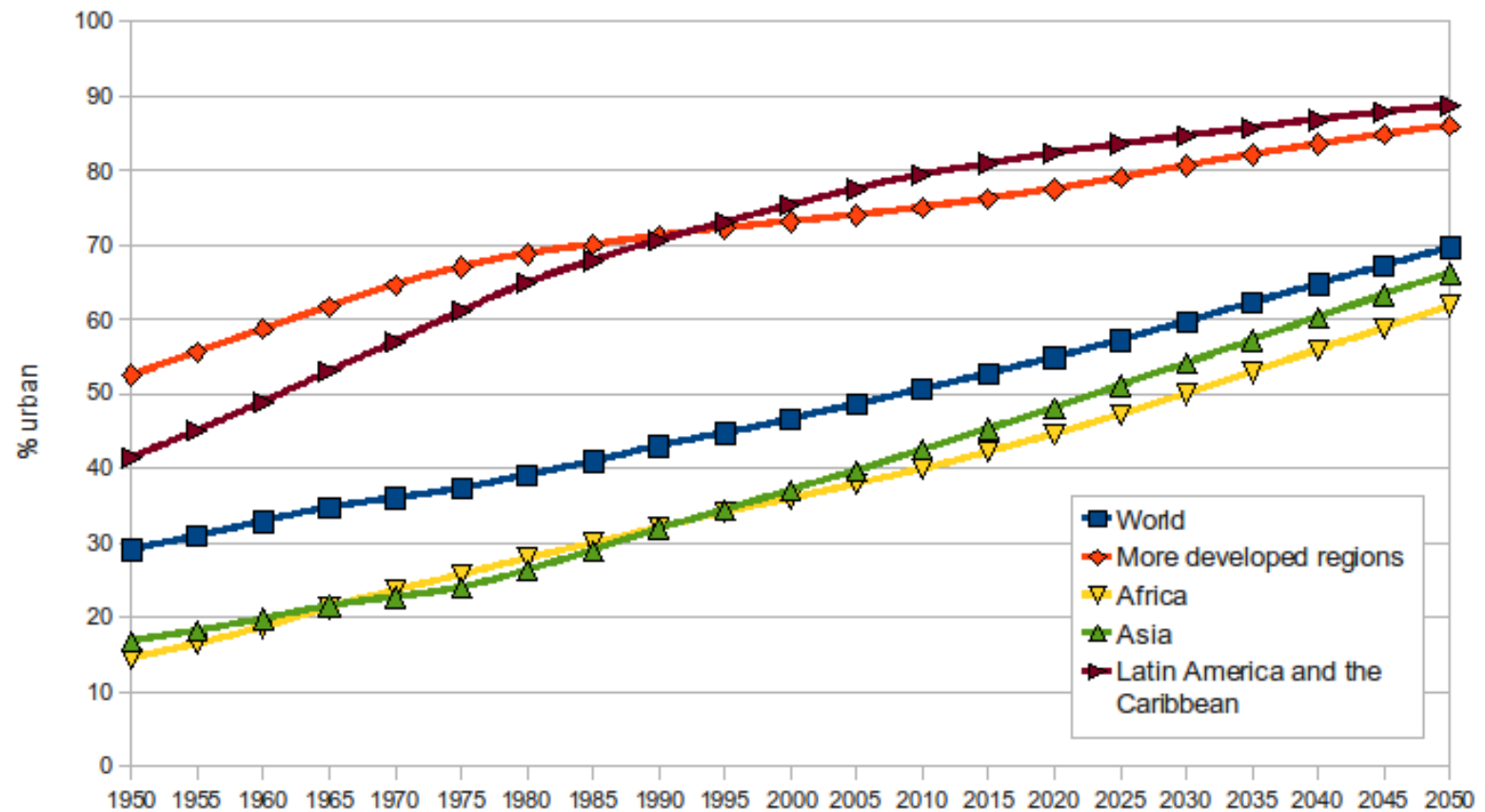
Please note:

Not every individual toxic story contains all of these elements, and it's useful to ask which ones are left out and why.

Urbanization in the Anthropocene

Percentage of Population Living in Urban Areas by Region, 1950-2050.

Source: UN World Urbanization Prospects, 2007.



