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ENVIRONMENT IN CRISIS:  
SEEKING AN AFROFUTURIST PERSPECTIVE

Simone Wolynski

SUBMITTED TO PITZER COLLEGE  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF A BACHELOR OF ARTS  
DEGREE IN AFRICANA STUDIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

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## **Abstract**

This research examines the relationship between environmental oppression and racial injustice, speculating about the need for a paradigmatic shift to better promote an intersectional justice movement. Through a presentation of literature that confronts failing environmentalism, I argue that the framework propels social injustices through its elitism and exclusivity. Current environmentalism hinders sustainable change and further contributes to prolonged inaction in socially targeted communities. Using East St. Louis as a case study on cyclic environmental and racial injustice, I present a long-term historical landscape of the city. Industrial overuse and political negligence cement the predominately Black residents in poverty and pollution. Environmental issues attacking East St. Louis trigger social consequences including housing discrimination, public health crises, and educational inaccessibility. Afro Pessimism asserts that current conditions for these communities comprised of minority, low-income populations brinks dystopia only destruction can relieve. In questioning what is needed to promote positive futures for Black communities, I postulate how an Afrofuturist perspective could contribute to a new equitable, inclusive environmentalism.

*Key terms: Environmental justice, environmental racism, Afro Pessimism, Afrofuturism, industrial overuse, East St. Louis*

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## Introduction

Environmental crisis becomes more pressing with each passing day. The justice work that strives for sustainable change clashes with the strength of stagnant systems. Throughout my academic career, I learned about the intersections of our environment. Each lesson emphasized the interconnectivity of Black struggle and environmental strife. Though the interdisciplinarity of environmental studies motivated me in my pursuit of a justice-based education, I could not ignore the distance I felt from the environment when I entered classrooms as the only Black student or one of few. Yes, I know these situations are bound to happen at predominately white liberal arts institutions, but I felt a greater separation. The field still seemed exclusive even when teaching the truth about stolen Native lands or calling for collective justice. A gap existed in my liberatory education between my Africana Studies courses and my Environmental Analysis ones. Why? When I first learned about Afrofuturism through Octavia Butler's works I thought, *This is the platform that is doing it!* In her literature, Butler has a way of effortlessly joining the intersections of race—specifically highlighting Black women—and the environment, making her protagonists one with nature and one with change. When I later learned about Afrofuturism as a mode of political thought, the emphasis on creation and radical hope Butler introduced me to remained. I wanted to know how Afrofuturism could converse with elitist, exclusive environmentalism. If the two frameworks sat down to break bread, what insight would they gain? Which aspects of their essences would change if any? Would the two find common ground and make plans for another gathering? In the following pages, I present the environmental struggles and social negligence that maintain my longing for a more inclusive environmental framework.

## Literature Review

### Environmental Crisis

Environmentalism falls under the umbrella of environmental justice, joining social justice and environmentalism to combat inequity in environmental degradation.<sup>1</sup> In the context of this research, I call attention to environmentalism for stalling the environmental justice movement. Environmentalism historically prevents the inclusion of people of color from leadership in mainstream environmental action. Racial discrimination in environmental policymaking targets Black, brown, and indigenous communities as sites for toxic waste facilities, permitting the use of life-threatening chemicals and pollutants.<sup>2</sup> Research on respiratory and cancer risks related to ambient air toxics exposure shows that youth of color in the Los Angeles Unified School District undergo likely disparate health impacts. Potential brain damage from lead and mercury exposure or air pollution can reduce academic performances for affected students.<sup>3</sup> Toxicity goes beyond said physical attacks to hinder community building, exemplified in East St. Louis and too many other cities suffering from environmental contamination and lack of remediation. This reality is not coincidental, but rather purposeful. The interconnection of environmental degradation and racial discrimination historically ties the environment and Black people to the same fates: ownership, negligence, destruction.<sup>4</sup> Institutionalized poverty and racism endure in hazardous environmental zones. Property, one of the most legally protected assets, seemingly exceeds the

<sup>1</sup> Leah Thomas, "Intersectional Environmentalism: Why Environmental Justice Is Essential For A Sustainable Future," *The Good Trade* (The Good Trade, June 3, 2019), <https://www.thegoodtrade.com/features/environmental-justice>

<sup>2</sup>Ryan Holifield, "Defining Environmental Justice and Environmental Racism," *Urban Geography* 22, no. 1 (2001): 83. <https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.22.1.78>.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Morello-Frosch, et al., "Reading, Writing, and Toxics: Children's Health, Academic Performance, and Environmental Justice in Los Angeles," *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 22 (n.d.): 271, <https://doi.org/10.1068/c009r>.

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

value of Black people. Zoning laws further hinder low-income, Black, and brown communities from accessing education, employment, and nature. Where people live determines water filtration, waste management, industrial development, and access to healthcare often dependent on the district taxes paid in an area.<sup>5</sup> Environmental racism blames victims for living under these circumstances while simultaneously relinquishing guilt from observers and direct producers. The dependency on market dynamics encourages a check-and-balance mentality –*which came first? the environmental hazard or the socio-economic makeup of a given area?* –over the acknowledgment that racial discrimination is a customary, deep-seated part of our society.<sup>6</sup>

The invisibilization of Black people in the outdoors further excludes them in all places that hold stake in environmental interactions.<sup>7</sup> The separation of Black people and the environment in the public sphere sources the inability to protect the two. This detachment also erases histories of resistance and triumph. Black people’s survival in the face of racial terrorism demonstrates how communities have dealt with existential crises long before the problem became explicitly environmental. What differs now is environmental issues, like climate change, exceed the consequences of toxicity that target Black, brown, indigenous, and poor communities<sup>8</sup>. Environmental movements have garnered attention from more privileged people through their recognition of environmental degradation as a humankind problem. Interest

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer F. Hamer, “East St. Louis As Detroit’s Mirror,” *Solidarity* ([https://solidarity-us.org/files/ATC\\_166--EastStLouis.pdf](https://solidarity-us.org/files/ATC_166--EastStLouis.pdf), 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Smith McLeod, "Unmasking the Processes and Justifications that Lead to Environmental Racism: A Critique of Judicial Decision-Making, Political and Public Ambivalence, and the Disproportionate Placement of Environmental and Land Use Burdens in Communities of Color," *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law* 15, no. 3, (Spring 2008): 555

<sup>7</sup> Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Annaise Heglar, “Climate Change Isn’t the First Existential Threat,” *Medium* (ZORA, February 18, 2020), <https://zora.medium.com/sorry-yall-but-climate-change-ain-t-the-first-existential-threat-b3c999267aa0>

convergence theory asserts that when privileged people's concerns overlap with those of minority groups, society can combat environmentally racist outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Critical Race Theory, and Afro Pessimism as a subset, argues interest convergence theory will never actualize under the current societal frameworks. Interest convergence theory requires the relinquishment of privilege unseen in history. The legal system—courts and society's policy-makers—that deems these interests function only as intended, maintaining an exclusive, caste-based structure. Our positions in the racial hierarchy will continue to correlate to our relationships with the environment until a global systemic shift comes to fruition.

