

Color Lines: Geography and Racial Control – Podcast Transcript

Bridgett McCoy: In St. James Parish, Louisiana, there is a plastics plant on the site of a historic burial ground of people once enslaved. Descendants of the buried continue to live in the neighboring majority Black communities. In the fields where enslaved people cultivated sugarcane, smokestacks from factories now exhale toxic chemicals. Where the roots of the plantation economy took hold, natural gas, oil, and other pipelines snake, omnipresent in the ground. The proximity of these industries to black communities is the result of laws that have operated to place black people directly in contact with environmental pollutants.

Eli Turner: We will talk to a community member from St. James Parish, Louisiana, and a city planner from New York City will hear about how laws have operated to place high polluting industries near black communities. We hear about how black communities and the health of community members have suffered. And we'll hear about the challenges that impacted communities face when they went to raise their voices in protest against having toxic industries placed in that community. I am Eli Turner, a third year student at Columbia Law and one of the hosts for this episode. I'm particularly interested in this topic that we're covering, because I'm interested in environmental racism and the ways that the environment under the law can be used as a tool of social control. Later on, he was a co professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and preservation. First, you hear from my classmates and CO hosts.

Bridgett McCoy: Thanks to you Eli. Hey everyone, my name is Bridgett McCoy, and I'm also a third year law students at Columbia Law, I came to law school in part for—actually entirely for—my interest in environmental law and environmental justice. During my second year of law school, I wrote every research paper called a note, which is kind of the jumping off point of the Podcast, on environmental justice issues in in the area of Louisiana known as Cancer Alley, and how that intersects with anti-protest laws and generally with segregation and the concentration of black people in areas and how that allows people with nefarious plans to place harmful infrastructure in those areas. And that can have sort of cascading impacts in other areas including potentially policing of speech and incarceration. So that's how we got in contact with Rise St. James, a Black woman led environmental justice organization based in Cancer Alley, Louisiana. And I spoke with Stephanie Cooper, a member and President as co-founder and vice president of Ray St. James. Do you mind introducing yourself to our listeners?

Stephanie Cooper: Sure. My name is Stephanie Cooper. I am the Vice President of rising James, currently living in St. James, Louisiana, and currently as of July 19 2021, air retired after 30.7 years as a school teacher and have been with Rise St. James for about three years now. It has been inspiring, wonderful being in the community as far as being an environmental activist, which is something that is heartwarming to me and it is something that personal as well.

Bridgett McCoy: Wonderful, thank you. Since you brought up that this is this issue is personal to can you tell us a little bit about yourself and why environmental justice, environmental racism is personal to you?

Stephanie Cooper: as time progressed, I noticed that [my] health situation you know, getting worse as far as having allergies. I became 50, at that time, I went to my doctor chronic infection,

chronic sinus infection, throat infections, strep throat upper respiratory issues going on. Then also notice the breeze and filament of sulfur from an industry. It began to set on my vehicle and on the home as well. So I begin to inquire to my doctor, I said to the Doctor, you've always had me as a patient since a little girl and I never had upper respiratory problems, I never had chronic sinus infection. I'm 50 years old. Why am I having this issue?

Bridgett McCoy: Would you be able to list the factories that you can think of that are close to you?

Stephanie Cooper: Yeah, it was just so many of them. We have like 12 popped up on the river road, and if you want to count them is 13 and 14 industries in one. But we have plastic, we have chlorine, we do have the just like I said, this sulfur as well. We do have on the other side of the ravine cement you have occidental plant as well, which is a chemical plant on the other side as well. There's another industry does wanted to be 70 feet from our park. So now our kids are going to have to wear oxygen tank to go to the park. most of Louisiana, if you look our wetlands are really really disintegrating. We're losing it. And that is something that should be our priority. Because we need to do something to maintain the land and maintain the people, all people they are human beings and the sight of God.

Stephanie Cooper: And let me tell you something if people really believe in the God and the fact that they profess not only the government, I'm talking about all politicians, what makes them think that we don't believe in economic development, we're all for that. But that expensive and alliance of people, black and brown people don't talk about it, Jewish people are hurting, people are sick, and people are due. And we also don't have the opportunity of sitting on the porch and join a breeze and the fresh air, the opportunity to put your clothes on the line and let the wind blow through your clothes. You can't do that anymore because of pesticides. And a combination of chemicals being up on your closing on the line, you can't sit outside because you know it's like snowflakes and other chemicals and a foul odor. That's what happened. Even the birds and the butterfly know that this is not a place for anyone to live because we no longer see the grasshopper of crickets and you know the dragonfly and the beautiful butterfly, they use to folic back and forth and certain birds, they used to be up there, you know. And you could sit on the porch and enjoy the breeze. You know, by sitting on the floor, you no longer have that anymore. People have been having, you know, a respiratory, we have some that died from cancer from other type of ailment that has been going on because of the land, the air and the water that we breathe, you know, and you can do you definitely can tell the difference in the smell in the stench when you go elsewhere outside of the area.