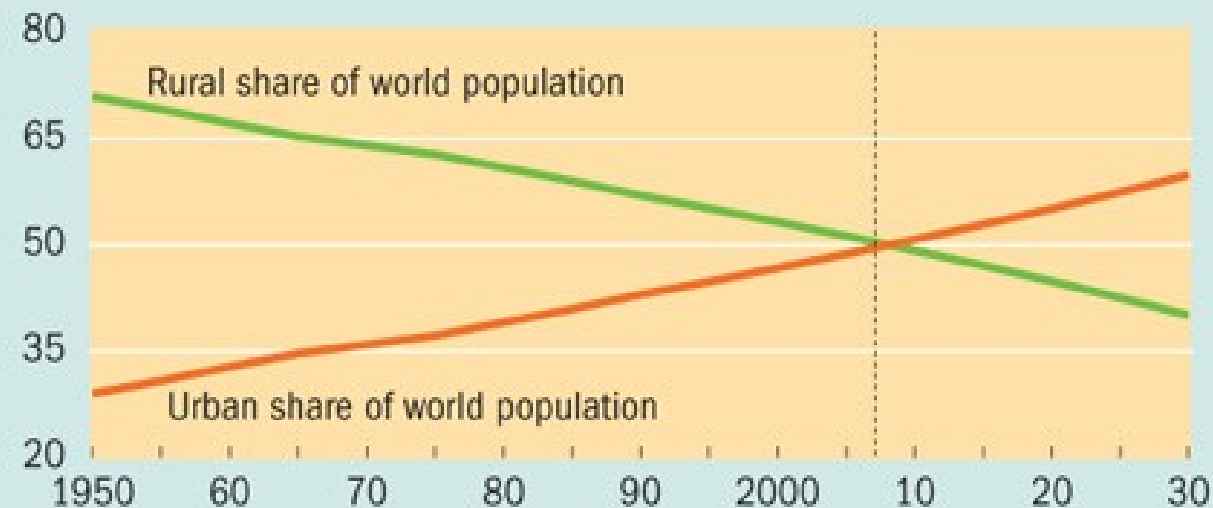
Urbanization in the Anthropocene

Chart 1

Tipping the scale

Next year, for the first time in history, more people will be living in urban than in rural areas.

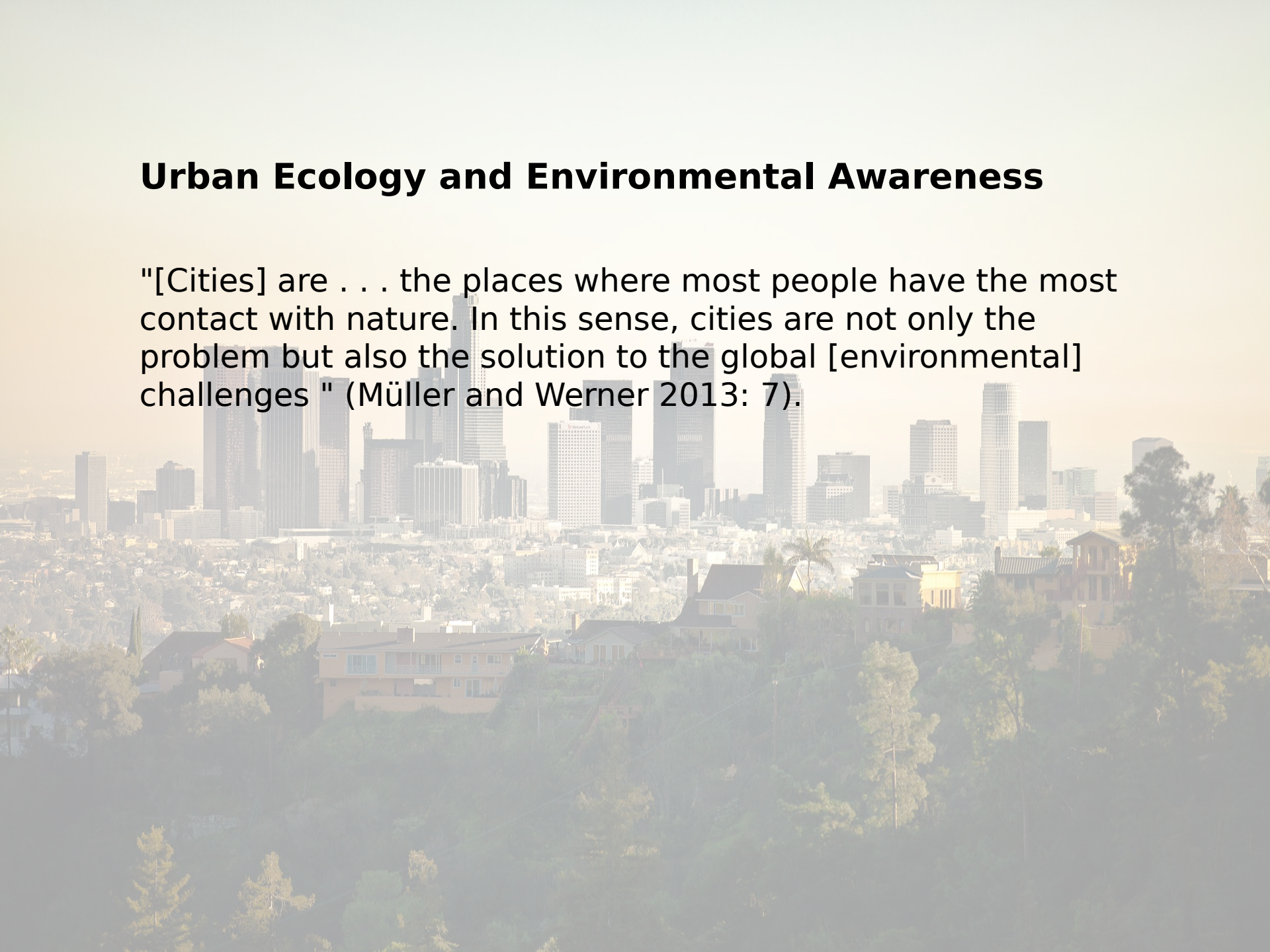
(percent)