**Afro Pessimism** *The state of racial injustice*

Society has yet to make sustainable progress toward a society in which Black people are free. Environmental racism and educational injustice sit at the core of hegemonic socio-political systems, contextualized through Afro Pessimism. The theory describes the desolate conditions in which Black people live as inescapable, asserting that the persistence of these circumstances is intentional. In Baltimore, the city destroyed 10,000 homes to construct a one-mile freeway. The city planning, neither practical nor efficient, showcases the illogic of false covers realistically meant to terrorize Black communities. The oppression Black people experience exceeds sociopolitical negligence or economic inequality.<sup>10</sup> The plight converges state, capital, and cultural attacks in the executions of poor, marginalized racial groups. Cities in crisis worsen with or without government action. Failing academia, urban planning, and environmentalism further sustain racial injustice. Academic spaces do not create adequate space for research, examination, and reconstruction of marginalized communities. Investigations focusing on race and other

<sup>9</sup> McLeod, 568

<sup>10</sup> Clyde Woods, "Life After Death," *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (2002): p. 62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00315>

identity-based problematizations too often exclude the histories of persecution and resistance behind the issue. The exclusion of active local and state racial practices contributes to the invisibilization of injustice. With increased white flight, states have invested funding in planning for predominately white spaces while they have divested from regions comprised of largely Black and brown populations. The semblance of development on a state level hinders change in social policy nationally, preventing the standardization of federal support.<sup>11</sup> The environmental conditions in which East St. Louis residents live depicts the hopelessness surrounding the Black American experience.<sup>12</sup> Educational, public health, and economic crises arise from environmental toxicity plaguing the city.<sup>13</sup> The state views residents of the city as an expendable population; the demographics being 98% Black.

Whiteness *is* capital as race functions in our society. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Derrick Bell's contributions to Critical Race Theory, Karl Marx's communist theory, Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, and CLR James' *The Black Jacobins* offer foundations for Africana social and political ideologies connecting race, class, and social capital.<sup>14</sup> The challenge in seeing Blackness as it is and as society condemns it results in a double consciousness that constantly grapples with the use of Black bodies as the antithesis of goodness.<sup>15</sup> The cognitive dissonance cannot combat the internalized hatred society's rejection forces upon Black people.<sup>16</sup> Whiteness represents an all-encompassing model of success, birthed from what Blackness is not.

11 Linda D. Fischer, "A Fresh Start in Distressed Cities: Experts Present Ideas on Renewal," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, January 1, 2003), <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/bridges/winter-20022003/a-fresh-start-in-distressed-cities-experts-present-ideas-on-renewal>

12 "East St. Louis: One City's Story," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, (2002), <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/bridges/winter-20022003/east-st-louis-one-citys-story?print=true>.

13 Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in Americas Schools* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 2004).

14 See bibliography for further reference.

15 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005).

16 Frank B. Wilderson, *Incognegro: a Memoir of Exile & Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

This model determines a person's humanness, not by biology, but rather concerns social, cultural, political ideas of existence. Putting this assertion in conversation with racialization, the convergence of sociopolitical relations delegate how human someone can be. Those humans who ascribe to the western bourgeois and adapt to the imperialist, white, masculinist, heterosexist perspective shape the conception of human to label themselves “man” and all others various levels of unhuman all together. A project for the abolition of "man" in this context unifies various justice struggles including race, environmental destruction, and economic inequalities.<sup>17</sup> Still, the strength of racial hierarchy has evaded generational efforts of dismantlement. Afro Pessimism contends this supremacy will only cease in blood; destruction is necessary—inevitable—in the commencement of societal evenness.

### **Afrofuturism** *Reimagining a Black Future*

Afrofuturism illustrates alternative methods for survival and resistance which empower Black people. The political theory offers a stomping ground for Black people to fully exist, particularly through the rejection of western pedagogy, philosophy, and theory. Afro Pessimism's assertion that chaos, violence, and destruction always follow Black people grounds Afrofuturism which insists that with each apocalypse, we near something different and unknown—something better. While Afro Pessimism can destroy illusions of hope and change in the world as we know it, Afrofuturism ensures the future of a new world will inevitably occur and Black people will be a part of it. The ideologies seem contradictory but work in tandem. This future permits a reimagination of Blackness unlike those portrayals perpetuating systems of violence. An Afrofuturist framework can support and propel the abolition of “man” through the erasure of

<sup>17</sup> Nathan Snaza, “Curriculum against the State: Sylvia Wynter, the Human, and Futures of Curriculum Studies,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 49, no. 1 (2019): pp. 130-132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2018.1546540>.

hegemonic power systems, the recasting of past, present, and future narratives, and the platform for otherworldly existence.

Octavia Butler stands as an icon for Afrofuturism, situating many of her literary worlds in Afrofuturist settings. In *Parable of the Sower*, dystopic future meshes reality and fantasy. Issues addressed in the novel relate to problems plaguing our world in real-time: environmental degradation, wealth disparity, industrial domination, societal downfall. The fantastical nature leaves room to create something otherworldly. The protagonist in the novel, Lauren, is an empath perhaps nodding to Patricia Hill Collins work which stresses how dominant systems generate excessive pain and hardship for Black people and especially Black women. The influx of emotion results from the likelihood that Black people empathize more with the pain and hardship of others. Still, these systems teach Black people to settle with that pain, to turn the other cheek and ignore situations that perpetuate violence against them. Butler uses her literary platform to showcase forms of radical resistance. Lauren's notion of God epitomizes the praxis and essence of Afrofuturism. Lauren knows her God as change and hope, the roots of Afrofuturism. Fire symbolizes the destruction needed to allow transformation. Artistic applications compose a counter-hegemonic narrative for a restorative environmental justice grounded in solidarity and collective cultures. In considering the political applications of Afrofuturism, its origins in literature and visual art must be recognized. The presentation and creation of culture can spark the fire for change.<sup>18</sup> Butler conveys that the only certainty in life is change; urging creation from cracked foundation—fill the gaps or lay new ground entirely. Afrofuturism can encourage environmentalism in championing the survival and success of marginalized people, emphasizing creativity, inclusion, and hope.

<sup>18</sup> Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020: pp 76-98).

Though an explicitly Afrofuturist environmentalism does not exist, roadmaps for a framework supporting the same causes do. Restorative environmental justice, reparations ecology, living environmentalism call for radical shift to disrupt how we engage with environmental politics.<sup>19</sup> Grassroots-oriented environmental justice work already utilizes foundational Afrofuturist ideologies, like radical hope and creativity. The conflict comes from the attempted collaboration with mainstream environmental organizations that perpetuate racism and elitism in their marriage to environmentalism.<sup>20</sup> In speculating that an Afrofuturist lens could encourage more effective environmentalism, the importance of this ideological shift relates to the greater context of environmental justice movements. Afrofuturism and environmentalism exist separately, but why not together? Ecological genocide mirrors the genocide of Black people. Present environmentalism has not successfully shaken its misguided beginnings: the conservationist agenda, the displacement of minority peoples, the hypocrisy of yearning for environmental change while excluding those most affected by degradation. In shifting away from purity preservation and Jefferson style agrarianism, we can create room for a more effective, inclusive approach. Environmentalism's American centrist pulse in the most notable literature is xenophobic; whereas Afrofuturism incorporates diasporic ideology and theory, Afrofuturism epitomizes the non-western movement that negates environmentalism as a western luxury.<sup>21</sup>

In understanding the connection between environmental toxicity and the intentional attack on Black communities, Afrofuturism can be integral in considering innovative solutions for our future. Other environmental-related frameworks driven by the same motive don't have a

<sup>19</sup> Sze, 80-81

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Sandler and Phaedra C. Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement* (Cambridge: The MIT, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Rob Nixon, "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, January 2005, pp. 233-251, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386650-011>.

foundation in Afro Pessimism. This factor separates Afrofuturism which calls for more than a shift away from capitalism and other dominant power systems we know in seeking a “post” disaster world. The gap welcomes Black Poethic thought considering that a better world could be the end of the world we know entirely.<sup>22</sup> From the convergence of the aforementioned scholarly contributions, literary works, the application of East St. Louis as a case study, and my perspective, the following question arises: How can environmentalists use Afrofuturism as a political theory to seek remediation for injustice?

