AB 3121 Statement to the Task Force to
Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans

C.N.E. Corbin, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies & Planning
College of Urban & Public Affairs
Portland State University
Phone | 503.725.6145
Email | ccorbin@pdx.edu

The research I am presenting today focuses on relationships between race, class, housing, and access to green space, parks, and environmental amenities in Oakland, California from 1937 to 2020. Because of this long historical view, I was able to identify a recurring pattern in which low-income residents, communities of color, and particularly African Americans citizens were habitually excluded from and/or dispossessed of property ownership, quality housing, and healthy green environments while also having their housing, neighborhoods, and lives compromised by environmental harms. I have connected these patterns to three distinct eras 1937-1968 when Oakland was a legally segregated city, 1977-1999 when Oakland was a Chocolate, and 2005-2020 when Oakland adopted an environmental agenda and started to be recognized as a top green city, this era is still unfolding.

In 1937 the HOLC (Home Owners' Loan Corporation) security grades codified the bifurcation of Oakland into differently valued landscapes. The hills became the location of most desirable neighborhoods and the flats with neighborhoods declining in value and the least desirable neighborhoods. The HOLC indicated which neighborhoods, environments, and residents were worthy of investment and which are not. The distinction between the hills and the flats is still recognized today.

Within the HOLC area description documents, the hill neighborhoods are touted as "good," "inspiring," and/or "unsurpassed," with "pretty treelined streets", and "good climate." One of these neighborhoods was "considered one of the best residential areas in East Bay" with others described as a "beautiful sylvan setting, among pine and eucalyptus trees…" or as a "wooded dell, with hillside and forest background." These neighborhoods are situated next to the 500-acre Joaquin Miller Park, acquired by the City of Oakland in 1917, and Redwood Regional a 1,800-acre forest. In 1934 the Regional Park District was created, "aided by a federal appropriation of $500,000." When adjusted for inflation this translates to approximately $10 million in environmental investments today.

The hill housing tracts had "high racial restrictions." They enacted race-based restrictive covenants with protective provisions against occupancy by African Americans and Asians. These neighborhoods all benefited from Federal Housing Administration investments providing low-cost long term loans, which were documented to be "cheaper than fair, ordinary rent." These neighborhoods represent a scarce and coveted commodity in property ownership made possible through government loans and in neighborhood investments which created access to the

surrounding green amenities. The suburbanization process also granted these residents a backyard, a privatized green space for personalized enjoyment, afforded by homeownership. The backyard made these residents less dependent on municipal public parks for their access to green space.

This is in direct contrast to the neighborhoods in the Oakland Flats. These neighborhoods are described as within "walking distance to local industry […] for laborers," which is recorded under "favorable influences." These neighborhoods reveal the intersection of economic advantages through employment and environmental disadvantages among housing options for African American and Asian residents. As early as 1937, these neighborhoods are described as having "odors from factories," "odors from bay flats; smoke and grime from railroad shops and local industry," as well as consisting of "cheap older homes," "zoned for multiple dwellings," "no restrictions" in regards to racial residential stipulations, with an "infiltration African Americans and Asians. It was also noted, "City taxes [were] too high in proportion to income and value" of these homes. None of the neighborhoods in the Oakland flats document any green amenities. By 1942, Oakland had approximately 48 public parks and playgrounds. De Fremery Park and Recreation Center in West Oakland became the sole recreational space for Black USO officers to congregate. In addition, African Americans were often denied access to the "great outdoors," when national parks and regional park systems were legally segregated, prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The HOLC upheld and solidified racially segregated housing practices and created distinct landscapes and differently valued neighborhoods, the Federal Housing Administration along with other federal, state, and local governments helped to fund the process, and together they created the necessary conditions needed to disinvest and devalue the neighborhoods in the flats of Oakland and clearing the way through demolition using eminent domain for Urban Renewal projects of the 1940s and 50s, the creation of the federal highway system, and the Bay Area Rapid Transit system a decade later. The legacy of the HOLC's risk grades evaluation system is associated with current neighborhood racial residential patterns, poverty, income inequality, tree canopy coverage, higher ambient temperatures, location of hazardous waste facilities and superfund sites, and a lack of green space, parks, and biodiversity. The HOLC system captured, contained, and contaminated these communities for generations.