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision* (2007).

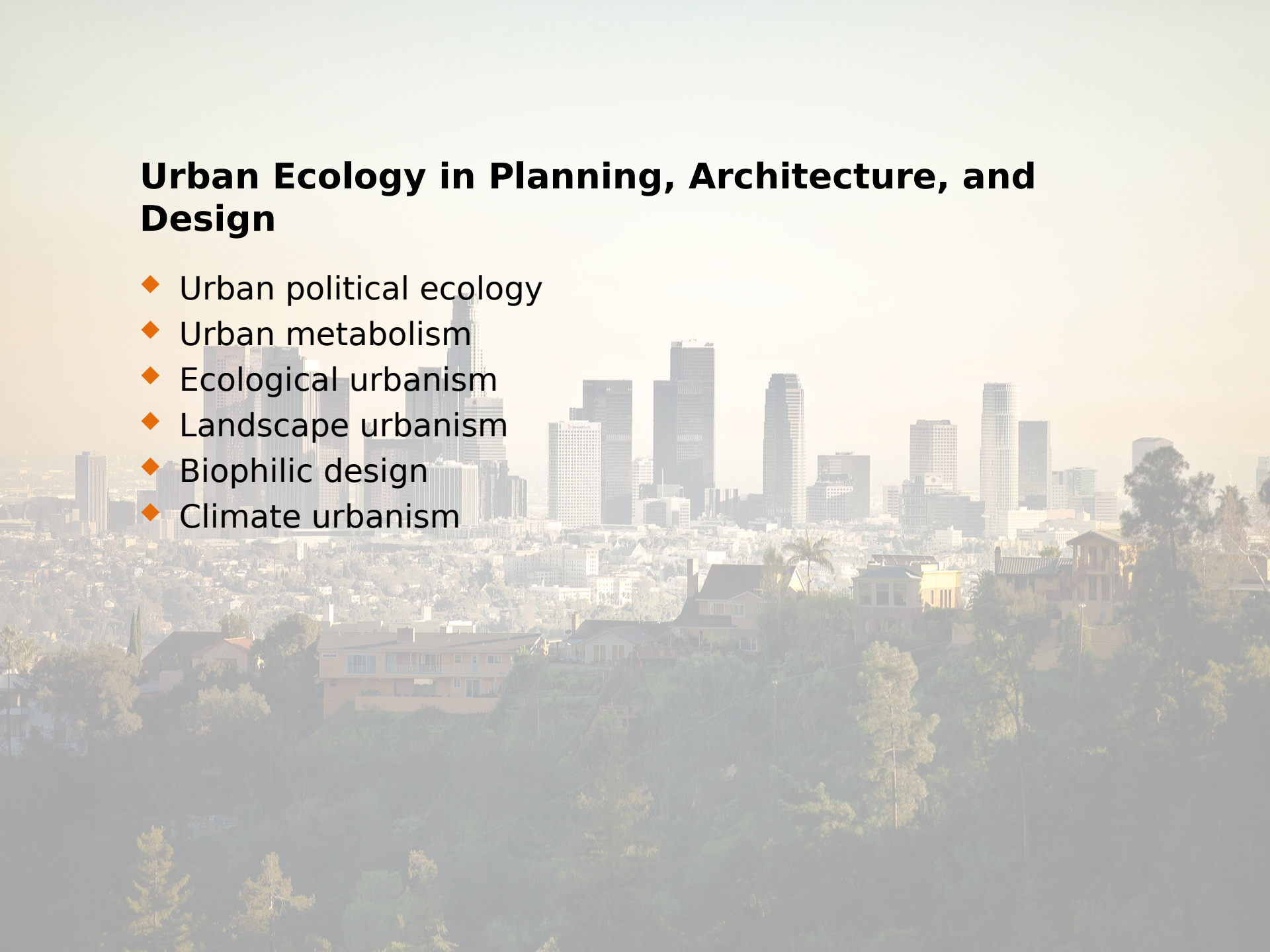
Urban Ecology and Environmental Awareness