<sup>22</sup> Yusoff, p. 103-108,

## **East St. Louis Beyond Solutions?** *A Case Study on Cyclic Injustice*

Once a hub for industry and production, East St. Louis is now known for its strip clubs and liquor stores that stay open when everyone else has gone home. Growing up just over the Mississippi River in South City St. Louis, a three-minute drive from East St. Louis limits, I heard the city's name often. My family drove over the town on the highway change from I-70 to I-55 en route to Chicago. I know friends of family who grew up there or had people there. No one seemed to stay, though. When reading about East St. Louis as a community, the narrative of people passing through or getting out reoccur. Despite feeling connected to East St. Louis given its proximity to my hometown, the city remained across the river and I on the opposite bank, oblivious to the social, political, and economic attacks on the community. Ceola Davison, a community initiative leader, once expressed her frustration with failed community improvement efforts. She stressed that East St. Louis is not another city to be featured in a study for the benefit of an institution.<sup>23</sup> These words sit at the forefront of my mind as I apply East St. Louis as a case study for this project. I aim to present the severity of targeted social violence and analyze the failed federal, state, and private support for the city. I recognize the violence external prescriptions for East St. Louis's community and city development has actualized throughout history. In critiquing state and federal involvement, I hope to highlight the perpetuation of cyclic injustice through political (in)action and policy.

Throughout history, four main aspects continue to fuel oppression: industrial development and abandonment, futile government, racial terror against Black community members, and environmental contamination.<sup>24</sup> Industry built and destroyed East St. Louis

<sup>23</sup> "East St. Louis: One City's Story," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis , 2002, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/bridges/winter-20022003/east-st-louis-one-citys-story?print=true>).

simultaneously; industrial abandonment cost the city of 55% of its population. Ineffective municipal government and a poorly managed tax base depleted the few public amenities that once existed. Discrimination against Black residents did little to motivate politically mandated change. Still, in analyzing the longevity of dystopia in the city, environmental degradation comes as a cause and consequence of the complex social issues in East St. Louis. Environmental justice is inherently intersectional and necessitates an analysis of the interconnected socioeconomic, political sphere. The persistence of injustice begs a shift to center sustainable improvement. In this way, an application of Afrofuturism as a political solution is not meant to target the community in East St. Louis. This critique concerns failed environmentalism and emphasizes the need for ideological change to mitigate issues. East St. Louis, a place that has been historically left behind, abused, and conceived as beyond resolution requires future efforts founded in a sociopolitical ideology that recreates an effective justice framework. For external parties, shift application is overdue.

### **A Brief History of East St. Louis**

Formerly known as Illinoistown, discourse surrounds the establishment date of East St. Louis, IL, stemming from debate over what began life in the city. Industry enlivened the pulse of East St. Louis. Its purpose and founding tie to the inception of different industries over the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The city always made a home for industrial development and transportation services. The swamp-like land, once useless to establishment, transformed with the presence of railroads; the flat topography offered ideal terrain for laying train tracks in every direction. From the late 1800s through the 1940s, East St. Louis saw an explosion of industrial expansion. Railroad development played a key part in economic and population growth. Elliott's

Frog and Switchworks opened in 1874 and East St. Louis marked the end of the line<sup>25</sup>. It quickly became a rail center central for industrial transportation, docking, and storage. Rail established East St. Louis's autonomy from St. Louis in commerce. Few viewed East St. Louis as an independent municipality, but rather a lawless area across the bank from a thriving city. Charities and community organizations combating poverty and racial tensions in St. Louis lost their grasp farther east. The region remained out of sight, across state lines. The discovery of coal deposits followed, increasing commerce at the cost of contamination. Production and labor demands facilitated a massive population boom from the 1890s to the 1910s. Industrialization created jobs, but no tax base. The city invested in industry and industry invested in itself, too. Companies built factories and processing plants outside of East St. Louis on cheaper land with lower taxes and weaker unions<sup>26</sup>. Big business powers of America stimulated the economy, offering employment opportunities, but utilized state-sponsored loopholes to protect profit. Nearby cities comprised only of industry, including National City, Granite City, Alorton, Sauguet, Alcoa, emerged with no residential obligations.

By 1910, industrial employment helped doubled the region's population from the beginning of the century with a surge of eager European immigrants and out of state laborers. Vice married industry in East St. Louis. The city stood as a haven for misconduct and mischief, a place where that permitted round clock drinking and gambling. In 1917, half of the city's budget came from the purchase and upkeep of liquor licenses. The economy expanded and East St. Louis boasted one of the largest rail centers in the United States, next to Chicago, by the 20s. The trend

<sup>25</sup> Mary Edwards and Laura Lawson, "The Evolution of Planning in East St. Louis," *Journal of Planning History* 4, no. 4 (2005): pp. 356-382, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513205280523>).

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth M. Reardon, "State and Local Revitalization Efforts in East St. Louis, Illinois," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 551, no. 1 (1997): pp. 235-247, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716297551001017>).

continued through 1950 when the population peaked at just over 80,000 inhabitants. The region constantly faced environmental mishaps, located on land meant to ease flood pains for St. Louis. Flood protection divided the city when residents demanded action and companies refused to fund safeguard projects. The city's first mayor, John Bowman, pressed the issue and gained support from community members dubbed "high graders." Bowman battled for street-raising to prevent future flood damages. Still, the project required financial support the city could not muster alone. Industries that could fund the project viewed the development as frivolous, arguing that improving infrastructure would bankrupt the city. Political strife resulted in two mayors, two city councils, and two police forces. Industrial powers and municipal governments could not find common ground. Prolonged conflict eventually led to violence and motivated the assassination of Mayor Bowman in 1885 before any construction commenced. Years later, the city implemented the street-raising project for which Bowman gave his life. Though time brought about infrastructural advancements in some ways, it did nothing to change what Mayor Bowman's murder made clear: industry ruled the city.<sup>27</sup>

Poverty concentrated in Black residential areas even at the city's economic peak and continued through the denial of low-interest housing loans. From the 60s through the 80s, industrial abandonment prompted massive declines in production, population, and employment. Poverty, corruption, and environmental contamination existed since the establishment of the city. Industry ensured job security and flow of commerce, keeping the dysfunctional system afloat. Industrial flight was not coincidental; it began just as Black residents moved toward improved socioeconomic statuses and race relations. In the 1930s through the 1950s, East St. Louis offered strong labor unions, living wages, and quality schools. Racial tensions increased during the years

<sup>27</sup>Made in USA: The East St. Louis Story," (KETC-TV (Television Station: Saint Louis, MO), 2003), <https://www.pbs.org/video/made-in-usa-the-east-st-louis-story-ccgfta/>.

leading up to the Civil Rights Movement. White residents started to move to suburbs—away from diversifying communities. The factory town lost its lure and production that expanded the city became irrelevant with greater technological advancements.<sup>28</sup> Coal lost value as transportation shifted from rail to auto. The development of refrigeration made it more efficient to slaughter animals on-site rather than ship livestock to meat packaging plants in East St. Louis. Businesses in the city fell from 1527 to 323 along with local jobs which decreased from 12,423 to 2699 over two decades. Factories closed and land lay barren.

The vastness of production once prompted the National Civic League to grant East St. Louis the *All-America City Award* in 1959 for civic excellence in cooperative spirit.<sup>29</sup> The vibrancy of commerce masked disaster until the last possible moment. East St. Louisans paraded through downtown joined together in celebration. Crowds cheered and laughed while smokestacks billowed poison into the air. Pollution hung above contaminated land that's houses wrought from cheap construction occupied. The festivities marked the city's last hoorah. False achievement crumbled with the outflux of production and employment. Deindustrialization in the 60s through the 90s caused East St. Louis to fall from greatness. The city mirrors Detroit and other places along the Rust Belt, showcasing American disregard for the working class, especially Black people in central production cities. Industries hung the American dream by a thread for workers residing in surrounding areas. East St. Louis promised economic opportunity and social mobility for white immigrants and Black southerners alike, yet diverse dreamers did not evoke equitable outcomes.

<sup>28</sup> KETC-TV, "Made in USA: The East St. Louis Story," (2003).

<sup>29</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis: "One City's Story," (2002).