Bridgett McCoy: Thank you for that. So in your experience, how does race play in the environmental conditions, African American people face in Louisiana and in St. James Parish and in the parishes along the lower Mississippi River?

Stephanie Cooper: Without a doubt, if you take an aerial view, and begin to talk with anyone who has eyes, it will be obvious to them that race is [what's] going on. It will be obvious today with us. Us who do have eyes to see it has to be raised when it comes to who's going to get the industry and who are not. Who's going to pay the piper for it and who's not is very obvious, very obvious, and I feel to believe that they know it. Because when the land is being given or shown

to the industries, the people in the industries have been told that nobody lives there. When they're showing Greenaway [a Black Community] they're shown a field with grass with no homes. That is the way that is the underlying procrastination that is going on. If you [an industry] want something what you have to do . . . is take from people feel that they do not have a voice who will not say anything. I really feel to believe that it was on purpose and a plan because they know no one is going to have this political person on his side. I really feel to believe that it was something that was playing and plot undercover. I really feel to believe that you know, as a school teacher, and what people need to do is tell their truth. Keep your first amendment, your voice, don't let someone have your voice.

Stephanie Cooper: Besides emotion compassion and love for God's people. Truth, fairness, equity, and looking at the suffering of others. It brings me back to the scripture where Jesus talks about and tell us that we going to always have the poor with us. Don't we have it the winters the lease? The least of them? Those are the words that Jesus spoken so well who are the least of these? One of them is whom you're talking to now, Bridgette, I am the least of them. Because I'm living in one of those areas. I refuse to leave because I was at first. They're the one that needs to move. They're the one that needs to leave.

Bridgett McCoy: I want to be conscious of time. So I just want to ask a few more questions. What kind of organizing work have you been involved with Rise? St. James,

Stephanie Cooper: we've done a March, we didn't march to the state capitol. We did March in New Orleans, St. John St. James combat. We didn't watch this there. We did. Just like I said, watch it for amendment number five. Amendment five was an amendment that they were trying to pass where if you will go and protest on industries or any type of property, you will get arrested and you will be a felony. And you will go to jail for a very long time.

Bridgett McCoy: have you personally experienced any harassment or efforts by the police or for most or anybody else to get you to stop.

Stephanie Cooper: But I'm going to say yes. underhandedly, if that makes sense. Yeah. So can be physical that you know, and some can be physical that you don't know. That's what I'm talking about. So yeah, so to answer that question, yes.

Bridgett McCoy: Wow, that's must be so difficult to organize in that situation. I just have one specific event I'd love to hear you talk about when you at the Juneteenth prayer ceremony at the burial grounds of the enslaved people that was on the land that Formosa was planning on building upon.

Stephanie Cooper: Yes, I was on a burial ground there. That was the event that we did. We had a lot of men of the clergy there, we had an event where we have all of the faith coming up out of the Baptist, keeping the community outside of the community as well. Fromosa did set aside a fence to one area where they have slaves.

Stephanie Cooper: We know for a fact that there are many other areas when it land that has not been geared all like this port. But yes, I was there we had all inspiring program where we give honor to our ancestors who decided toward the ground, work the ground, dive on the ground prior in the ground dance on the ground jubilating and celebrated when freedom came on the ground as well. So we had a ceremony where we had dancers that came from New Orleans, and they danced on the ground. In honor of the ancestors, it was awe inspiring, where they also passed the hands up on the ground while dancing, given coloration and love and compassion to the whole court fight that they had and how we feel the same thing because we are doing the same thing as we speak fighting now for them. And as well power swells, and let them know that the fight is still not finished. Not even completed, the work is not done, and that we feel their love and pride and them cheering us on at the same time. As a matter of fact, as he got quiet and the wind began to blow, I was telling people to remain quiet. Because our ancestors are receiving our prayers, our upload, our love our admiration for them. And they are with us. And they think us also been fighting the fight. Because victory may now be now. But victory is coming and is coming soon.