"[Cities] are . . . the places where most people have the most contact with nature. In this sense, cities are not only the problem but also the solution to the global [environmental] challenges " (Müller and Werner 2013: 7).



Urban Ecology in Planning, Architecture, and Design

- ◆ Urban political ecology
- ◆ Urban metabolism
- ◆ Ecological urbanism
- ◆ Landscape urbanism
- ◆ Biophilic design
- ◆ Climate urbanism



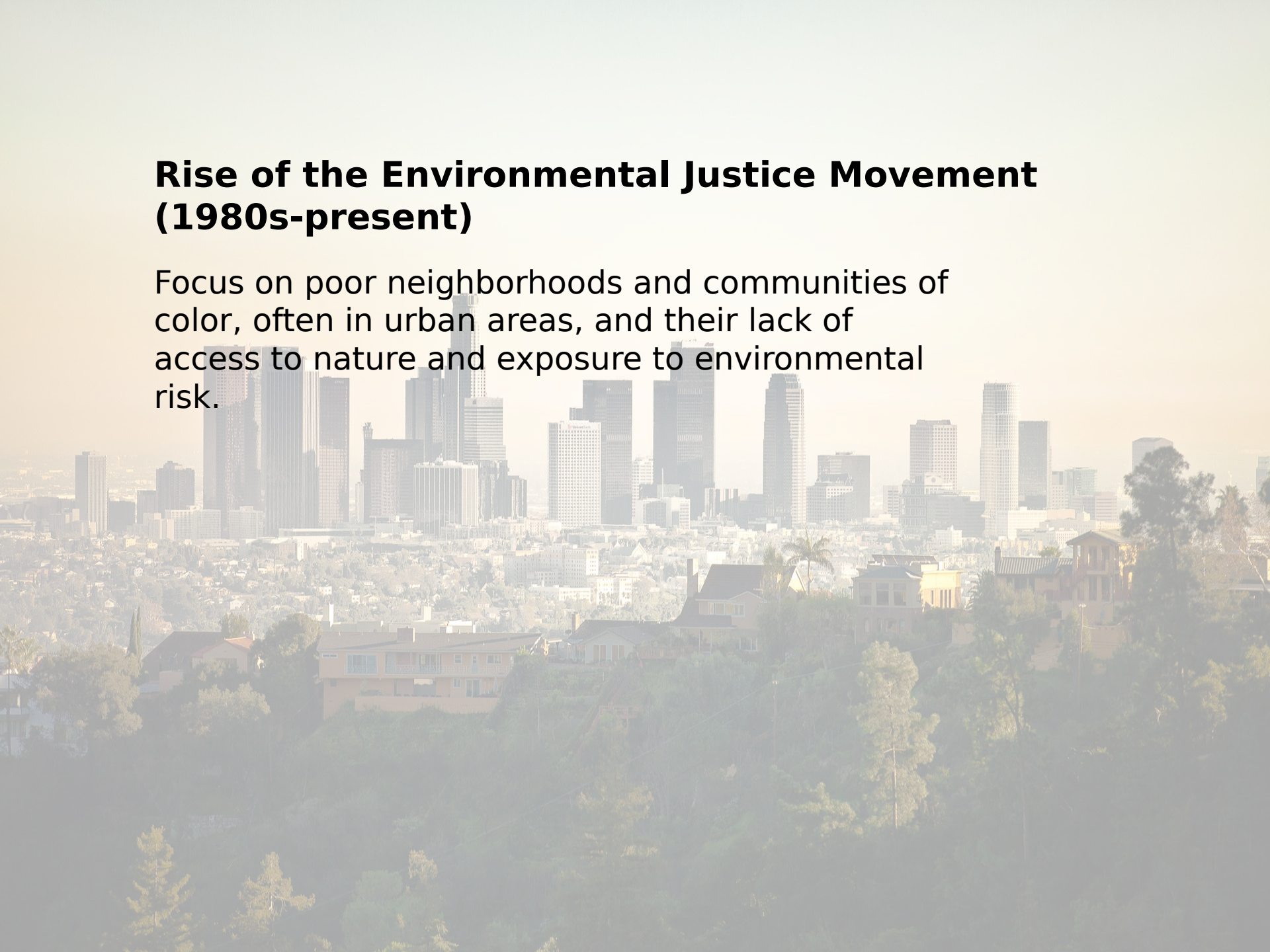
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Nature in the city ↔ nature for the city ↔ city as nature (“novel ecosystem”)

Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement (1980s-present)

Focus on poor neighborhoods and communities of color, often in urban areas, and their lack of access to nature and exposure to environmental risk.



LENS Podcast: Heirlooms of Conquest | 2021

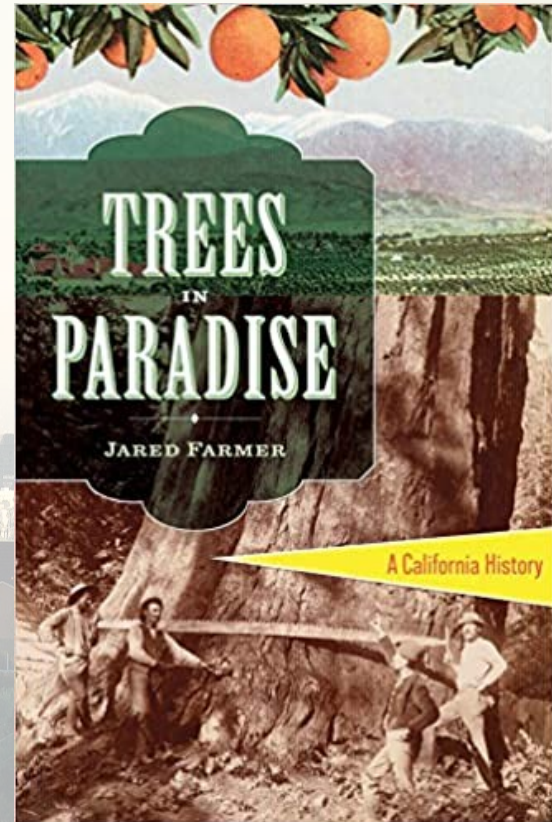
LA Tree Cover:

<https://www.treepeople.org/los-angeles-county-tree-canopy-map-viewer/>

LENS Podcast: Los Angeles Trees



"Heirlooms of conquest"