## **Industrial Overuse** *Attack on Community Wellbeing*

East St. Louis was built to serve from its inception. It provided fresh food sources to support St. Louis's growing population. The Mississippi River and the development of rail allowed the city to transform into the center for Midwestern transportation. East St. Louis detached from St. Louis but did not have an autonomous community under industrial control.<sup>30</sup> The establishment of industrial towns on land adjacent to communities in East St. Louis began with National City, IL, home to the meat packaging corporation, St. Louis National StockYards. Established in 1907, the town kept few to no actual residents. It lay just north of East St. Louis and remained untouchable by the city's authority. Monsanto, IL, now known as Sauget, IL, followed with the development of a citizen poor, chemical processing plant town. Alorton, IL, an abbreviation of Aluminum Ore Town, housed Aluminum Ore factories, but nothing else. Throughout the region, expansive factories, refineries, tanneries, and smelters occupied entire towns. Companies including the National Stock Yards, Monsanto, and Aluminum Ore maintained control over social outcomes in East St. Louis through employment dependency, political manipulation, and financial support on their terms. Industrial interests centered profit and production efficiency above all. A staggering concentration of low regulated, chemical processing plants including Pfizer, Big River Zinc, Cerro Copper, American Bottoms Sewage Plant, and Trade Waste Incineration still lay just on the outside city limits.<sup>31</sup> Policy in these areas favored industry; the government comprised of industries themselves. Factories, processing plants, and warehouses located in these non-cities held maximum control over labor regulations. Even better for profit and production, companies dodged responsibility for tax fees and community impacts. Illinois

<sup>30</sup> Reardon, "State and Local Revitalization Efforts," (1997).

<sup>31</sup> "Environmental Justice Case Study: East St. Louis, Illinois" (University of Michigan), accessed May 6, 2020, <http://umich.edu/~snre492/Jones/stlouis.htm>

State legislature supported the creation and endurance of industry-run districts outside of East St. Louis limits. Firms that relocated caused dire financial issues as a consequence in the 20s, soothed only will when production increased during WWII. The state feared losing more business to land across the Mississippi River farther into Missouri.<sup>32</sup> Employment availability and economic growth garnered community focus and mitigated uproar over wealth distribution issues during high production years.

Fear of socialist takeover spurred civic capitalism around the nation where some companies crafted towns to accompany their factories. Throughout the Midwest, cookie-cutter style, working-class housing appeared in industrial towns. East St. Louis did not see the same treatment. The city offered private wealth and public poverty. Cyclic economic struggles prevented community members from building personal wealth causing poverty concentration. Carr Island, near the Carr Street Ferry Landing, charged \$0.50 per lot, making homes for squatters living in self-constructed quarters into the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Higher quality homes still lacked running water infrastructure into the 1970s.<sup>33,34</sup> Income insecure households in East St. Louis had been systemically denied access to property investment through rejected homeownership, a key strategy for individual wealth enhancement and security. East St. Louis consistently lacked asset-based community development which pushed for more than economic improvement and emphasized positive community aspects.<sup>35</sup> The subtractive planning targeted the regulation of negative features—crime, gangs, unemployment, illiteracy, broken families, and welfare recipients. These methods further deprecated the community.

<sup>32</sup> Reardon, “State and Local Revitalization Efforts,” (1997).

<sup>33</sup> Arthur Moore, “History,” Early History of East St. Louis and Cahokia, (<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/landings/Ambot/Archives/fwp/EarlyHistory.html>).

<sup>34</sup> KETC-TV, “Made in USA: The East St. Louis Story,” (2003).

<sup>35</sup> John Kretzmann and John P. McKnight, “Assets-Based Community Development,” Wiley Online Library (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, February 2, 2007), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ncr.4100850405>).

Still, low-income residents did not induce the downfall of East St. Louis. Poverty did not provoke social dysfunction, rather it came as a response to preexisting, sociopolitical impairments.<sup>36</sup> Residents could not access skill-building educations needed to afford corporate-built homes; they remained under the control of social desperation. With no organized union, workers toiled round clock and abided by few safety regulations before labor movements demanded better regulation. By 1950, 80% of all workers were organized in a union, which propelled industrial abandonment. There was little opportunity for community-lead advancement. City planning efforts that attempted to better poverty concentration in the city pushed increases in market access and flow of commerce. Many of these goals could not actualize given irreparable damage to the city's tax base and overall budget. The investments the city did make for community improvements caused more debt.

Three comprehensive city plans for East St. Louis were developed in 1920, 1960 and 2004.<sup>37</sup> The well-meaning proposals had little impact on actual city conditions. Harland Bartholomew crafted the first plan, focusing on physical development regarding the improvement of streets, neighborhoods, and recreational centers. Bartholomew proposed the establishment of a downtown to increase commerce flowing through the city. The commerce flow would also require increased production to support the growing market, though the plan did not address this reality. The effort was suggestive rather than an applicable plan of action. Planning focuses shifted to what developers called rational strategy in the 1930s through the 1950s. Efforts emphasized "objective" planning to attain federal funding. Analysts, Candeb and Fleissing from Newark, NJ, identified problems in the city and set out to solve them using a unitary framework

<sup>36</sup> Fischer, "A Fresh Start in Distressed Cities," (2003).

<sup>37</sup> Edwards and Lawson, "The Evolution of Planning in East St. Louis," (2005).

that compared the city to a national standard. The plan attempted to tackle the same issues of poor traffic circulation and inadequate recreation facilities. It pushed for commercial development to compete with suburban shopping centers, proposing a downtown civic center and riverfront shops. To improve public housing, planners used federal funding to replace substandard housing with different, still overcrowded quarters, destroying homes, businesses, and community in their wake. Attempting to actualize a document into a city propelled displacement and continued poverty concentration, unemployment, crime, environmental degradation, and educational underachievement. In seek of federal support, planners obsessed over arbitrary requirements and recommendations instead of empowering community needs. Early plans did not address mutuality in education or longevity in community partnerships. The East St. Louis community grew distrustful of federal support and city planning efforts altogether.<sup>38</sup> The excuse of well-intentioned government fell short when plans excluded and destroyed the community they meant to serve. The 1960 plan and other failed plans led to backlash that closed the Urban Planning Department in 1971.

The closure did little to shift the framework work for community development. Planning attempts continued without the sponsorship of the federal office. Developers focused on fiscal management and economic growth from the 60s. Mayor Carl Officer, elected in 1979, proposed another riverfront expansion project to retain employment and heal the tax base. Mayor Officer called upon private and public funding to support economic advancement. Private investors established Casino Queen Riverboat during his leadership. The \$43 million gambling boat created 1200 permanent jobs. The overall combined fiscal efforts still fell short when confronted by the overwhelming socioeconomic, political strains the city faced. From 1960 to 1992 the

<sup>38</sup> Fischer, "A Fresh Start in Distressed Cities," (2003).

property taxes diminished from \$562 million to \$162 million. Setbacks on city services included the cancellation of garbage collection from 1987 to 1992 but did not relieve the city's financial strain. Millions in debt continued to amass toward the end of the 20th century.<sup>39</sup> The city could not finance any comprehensive plan while funneling all revenue to satisfy debt payments. The stagnancy of underdevelopment led to lost federal support and further decreased tax polls, locking the city into financial insecurity.

Shift to investment in suburban development additionally diverted city funding.

Deprioritization of home loan availability made it increasingly difficult to accrue property for low-income people, not helped by quality reduction of public housing. Public housing no longer offered a transition to homeownership; it symbolized permanent placement for poor, Black people.<sup>40</sup> Federal aid funded the transportation shift to highways and freeways, negatively affecting growth in urban centers. The movement away from public transportation reduced access to areas that required driving. East St. Louis was no longer a city center that could take transport around the nation from its base. With the forced closing of the bridge that joined the banks of the Mississippi River, people could not even reach St. Louis from the city.<sup>41</sup> The construction and intense usage of mass transitways adversely influenced environmental conditions in the city, causing pollution from high traffic and ground transportation of goods. A prominent East St. Louis historian, Andrew Theising, asserts that the federal government did not know what impact these changes would have on cities. Yet, the exact lack of consideration shows how government urban planning attacked Black communities like East St. Louis.