Bridgett McCoy: Thank you for that. Just wanted to give you the chance to say anything else that you want our listeners who aren't familiar with these issues. Is there anything you'd like to say to them?

Stephanie Cooper: Wow. First thing I would like to say is thank you all for it felt thank you for wanting to do such a story on some of the lease of dem people, or politics or power may think as we tell our story, as you see us marching as you see us on social media. As you see us trying to break the chains of injustice, environmental racism, help us to walk that walk To Talk That Talk in equality, hold hands together, not even for one second, looking down to find out and see if that hand is white. If that hand is black, then hand is brown. That hand is someone who lived differently from us. But Roland has to say, Will fighting and we are in this together, no matter what Come what may come what may.

Bridgett McCoy: Well, thank you for helping us this has been such a fabulous conversation.

Eli Turner: So brilliant. It's been a few weeks since your conversations, Stephanie? And what is your takeaway from that?

Bridgett McCoy: I mean, it's just so important to talk to people who have these lived experiences. And environmental justice, environmental racism is obviously something that we talk a lot about. And critical race theory itself is something that's very talked about, but when it is just so obvious, like scoopers when you zoom out and just look on the ground, when it becomes very clear that this is that the health harms are happening to black people. the same kind of care that's being done towards white families, and also the, in what communities and the targeting that's happening to black news, it's just so obvious on the ground that all these legal terms that we kind of think about and that we hear, and these issues of discriminatory intent really just don't matter, right. I think one of the things that we talked a lot about in our critical race theory is how colorblindness and the law and the desire of the Supreme Court to see evidence of discrimination, discriminatory intent. And in any sort of civil rights case, or any sort of civil rights issue, or, obviously, none of these factories are going to be like, we don't like Black

people. But that's very much what's happening on the ground. And so these people are just completely these people in these communities are completely outside of the protection of the law.

Eli Turner: Yeah, I totally agree with everything you just said. I think that, you know, hearing from Stephanie, we really see the importance of political action, and then some of the challenges of turning political action into legal action. And I know, ideally, legal victories. And yeah, just like you said, it's a it's a hard road to fight, but we have to keep Fighting.

Bridgett McCoy: So I'm, excited to hear your conversation with Professor Forbes.

Eli Turner: Yeah, yeah, we spoke back in November on the phone. And I got to ask Professor Forbes, a little bit about his experience as a city planner, and his perspective on some of the challenges of planning, safe urban spaces for black people, you know, in what's historically been a white dominated and even openly racist field. And he's his career as a planner here in the city. So he definitely has some insights into black neighborhoods around the city, especially here in Harlem, as most of his experience focuses on Manhattan. And he also brings this really interesting perspective, having been an active member of the Black Panther Party, kind of at the apex of the party's existence, serving as a quartermaster out in California. So Flores Forbes has a ton of interesting perspectives and excited to share our conversation with you all.

Flores Forbes: I joined the Black Panther Party when I was 16 years old, and that was there for 10 years, at least in the like, above ground type, environment. And then I was a fugitive for three years. And then after that trauma, and I went to prison for like five. New York City is the best laboratory to study urban planning because it's the most complicated development process and this is where all the big developers

Flores Forbes: When I was a real estate developer, there was a Black female investment banker who we were working with and she primarily used to do municipal bonds. And she told us, so me during one of our consultations that in their in their multiple regression models that they build to price bond He said that they use the third-grade test scores of Black boys as a significant variable in order to determine number of beds, prison beds that would be needed. You know, so I, you know, I'll never forget that.

Flores Forbes: And I thought that was a significant piece and, and it is basically part of their model building. So it's not very much as my written about it, I've seen different people try to debunk that that's what happens, but there are that is some that is there is a measure of that type that is used with regards to pricing the bonds, you know, most of the planning apparatus in New York City was developed around having clean water, you know, and that was one of the bigger issues there.

Flores Forbes: The kind of development process and, and how people became these power brokers probably evolved a lot around this guy named Robert Moses, who was, you know, in his book, The power brokers, this was taught in urban planning schools and that sort of thing. And, you know, Robert Moses was a planner, but he clearly developed planning, using race as a significant variable. No, actually, you know, it is a story about how he planned the bridges for all

the in the parkways and that sort of things to be so low that the buses could not go on to them. That people of color who were trying to take the buses to go to the beach couldn't, couldn't get there through his parkways.