LENS Podcast: TreePeople



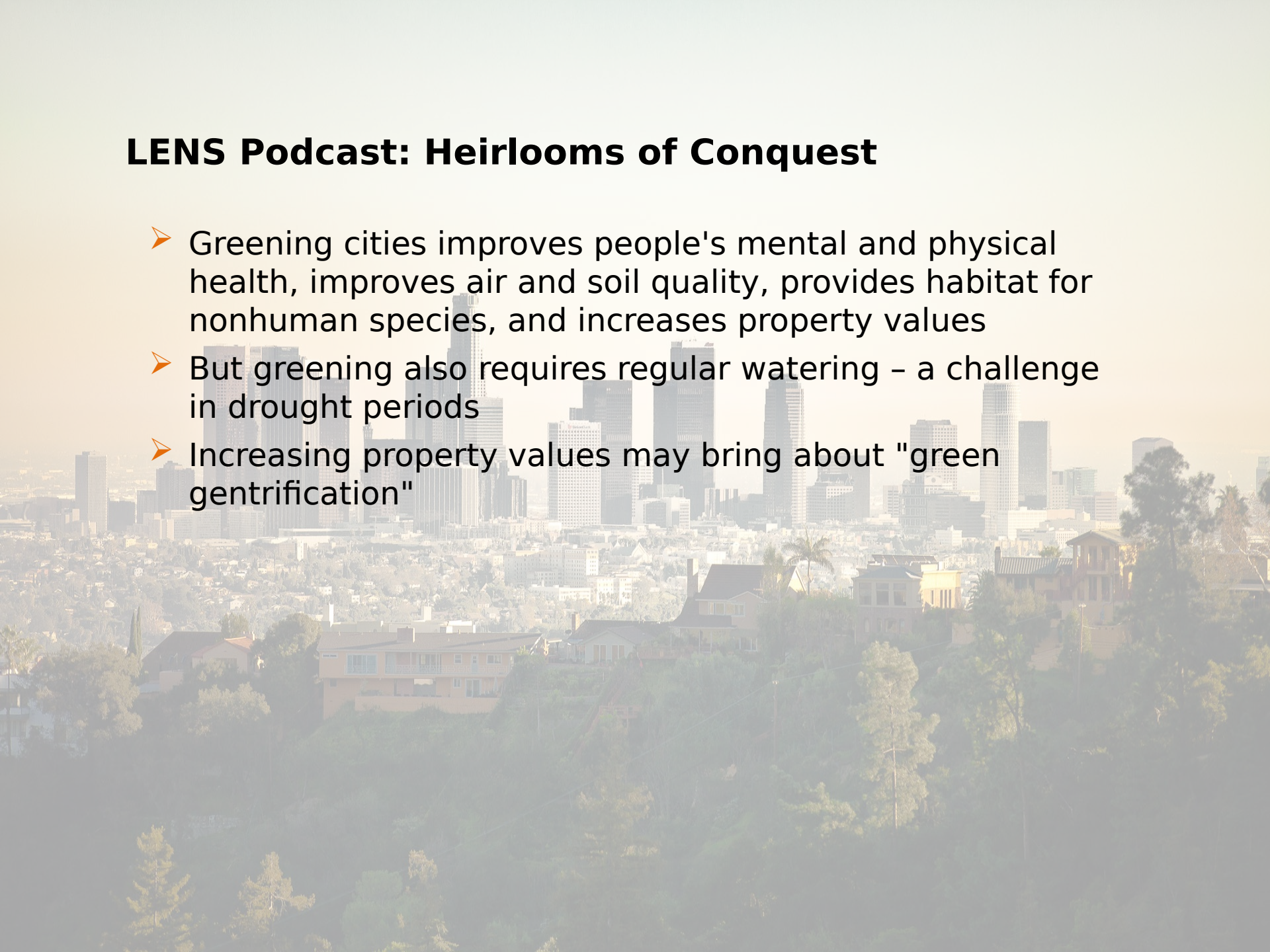
Maria Adame



Miguel Vargas

LENS Podcast: Heirlooms of Conquest

- Greening cities improves people's mental and physical health, improves air and soil quality, provides habitat for nonhuman species, and increases property values
- But greening also requires regular watering – a challenge in drought periods
- Increasing property values may bring about "green gentrification"



What do urban trees have to do with environmental justice?

- ❖ Middle- and upper-class neighborhoods generally have more trees (as well as more parks and backyard green space) than working-class/low-income neighborhoods (including many neighborhoods of color).
- ❖ What type of trees gets planted has to do with people's **cultural preferences** (what people find beautiful, reminds them of home, reminds them of their childhood, corresponds to gardening fashions) and whose preferences can get translated into reality.

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- ❖ What type of trees gets planted has to do with "**aesthetic infrastructure**": what image a city or neighborhood wants to project of itself.
- ❖ What type of trees gets planted has to do with **real estate markets** and the way in which a city or neighborhood tries to sell itself to potential buyers: Los Angeles as a mediterranean beach city or as "semi-tropical" paradise.
- ❖ What type of trees gets planted is in part an "**heirloom of conquest**": those who conquer the urban space determine what its vegetation looks like. So urban trees are a visible record of unevenly distributed power.



Jenny Price

Environmental historian, urban
environmental activist (LA River,
LA Urban Rangers)

Price's Stories about Nature in LA: A Closer Look

- Which of the 13 aspects of nature in LA did you find most interesting/surprising/intuitive/counter-intuitive/scary?
- Which aspects of urban nature that you find important, appealing, scary, or disgusting are missing from Price's essay?