<sup>39</sup> Reardon, "State and Local Revitalization Efforts," (1997).

<sup>40</sup> Fischer, "A Fresh Start in Distressed Cities," (2003).

<sup>41</sup> Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*: (2004).

In 1989, the state of Illinois seized the city's financial records and called for Mayor Officer's removal for accusations of corruption and embezzlement. By the early 90s, East St. Louis had accumulated an unknown amount of debt—an audit in 1985 estimated the bill at \$50,000,000. Poor investments, corruption in local politics, and industrial abandonment that created the debt haunted the city. Gordon Bush, a former mayor, promised regular trash pickup to win his election. Despite the extreme financial distress facing the city, former Illinois Governor, Jim Edgar, ordered \$500 million to be from the state budget in 1991. The city won \$7,000,000 after a court settlement, but the judge didn't trust the municipal government to manage the funds.<sup>42</sup> When the city defaulted a court payment in the early 90s, the state intervened. Illinois passed The Illinois State Financially Distressed Cities Act of 1990 to prevent East St. Louis's bankruptcy, bolstered by the establishment of the East St. Louis Financial Advisory Authority.<sup>43</sup> The state's attempts only increased the dependency and disempowerment of East St. Louis.

The city saw some positive reform, but not enough to heal the root causes of its struggles. Advocacy and community-based efforts surfaced in the early 80s through the 90s. With support from Illinois House Representative, Wyvetter Younge, the Concerned Citizen Committee for Economic Recovery, and the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP) program occurred. The university-community joint strategy worked to benefit needs brought forth by community members in partnership with Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville that provided funding and volunteers. Kenneth Reardon acted as a university representative, collaborating with

<sup>42</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, "Ravaged City on Mississippi Floundering at Rock Bottom," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, April 4, 1991), <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/04/04/us/ravaged-city-on-mississippi-floundering-at-rock-bottom.html>).

<sup>43</sup> Reardon, "State and Local Revitalization Efforts," (1997).

Ceola Davison, a prominent community leader. Together, ESLARP developed a revitalization plan that no one would fund.<sup>44</sup> Other problems arose in navigating biases of the advocates and community members including inconsistencies in community representation and neighborhood assistance. In 2004, a private consulting firm presented a comprehensive city plan to build upon past efforts, focusing on economic development with recommendations for neighborhood quality enhancement. The plan never commenced. Revitalization efforts by another private firm eventually occurred in 2011. The completed project preserved historic building fronts, extended a main street to improve access to the MetroLink and provided aesthetic landscaping.<sup>45</sup> A review of local substance abuse programs propelled the construction of an inpatient facility at St. Mary's hospital. The government task force on alcohol and drugs sponsored alternative programming for youth but viewed drug addiction as a crime and not as a public health issue. Combined state and federal efforts centered public safety, a euphemism for intensified police patrol. The U.S. Attorney's Violent Crime Initiative, Citizen's Police Academy, and the Enforcement Efforts Crime Watch improved crime reporting systems, enhanced police personnel with new equipment, and increased prosecution. Community policing programs helped to halve the number of homicides from 1990 to 1995—at a cost. These programs perpetuated a community-led, hyper-militarized East St. Louis. Crime prevention efforts unsurprisingly did not repair the community. The developments maintained the city's status as inferior—a place that needed to be controlled. Policies focused on economic opportunities, increased production, and crime prevention continued injustice.

### **Racial Violence and the Race Riot of 1917**

<sup>44</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis: “One City’s Story,” (2002).

Racial strife brewed in factory politics of East St. Louis. World War I slowed immigration from Europe but increased the need for production. The industrial boom temporarily smothered the threat of economic collapse. Despite advancements in factory infrastructure, the need for arduous, physical labor remained. Factories ran 24-hour production every day of the week. The combination made plentiful work for unskilled, often uneducated, immigrants and Black migrants from the South. The city had always been dubbed for its sin: corruption, gambling, and alcohol. By the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city also became known for a vibrant and growing Black community. White immigrants remained fairly nuclear in their ethnic communities after settling in East St. Louis while Black settlers sought social, economic, and political involvement and improvement. They yearned for a voice. They wanted to vote. They called for adequate housing. Corruption and discrimination in the city prevented these measures from happening. Political divisiveness between the republican and democratic parties utilized disenfranchisement tactics, arguing voter fraud, to eliminate Black people's votes. With workers plentifully available and labor conditions dangerous and unregulated, many factories saw workers as expendable. Corporations replaced workers with white Americans, white immigrants, and Black migrants alike. Still, white workers striking against labor conditions and low pay targeted Black workers to stimulate organization efforts and boost striker numbers. Economic access among Black residents made white workers feel threatened. Labor strikes at Aluminum Ore Company incited a massacre in 1917.

In early July of 1917, unknown drivers fired shots into a Black neighborhood. When the next car passed, Black neighborhood members shot back, unintentionally killing two white police officers. The ring of bullets shattered superficial peace smothering the city. White mobs organized and violence ensued that nearly burned East St. Louis entirely. The final number of

deaths is debated; rioters burned or mutilated many Black bodies beyond identification. Others sunk to the bottom of the river. The aftermath could not be more visible. Loosely constructed homes and buildings had turned to ash that somersaulted in the thick summer breeze. The aftermath of the riot increased segregation in the city and displaced community members who once resided in now destroyed homes. The fire opened land businesses eyed for commercial real estate and industrial ownership over the city continued. The massacre garnered national attention, inciting the Silent Protest Parade in New York several weeks after. The protests and anti-lynching efforts marked the beginning of a modern national approach to civil rights. Still, the shift came from the national response more than the violent act itself. Anti-lynching campaigns emerged from the disillusionment of southern racial violence as isolated.<sup>46</sup> Lynching did not only happen in the South; East St. Louis showed that racial brutality was a national issue—as if lynching was not a national issue before the Race Riot of 1917. If the riot had not interfered with East St. Louis as a northern industrial city, would it have reaped the same attention? The question confronts the paradox of industry as East St. Louis’s killer and its keeper. White supremacy embedded in northern industry remained rooted all the same.

The beginnings of stability in Black communities made white flight possible. White residents could access higher-paying jobs to accumulate wealth through property purchases. Though the municipal system in East St. Louis was historically impoverished and politically corrupt, many whites attributed the depleted tax base to the growing Black population. Meanwhile, economic strain among Black communities created family strife, leading to increased divorce rates and destroyed family structures. With white flight and industrial abandonment, East St. Louis became viewed as out of control, unwilling and unable to practice

<sup>46</sup> Olivia B. Waxman, “Silent Parade, East Saint Louis Riots and Civil Rights,” *Time* (Time, July 28, 2017), <https://time.com/4828991/east-saint-louis-riots-1917/>.

discipline in self-governance.<sup>47</sup> The inferiorization of the city and its inhabitants made it easy for more people and industries to leave East St. Louis and its community behind. Historians, journalists, and city planners alike understand East St. Louis as a textbook case for everything that can go wrong in an American city. <sup>48</sup> Though employment opportunities existed around every corner, factory work was dangerous, the pay limited. The increasing Black population further spurred social neglect.