Eli Turner: You know, a lot of these zoning rules and, and procedures are facially neutral. But we see that, you know, there's really high levels of demographic concentration, like in terms of race. And we also see that that concentrate like racial concentration overlaps with other indicators, like you mentioned, third grade reading levels, or asthma levels, as we talked about elsewhere in our, in our podcast, so how do these facially neutral laws and policies kind of contribute to those like coinciding variables?

Flores Forbes: Okay, you know, I don't think that they're neutral, because if they're part of the urban planning process, no, race is still a significant variable there. You know, today, you still have in different parts of definitely in upper Manhattan, particularly in Harlem, you still have a controlling Urban Renewal Plan. And these plans were developed to segregate. You know, I worked on years ago, the Frederick Douglass Boulevard initiative was a was as a result of an Urban Renewal Plan.

Flores Forbes: And there was 16 acres of vacant land that was there. That had been the you know, the area had been cleared. And it had been thinking for 30 years. Okay. And the only reason why, you know, as, as a land use planet working for the borough mean, we had to work to develop that land, and to create a plan, one that was controlled by us. And, you know, we brought in a kind of a left leaning urban designer, who was an urban planning professor here at Columbia University, Lionel McIntyre. And we realized, you know, we had an opportunity here to create affordable housing, you know, with space and light, because the developers were the kind of downtown developers, they want to control of that, that land. This was a major corridor, you know, kind of the gateway into upper Manhattan and there was this plan. I mean, a lot of people believe it was this conspiracy, because you have all these beautiful brownstones in upper Manhattan and in Harlem, and that, you know, after people who had left the city, they were returning to the city.

Eli Turner: Yeah, that is so fascinating to hear about how Race is kind of, in some ways, obviously used to create this, this urban environment and to decide where people are going to live. But at the same time, it's kind of hidden beneath this language of, of affordability in this kind of economic sensibility, which, you know, has a veneer of rationality. And, and a veneer of neutrality, when, in fact, it's clear just from looking at maps, and you know, just even walking around the city, that there's nothing neutral about these, these, these plans at all. And also, it's so heavily organized, like you mentioned, all these different groups and foundations and nonprofits that contribute to the, the creation of these affordable housing zones, which, you know, that's like, the only place that certain groups of people can afford to live, and so they end up bounded within these geographic spaces. And that kind of brings me to my next question, which is, once people are in those spaces, once you have these, you know, communities of black people, or Hispanic people, or Asian Americans, or, you know, what have you? How are they regulated? And how do environmental policing tactics play into, you know, the kind of maintenance of these racial boundaries?

Flores Forbes: Well, I mean, you know, when you start talking about environmental issues, like, you know, waste disposal plants, bus barns that are built. You know, again, those are issues where you look at the city, through the work of what's called interim laws, in terms of people not paying their taxes, the city seizes the property. So there was this disproportionate number of no tax arrears in mostly communities of color. And so if you notice that there are these bus barns in Harlem, you know, I mean, you know, the irony in that is, [Columbia is] building a new campus in Manhattanville one, and I think it's in phase two, the bus barn right there, in the Manhattanville area, that part of our agreement with the state and the city, is to put that bus barn, below ground, it's gonna be below grade. You know, there's another one over on Third Avenue near 120/5. And then you have these, the sanitation plants that are here that were just opened, I think they build a park over one, but they said, Well, we can make it, we can make it so that it doesn't smell bad. You know. And so, you know, and so a lot of these, the decision to locate these facilities there was because the land was owned by the city. And so therefore, because it was owned by the city would make it a lot cheaper. You know, and it just so happens that you had this, you know, disproportionate number of, what they called in RAM properties that the city was could seize. And they could seize them and then rezone the area to turn it into a, an area where we can put one of these kinds of facilities, you know, in many ways, like a manufacturing type. Setup, most of the planning has been done by the city is not being done by people of color, you know, people of color and not in the planning department. I mean, most of the time when I was working for the city, or even when I was kind of the traditional planning, and even here at Columbia, you know, if there's a discussion if there's a meeting around some land use process, I was usually one of the few black people that was in the room.