In the next era, 1977-1999 Oakland's population transitioned from a White majority to an African American plurality due to white flight to neighboring suburban municipalities. During this time neighborhoods in the flats of Oakland "saw a second wave of new parks, most associated with the freeway construction." The remaining undeveloped lands from freeway construction were acquired and used as sites for park creation. While "the number of city parks increased dramatically during this period, [the] total park acreage increased only slightly." Both new and historical parks within these neighborhoods were now situated under or near freeways, exposing these communities to a new set of environmental harms from traffic-related air pollution. According to The Health Effects Institute Panel, the exposure zone from a highway or a major road is approximately 300 to 500 meters. Similarly, the Mayo Clinic placed the highest pollution levels 400 meters from a road and advises to "avoid these kinds of areas when exercising."

In the historically African American district of West Oakland and prior to 1989 all of the parks were located within 500 meters of a freeway. With most of the park being acquired during and

after freeway construction and dedicated as municipal parks and/or recreation centers. Only due to Cypress Viaduct freeway collapse in 1989 due to the Loma Prieta Earthquake, all the parks except for three, De Fremery, Wade Johnson Park, and McClymonds Mini-Park, are still in the air pollution exposure zone due to remaining freeways that encircle West Oakland. This pattern is echoed in the Chinatown/Downtown district, all five parks are within the exposure zone of one or more freeways. East Oakland in particular is a park-poor area and lacking in overall green spaces. Most of these parks are located within the I-880's hazardous air exposure zone. These new municipal parks did not mitigate the green space deficit between the hills and the flats. The predominantly White residents in the Oakland Hills still lived in a suburban aesthetic of tree-lined streets, thick with green spaces, and nestled among the public Joaquin Miller Park described as "urban wildlands" and Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park said to be "peaceful groves."

In 1992 while Oakland was a Chocolate City it began to enact its environmental agenda. In 1996 and 1998, the City of Oakland adopted two environmental initiatives that were modeled from the 1992 Earth Summit Agenda 21 and 1997 Kyoto Protocol which brought cities to the forefront and recognized urban areas as essential to creating a healthy environment and

What emerged was the concept of a green city, an urban area designed to advance sustainability goals, address climate change, improve quality of life, and minimize negative environmental impacts. A crucial part of creating the green city is the production of green spaces (e.g., parks, gardens, and urban agriculture).

Green spaces absorb CO_2 and air pollutants, reduce flooding from stormwater run-off, mitigates the urban heat island effect, and can serve as areas for recreation, food production, wildlife habitat formation, and socio-cultural production and placemaking. The promise of the green city is particularly vital for low-income neighborhoods and communities of color who tend to be the most environmentally compromised, and are less likely to live next to or have access to healthy green spaces. There are two parts to creating a green city. Part 1 is financial and includes the business practice of investing energy, products, and services in low-income, minority, and disabled communities. Part 2 is environmental and involves the creation of large areas of land with a mix of uses that are in some combination of public and private ownership but are managed for public purposes such as recreation, ecological preservation, and maintenance of scenic vistas.

Between 1992 and taking effect in 2005 the City of Oakland began to erode the amount of affordable and low-income housing stock while simultaneously creating the foundation in which Oakland (re)envisioned itself as a green city. The HOPE VI program contributed to the removal of more than 4,000 low-income housing units in Oakland between 1992 and 2018 by placing public housing into the rental market using the voucher 8 program. This coincided with the Great Recession and the subprime mortgage crisis in which California was amongst one of the states hardest hit. African Americans and Latinx communities in California, were disproportionally affected by the crisis because they also had been targeted by subprime predatory lending institutions at twice the rate of Whites.

During this time a proliferation of Master Plans in which green space creation was coupled with luxury housing development. These master and specific plans rendered green gentrification and erased African American residents and misrepresenting the actual demographics of the neighborhoods they depicted. Developers and landlords also benefited from millions of dollars in

Environmental Protection Agency brownfield mitigation project grants used to remove high levels of lead contamination in the soil in the flats of Oakland, in predominantly African American neighbors and removing this population through eviction, raising the cost of living, and spurring on gentrification.

What is taking place now is not only green gentrification through displacement but gentrification through exclusion in which government funding and tax incentives make these environmentally remediated housing plus park developments possible while economically excluding the populations that need it the most. This is not just in Oakland, it happened in San Francisco's Hunters Point, in Chicago and their rollout of green roofs, in Birmingham with Railroad Park, New York's Highline, and that is just to name a few.

In all three eras, African Americans are habitually excluded from and/or dispossessed of property ownership, quality housing, and green amenities while also having their housing, neighborhoods, and lives compromised by environmental harms and repeatedly sacrificed, benefiting the municipality and its White residents.