Racial tensions plagued the city, rearing its head violently. White flight continued oppression of Black community. Lack of funding blocked possible resolutions. The city could not afford to construct a YMCA in the early 1900s.<sup>49</sup> Closed hospitals throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century? Lack of funding. Terminated traffic lights in the 90s? Lack of funding.<sup>50</sup> The city could not even pay its electricity bill at a certain point.<sup>51</sup> East St. Louis is a prime example of valuing land over the people who inhabit the place. Companies drained and damaged resources while the city drowned in environmental contamination and poverty. The long-term, purposeful neglect and indifference of industry targeted East St. Louis as a predominantly Black town. In the last 30 years, some wealth has developed in East St. Louis. Private sector investments spearheaded developments like the Casino Queen. Public funding established a Metrolink line in the city and community programs like the Management Agency work to target flood prevention. Still, data

47 Hamer: "East St. Louis As Detroit's Mirror," (2013).

48 Wilkerson, "Ravaged City on Mississippi Floundering at Rock Bottom," (1991).

49 KETC-TV, "Made in USA: The East St. Louis Story," (2003).

50 Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*: (2004).

51 Patrick E Gauen, "Rooted in Corruption," *Industrialization - Illinoistown* (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, May 23, 1988), <https://www.siu.edu/artsandsciences/political-science/about/iur/projects/illinoistown/industrialization.shtml>).

from the 2010 census show the city's population scraping 27,000 people—majority of whom are Black and low-income.

## **Environmental Injustice in East St. Louis**

From the historical context of industrial overuse comes the consequence of long-term environmental contamination. Environmental injustices represent the glue that binds East St. Louis to its socioeconomic and political strife. The relative brevity of industrial pollution wreaks devastation on housing, education, and public health that lingers to this day. The intersectional nature of environmental justice contributes to a social domino-effect. The geography of East St. Louis as part of the American Bottoms burdens the region with flooding and waste accumulation from run-off flows. The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) redlined many districts in East St. Louis for its natural and industrial issues, and also to further disenfranchise the majority Black population. The city and its residents continue to battle ill-equipped infrastructure which generates systemic catastrophes in education and public health. As a result, the city exists in poverty and dystopia, begging a shift in social and environmental praxis.

### **Geography of East St. Louis** *Drowned in the American Bottoms*

East St. Louis's location exacerbates struggles facing the city. The region lay to the east of the Mississippi River in flat, muddy floodplains that comprise part of the American Bottoms.<sup>52</sup> Southwest of the city lay the Illinois Bluffs, located in Monroe County, IL. The region has a history of floods, inspired the name of Venice, IL in Madison County, and nearly destroying early settlement throughout the area. A flood in the mid-1800s demolished the original

<sup>52</sup> “Made in USA: The East St. Louis Story,” (KETC-TV (Television Station: Saint Louis, MO), 2003), <https://www.pbs.org/video/made-in-usa-the-east-st-louis-story-ccgfta/>.

Illinoistown leading to the reestablishment and renaming of East St. Louis. With dense deposits of deep sand and gravel over wide areas, the American Bottoms made an ideal location for providing groundwater supply to industries. Studies from the 50s already show the adverse effects of industrial overuse. In 1953, a study found that industrial pumping centers consumed over 100 million gallons of groundwater daily causing major cones of depression and threatening to sink development in the area. Flood-control measures in place to protect the region and its residents restricted natural groundwater recharge methods. Industries expanded near the river to unexploited areas with more groundwater and a lower water table where environmental practitioners speculated recharge of groundwater could be induced. The relocation led to higher concentrations of industry around the river and higher pollution exposure risk for surrounding residents. Heavy pumping intensified environmental strife in a region predisposed to flooding.<sup>53</sup>

The American Bottoms never prided itself on being viable property for living or community building. The region's flatness aided railroad construction, not backyards or playgrounds. This is why industries thrived there. Still work brought people and communities emerged regardless of whether or not they were intended. As time lapsed, the diverse, working-class community reduced to those who did not flee—those who did not have the option to rebuild elsewhere. This group comprised of predominantly Black people continued to surround industry. Overflow from the Mississippi River and runoff from the Bluffs continue to collate in East St. Louis to this day. Industries in the city reap the benefits of land use without paying a dime in taxes for remediation efforts needed after flooding. Similarly, the Monroe Country does not contribute to clean-up or flood prevention efforts. Flooding disrupts the sewer system in St. Clair

<sup>53</sup> Robert E Bergstrom and Theodore R Walker, "GROUNDWATER GEOLOGY OF THE EAST ST. LOUIS AREA, ILLINOIS" (Urbana, IL: The State of Illinois, 1956), <http://library.isgs.illinois.edu/Pubs/pdfs/ri/ri191.pdf>.

county, causing bursts that spill raw sewage and industrial hazardous waste into the city. In neglecting solutions, said actors contribute to cycles of injustice which continue to trap the city: no funding, environmental degradation, community strife, state, and federal mismanagement.

### **Housing Discrimination** *An Economic Cellblock*

The denial of low rate loans relates to the environmental issues present in the region as a flood zone, industrial hub, and a Black-American settlement. Housing segregation and zoning further act as an economic cellblock, preventing social mobility in the city. Federal housing policies, made in part by the HOLC, locked East St. Louis and its many Black residents into poverty. The HOLC deemed many of the districts in East St. Louis as high risk, hazardous areas where banks and other parties involved in mortgage lending would not approve low-rate loans. Around the nation, areas marked high-risk correlated to properties in economically disadvantaged and/or minority communities. The HOLC began these practices in 1933 as part of the “New Deal,” and ended redlining implementation in 1968 under the Fair Housing Act. Decades later, socioeconomic disparities persist in those regions once deemed hazardous for mortgage lending risks. East St. Louis, one of many cities caught in these consequences, continues to battle hypersegregation and low-income concentration.<sup>54</sup>

Images below showcase the HOLC map of East St. Louis, published in 1941. One of the districts, noted in Figure 2 as D12, is a larger district sandwiched between the Mississippi River and various industrial properties. The HOLC area description from 1940 names the region “Denver Side.” Examiners described D12 as 65% Black and increasing in its Black population, comprised of low-income laborers and railroad workers. The report notes that white residents

<sup>54</sup> Bruce Mitchell, “HOLC ‘Redlining’ Maps: The Persistent Structure of Segregation and Economic Inequality ” NCRC,” NCRC, December 18, 2018, <https://ncrc.org/holc/>.

began to gradually transition out of the region with the influx of Black settlers. The racial dynamics motivated an exclusive—already limited—mortgage fund despite property shortage for potential Black settlers. The architecture of the homes—described as old, cheap, and poorly maintained—stayed frozen in time with no new constructions present or anticipated.

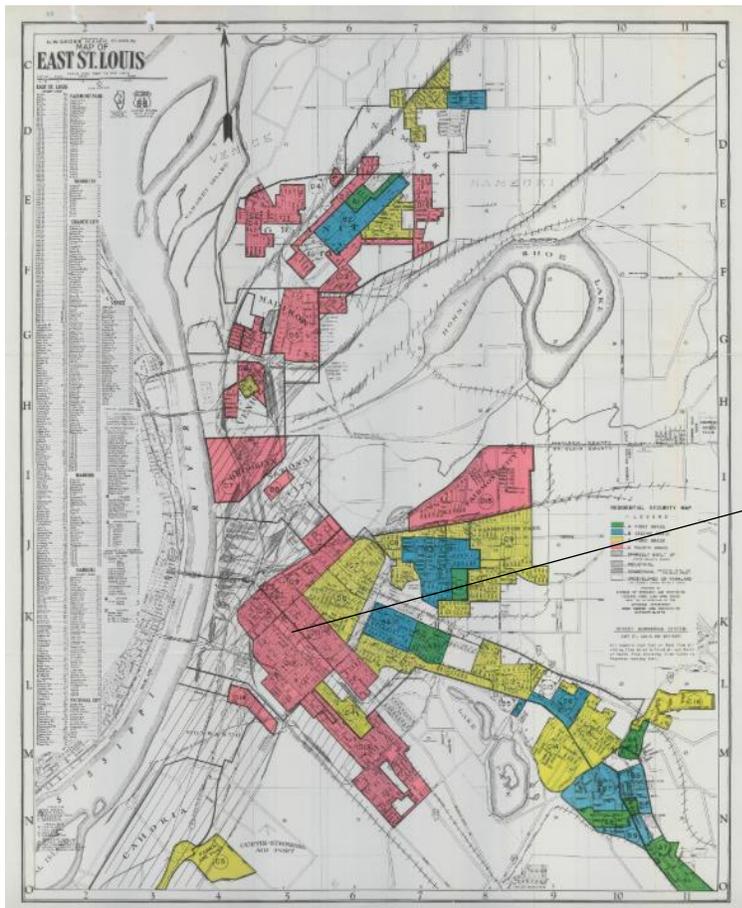


Figure 1: HOLC Map of East St. Louis (1940)