Eli Turner: So you're kind of painting this picture for us of urban planning departments that are mostly white, making these huge decisions about where people of color will be able to live in New York City. And then the same mostly white urban planning departments are also being catered to by corporate interests in industry and manufacturing. You know, affordability and land prices, the urban planning departments are allowing these industrial interest groups to put their infrastructure near these pockets of people of color, who are then bearing the brunt of most of the environmental externalities that are falling out of these, these industrial facilities. And then on top of that, we also have social control in the form of policing. Not necessarily environmental policing, as we just discussed, but also over, you know, use of the police force. And so how does that, you know, that overt policing kind of factor into this whole equation? What role does that play as a tool of social control with respect to the other things that we've been talking about? So also, to move on, just to talk about some remedies. So we've spent a lot of this conversation kind of diagnosing some of the different problems and how things got the way that they are. But I'm, like, like, now that we have that understanding, what can we do about it? How can we empower people to, you know, take back ownership of the spaces in which they live?

Flores Forbes: I mean, I think that, you know, I, one of the things that happened, I guess, with so called desegregation was that Black people didn't stay in the African American communities, they started moving to different places. And, and I think that that's something that's, there's, you know, that's, that's still going on, but I do you do have people who are coming back, you know, and I think there are these, you know, enclaves that are being created, you know, where you have them in certain areas, some of them are affluent, you know, areas, you know, like, in Los Angeles, you know, you have certain areas where you have a lot of affluent black people, and

those areas are thriving. You have it here in Harlem, you know, me, you know, in order to create, you know, these opportunities, I mean, there are these moments that are happening, you know, like, even in, at one time, it was jazz, and you had a jazz community, and now you have, you have hip hop, which I think is a little more robust, because it's actually, penetrated kind of public, public idea that it's okay to use poetry with music, it's kind of what it is, right? And it's okay to use poetry with music, and then talk about how difficult your environment is that people will pay money for that. This is kind of a wealth creation aspect of that, right. But not everybody is going to do that. I think that you have these opportunities, but I don't think that there's going to be this moment where everything is going to be, you know, I'm in a way segregated. Again, you know, in terms of bringing back, you know, opportunities for people and, you know, that sort of thing. So I think that that's a really interesting way of looking at it because I don't think that you're going to have you know, this drive to create these separate enclaves for people of color, not when you have the opportunity to, you know, to live somewhere else.

Flores Forbes: Well, it's not about redesigning the city because it's, you know, city regardless is made up of people, but I, I believe the biggest is to meet white supremacy, the most powerful ideology in the world. Okay. It's baked into the Bible. It's baked into the Qur'an, I mean, any type of thinking, and it affects that it has something to do with most of it has something to do with most of the wars that are fought. Okay. So I think that one of the things you need to do is to, and that would be this, you know, how did that happen? Are you making this happen this a reeducation project, in order to get people to realize that, you know, I believe that, you know, there's a belief in society that in order for, you know, for me to do well, someone else has to do bad, or be depressed. And that's the way this country has evolved. You know, so I think it would have some more to do with educating people, you know, around that, and sticking to that, you know, not being concerned when someone says, Well, you know, it's critical race theory. So is teaching, you know, Biff and Muffin to not like themselves? Well, you know, Biff and Muffin should be concerned about what they believe, if they believe that because they are white, that they are superior to someone who is not, and, that might not have a real positive result all the time. But I think that that's, that's this will be important. I don't think I would look at redesigning Manhattan, without there being some major education aspect, having lived here, having worked here, having been involved with that, you know, white supremacy controls the urban planning process still, right? The only reason why I have been successful in terms of doing things I knew it was an oppressive practice. And by knowing it, you know, insights, as the, you know, the great military theoretician Sun Tzu said, know, your enemies know yourself. Right? So if you know, this is what's going on. And you understand it, well, then how can you develop a process your guidelines to overcome that? You know, and like I said, I don't think it has anything to do with the built environment. It has to do with the people that make up that environment.

Bridgett McCoy: So Eli? What are some of the things that you took away from that conversation with Professor Forbes? Obviously, we got to know a little bit during our critical race theory class, but you really got a chance to talk with him about his craft and his work.

Eli Turner: Yeah, I mean, first off, I really learned that Professor Forbes is just a pretty fascinating guy. And he really has some deep experience with so many of these issues. But I mean, issue specific, I think, Professor Ford's definitely stressed the importance of education, in urban planning, and the importance of thinking about the built environment as constitutive of the

people as well. And not just buildings and infrastructure and things like that, but really centering the people who are living in the city, and designing the city for them and designing the city in a way that can educate them and where people can feel connected to their history and informed by their history. And they can, you know, that I think, is the basis at least from what I took away from Professor Forbes. That's the basis for, you know, creating social progress, which in some ways is really radical theory, I think, and I think some of the, the ideas that he presents would not be mainstream on like even kind of the most progressive circles that we see today. But I think he really touches on some key issues.