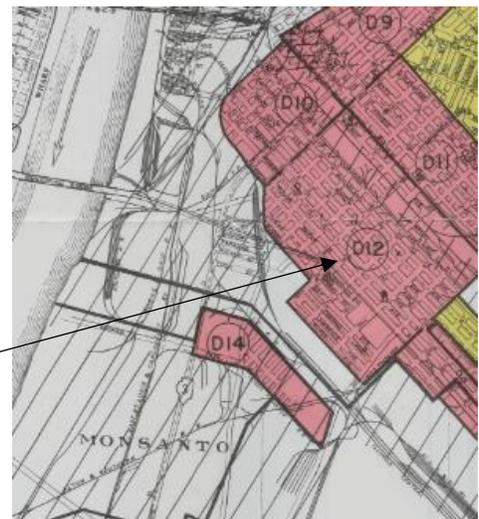


Figure 2: District D12 Detailed

Community members struggled to accrue investment capital or any capital in redlined areas. With little economic opportunity, alternative financial institutions including subprime lenders, payday lenders, pawnshops, rent-to-own stores have popularized as quick, easy money options. These institutions intentionally look for voids in communities like East St. Louis—lacking wealth and sociopolitical support—to perpetuate cyclic poverty. What community members seek out for instant relief to economic strains, they lose in high-interest payback plans

and debt accumulation. These alternative institutions do not offer savings plans or economic counseling but thrive on financial illiteracy and desperation. Soliciting these services acts as financial suicide, causing recipients to seek more loans to pay preexisting ones, ultimately building debt, reducing credit, and deepening their hardship.<sup>55</sup> The situation maintains social negligence in East St. Louis as status quo. Legal and policy-based protection offers little hope; alternative financial institutions operate within the law, much like the industries on the outskirts of the St. Clair municipal boundaries.

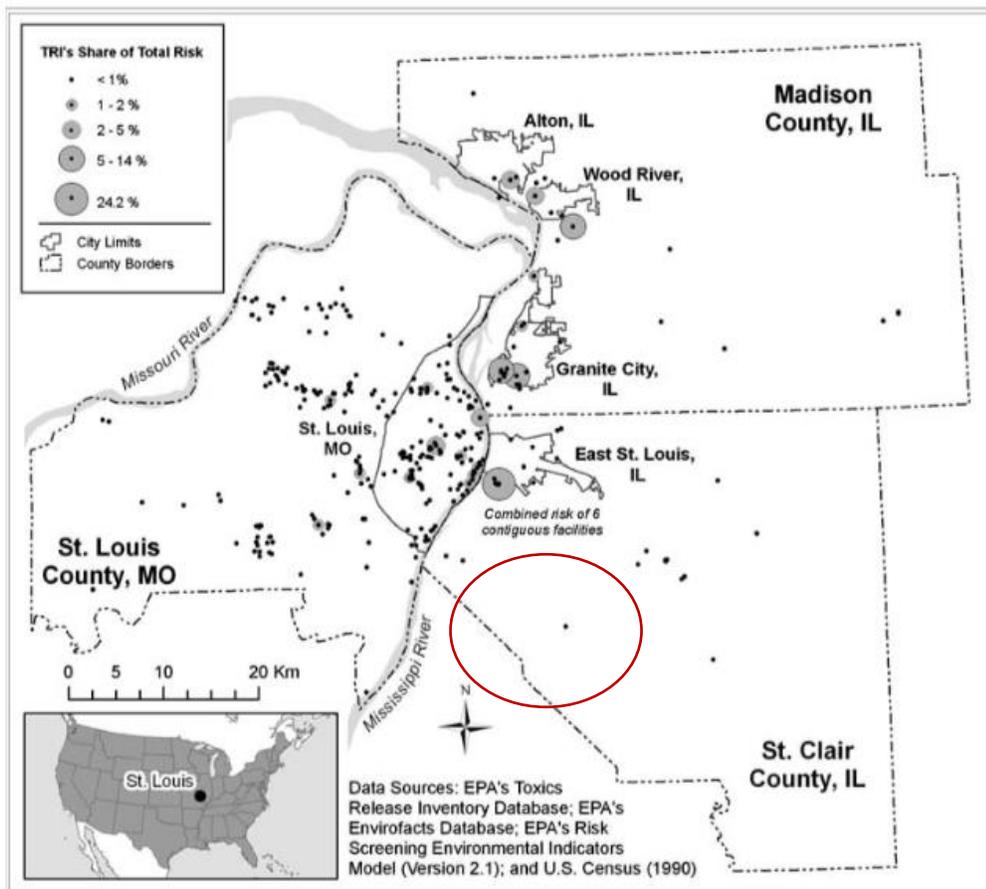
Housing discrimination in East St. Louis inherently relates to industry. Though industrial production in East St. Louis spurred economic growth in the city in during the first 100 years of its establishment, providing employment opportunities and expanding the city's infrastructure, the backlash of flooding, chemical spills, runoff, and sewage back up continue to cripple East St. Louis and its communities. Directly south of district D12 is Monsanto, IL—now called Sauget, IL. Monsanto Company established a chemical plant between Cahokia, IL and East St. Louis in the 1920s. Farther south sits Curtis-Steinberg Airport, later bought and reopened as St. Louis Downtown Airport. The cluster of other nearby industries concentrates hazardous waste in the region as a consequence. Seven national priority sites outlined by the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) surround district D12 within a two-mile radius. <sup>56</sup>

East St. Louis, IL holds part in the greater metropolitan St. Louis area again nodding to the frustration of being grouped with St. Louis but out of the city's jurisdiction. In a study on

<sup>55</sup> Linda D. Fischer, "A Fresh Start in Distressed Cities: Experts Present Ideas on Renewal," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, January 1, 2003), <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/bridges/winter-20022003/a-fresh-start-in-distressed-cities-experts-present-ideas-on-renewal>).

<sup>56</sup> "Environmental Justice Case Study: East St. Louis, Illinois" (University of Michigan), <http://umich.edu/~snre492/Jones/stlouis.htm>).

pollution through the general metro St. Louis region, researchers found that industrial pollution producers locate disproportionately close to minority and income insecure residents and nonrandom, significant levels. Still, the concentration of pollution spikes along the southwestern border of East St. Louis where six facilities sourced 20% of the region's entire air pollution exposure for over a decade. To help visualize the strength of industrial pollution and contextualize racist environmental consequences on East St. Louis, Figure 3 depicts the spatialization of hazardous facilities, represented by circles corresponding to relative exposure risk, in the greater metro St. Louis area.<sup>57</sup> The metro St. Louis area spans 8,458 square miles; four industrial facilities in Sauget, IL within less than five square miles produce nearly a quarter



ously.

Figure 3: Hazardous facilities in the greater metro St. Louis Area. Red circle outlines East St. Louis and six facilities disproportionately sourcing pollution (Abel: 2008).

<sup>57</sup> Troy D. Abel, "Skewed Risksapes and Environmental Injustice: A Case Study of Metropolitan St. Louis," *Environmental Management* 42, no. 2 (2008): pp. 232-248, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00267-008-9126-2>.

Big River, Cerro Copper, Solutia—formerly known as Monsanto—and Occidental source this toxicity, producing hundreds of tons of chemicals including chlorine, sulfuric acid, and lead compounds. The same study on pollution in metro St. Louis writes:

A two-year testing campaign in the city discovered that one in five East St. Louis children registered dangerous blood lead levels (Parish 2000). These levels were four times the national average, and hospital testing also found lead poisoning in children as old as 13. Since paint ingestion occurs only in children under six, the lead poisoning of older youth suggested other sources of contamination like contact with polluted soil or respiratory routes. (EPA 2003b). (Abel: 2008, 244)

The systematic placement of poor, Black people in environmentally hazardous zones is not unique to East St. Louis. Still, the city experiences disparate effects from toxicity. The city has one of the highest rates of child asthma, not helped by lead-poisoned soil and common exposure to hepatitis, cholera, and typhoid from sewage spills. Toxic exposure in the city acts as a death sentence. The closest full functioning hospital, St. Mary's, is a fifteen-minute drive from the city limits. Monsanto Chemical has a history of keeping a tab with the hospital for exposure-related illness and injury.<sup>58</sup> It's more than obvious that East St. Louis is the site of long-term sociopolitical inequity in which environmental toxicity worsens. State and federal attempts have not aided in sustainable resolution. Even those actions narrowing from the broader sociopolitical sphere to focus strictly on environmental contamination, including the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) funding and cleanup, East St. Louis remains overused and under-resourced. In 2013, 90% of families were considered low-income, 50% of residents were unemployed, the high school graduation rate reached about 60%, and 10% of people pursued higher education.<sup>59</sup>

### **Consequences on Community Educational Injustice**

<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in Americas Schools* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2004).

<sup>59</sup> Hamer: "East St. Louis As Detroit's Mirror," (2013).

In addition to public health crises, environmental issues can prevent educational achievement. Aside from the educational disruption inadequate city funding causes in East St. Louis, schools in the city close—sometimes permanently—when sewage lines burst; buildings fill with human waste and toxic run-off from industrial plants. The city's sewage system hardly functions, often leading to backed-up bathrooms, sewage spills, and pungent odors. Underfunded districts lack the resources for efficient remediation on widespread sewage spills, let alone access to prevention efforts requiring the total rehabilitation of sewer infrastructure. Educational (in)access further reflects community wellbeing. How can East St. Louis residents build community while dealing with the detriments of living in sewage and hazardous waste?

The commodification of education under dominant systems, including institutionalized racism and classism, force poor, Black people to settle in environmentally degraded areas. This systematic and calculated miseducation occurs repeatedly in educational spaces. From the disempowering socialization of young people through culturally irrelevant schooling to the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline, education in socially targeted communities can exploit students at early ages.<sup>60</sup> Schools represent more than a place to meet state-mandated outcomes; they have dictation over children's well-being. A day without school is more than a day off for students in East St. Louis. It can mean a day spent hungry or further exposed to environmental toxicity. School organized programs also hold the compacity to act as an outlet for community building. When people engage in dialogue with one another, the action encourages analysis and change. For liberation to exist as a permanent condition, communities must participate in constant conversations.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Torie Weiston-Serdan, *Critical Mentoring: A Practical Guide* (Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2016: p. 5).

<sup>61</sup> Paulo Freire and Myra Bergman Ramos, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014: p. 139).

Schools under the stress of standardized testing requirements must use time and resources to prioritize state demands and receive federal funding. Testing as the linchpin detracts from time and resources for critical thinking, creativity, and classroom bonding. Classrooms in East St. Louis can spend the entire year preparing for standardized testing.<sup>62</sup> The promise of resources forces districts to mandate depository teaching methods where the teacher stands as the holder of knowledge and students as empty vessels. The hoax of objective educational programming hinders communication in the classroom. In making space for irrelevant curricula, the structure guts students of their prior knowledge, cultures, and security. The euphemism of objective curriculum permits the white agenda, encouraging passivity in youth, and preventing young people from effecting change. Students become complicit in their oppression, competing with each other for survival. Advanced Placement classes in East St. Louis schools can offer students hope for a college education. Still, schools lack the amenities to support their students in seeking entry into higher-level courses. Martin Luther King High School has laid off teachers and staff to keep the school open on its budget. With employee shortages, thirty plus students can fill any given classroom. Those teachers who remain working often tire from overuse and low pay. Schools look to permanent substitute teachers as an immediate solution in an attempt to keep class in session. Substitute teachers earn wages at around \$10,000 a year, and though schools employ them as permanent hires, their long-term engagement can be inconsistent. Consequences deprive most students of attaining any useful lessons in school. Students who do acquire the skills to qualify for higher-level courses must teach themselves outside of the schooling system and contend with others for limited amenities.

<sup>62</sup> Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*: (2004), p. 34.

Competition in educational spaces promotes violence, indoctrinating a good-versus-evil mentality in youth—good students succeed, while evil students fail. Violence prevention requires a conscious unlearning and deconditioning of these unrealistic, oversimplified morals, which the dichotomy of hero v villain inhibits. Underdeveloped ethical arguments further isolate Black youth and promote their self-condemnation; culturally irrelevant curricula dependent on depository methods teach self-hatred over awareness and sympathy. Schooling becomes an abusive process and school itself a warzone. This kind of violence present in East St. Louis and other targeted communities exceeds physical action; it is not a moral issue, but rather a social, political, and economic issue.<sup>63</sup> School systems on the brink of extinction force students' compliance if they wish to survive, let alone thrive. Schools convert to sites of cultural genocide, encouraging silence, and complete obedience in the classroom. Fear-based pedagogy does not cause change but rather perpetuates violence. Schools eliminate culture, which is integral for community. The removal of these supports hinders collective trust, leadership, and dialogue. Without these tools cycles of injustice persists.

## **Conclusions** *Seeking an Afrofuturist Environmentalism*

<sup>63</sup> James Gilligan, *Preventing Violence* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

Afro Pessimism describes the condition of East St. Louis as intentional and inescapable. Industrial powers and government overseers view Black residents as subaltern. Why would they feel bad for leaving the city in shambles? Afro Pessimism calls for hegemonic elimination through destruction—dust over industrialization. Even if revolution and rebellion accomplished bulldozing the Monsanto and other industries, slaughtering the negligent politicians, and casting out those who grasp the cruel practices of our current society, would oppression end? In the context of environmental injustice, the soil is already leached and the air is full of toxins. We cannot afford total environmental destruction. The environment has seen enough degradation, some of which may not be recovered. Still, must we start with the end of the world as we know it to give breath to a new environmentally and socially sustainable global community?

In thinking about the future and analyzing creative works, including Octavia Butler's applications, the out of this world, fantastical nature of Afrofuturism necessitates radical hope and collective resistance in creating magic from ruin. Afrofuturism looks away from an oppressive capitalist-based system. The theory blossoms from the truth that current systems and efforts are not working. In seeking imaginative alternatives, the incorporation of Afrofuturist theory and praxis could provide tangible hope Black people can rely on and invest in. Internal community partnership stands foundational in providing solutions and prevention efforts as compared to action by external planners, institutions, and industries. Black communities have the tools of resistance; their existence in degraded environments actualizes dystopia. Community organizations incorporate an Afrofuturist lens: their survival and the change they effect stand as an application of Afrofuturism—birthing and bettering community. I am wary to use Afrofuturism as a catch-all solution that has the hidden solution to all environmental issues. Rather, I am asserting that the nature of Afrofuturism, emphasizing Blackness and wholistic

world history, is the essence that can propel environmental movements to create something different. An Afrofuturist narrative could supplement environmental crises to permit a more intersectional, more emotional, more inclusive mission.<sup>64</sup>Perspective can change the world. If Afrofuturist environmentalism can alter the lens in which we recognize reality, our reality can change.

*Our resilience becomes multidimensional and explosive with possibilities because of what we believe we can create. (Finney: 2014)*

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