

Best Text Collection

Volume 1 *Inaugural Collection*

Article 5

2020

A Tale of Two Systems: Highway Systems and Systemic Racism

Henry Nguyen

University of Massachusetts Amherst, hennguyenh@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/best_text

Recommended Citation

Nguyen, Henry (2020) "A Tale of Two Systems: Highway Systems and Systemic Racism," *Best Text Collection*: Vol. 1, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7275/28453146.0>

Available at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/best_text/vol1/iss1/5

This Alphabetical Essay is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Best Text Collection by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Henry Nguyen

Amy Diehl

ENGLWRIT 112

13 November 2020

A Tale of Two Systems: Highways Systems and Systemic Racism

I began my walk to the housing projects with three lanes of traffic to accompany me on my left as well as the five lanes of traffic on the highway watching over me. At that time, I, along with other bilingual youth, would be working with researchers to test the efficacy of air filters in reducing the concentration of air pollution. These air filters would be placed in these homes alongside the three lanes of traffic as well as the highway. Our role was to serve as communicators between the community and the researchers through our experiences as community members and youth interpreters. The service we would provide to our community was personally fulfilling, and I genuinely felt like I was making a change; however, I could not help but wonder: how did these highways get here in the first place, and why were they placed so close to residential areas?

Common knowledge about highways is President Eisenhower's Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 that promised economic and transportation growth through government funding of highway constructions across the nation (History.com). A study conducted in 2011 by Tegan K. Boehmer, a member of the Division of Environmental Hazards and Health Effects of the CDC, used US census data to find a correlation between race and one's housing proximity to a highway. From this study, Boehmer determined what percentage of each race lived within 150 meters of a major highway. For non-Hispanics, the results were 4.4% for Black and 5.4% for Asian/Pacific Islander, and for Hispanics, the percentage was 5.0% (Boehmer). In contrast, the

percentage for White non-Hispanics was 3.1% (Boehmer). These percentages seem small, however, given that the population of the US is approximately 328 million people, 1% difference is equivalent to more than three million people. This statistic brings light to the disparity between one's race and one's proximity to a highway. If there is such a disproportionate effect, does this imply that highways are racist? What are some of these effects? What can we do about them?

Beneath the intent for transportation prosperity, the creation of the highway system had an underlying motive that gave birth to a source of systemic racism. In the early- to mid-twentieth century, the majority of White families had moved from the cities to the suburbs and obtained easy access into the city due to the construction of highways, while communities of color still resided in urban slums. However, the migration of White families caused severe financial damage to those urban areas, resulting in the decline of city infrastructural conditions and contributing to their transformation into urban slums (*Segregated by Design*). Families of color were not able to leave these urban slums as easily as the White families, first having to overcome several racial barriers that kept them trapped in the urban areas. The first of these discriminatory practices was "redlining." Service providers such as banks mapped out areas and determined which neighborhoods were "safe for investments" (Demby). The underlying racist attitude that these providers used in determining which areas were "safe for investments" consistently excluded areas with high percentages of minority populations, discriminated against people on the basis of race and social class, and denied them these services. These areas were colored red on the map to suggest the dangers of investments, hence "redlining." This would mean that even if a family met all other requirements for obtaining a home loan, they would simply be denied the mortgage because of where they lived.

Had a minority family been able to overcome the challenge of redlining, they would be confronted with additional obstacles. For example, if a minority did happen to obtain funds to move to the suburbs, the local communities created a set of rules called covenants, which were deemed illegal however these regulations were not legally enforced, that explicitly excluded other races. The covenants covered thousands of properties within a single city and often used racist language, such as the Arroyo Heights area in the west of Seattle, Washington: “No person of any race other than the White or Caucasian race shall use or occupy any building or any lot, except that this covenant shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants, or a different race domiciled with an owner or tenant” (“Racial Restrictive Covenants”). The explicitly racist language was used to reserve suburbs as areas for “Whites only” and was repeated across other neighborhoods and areas. Despite the explicit racism, some families were not intimidated by these messages and decided to move in regardless. When this happened, residents took matters into their own hands and used direct violence to terrorize these families. These actions included and were not limited to ““cross burnings, dynamite bombings, rocks thrown through windows, graffiti, and other acts of vandalism as well as numerous phone threats”” (Mohajer). Redlining, covenants, and acts of direct violence were measures taken in order to hold minorities in the slums. These areas were prime targets for highways because highways would have the greatest ease in construction in urban slums; the low economic cost and the residents who had little influence on highway construction decision-making set up conditions that would facilitate the destruction of these areas (Karas).

The construction of the highway system has brought effects of systemic racism that continue to affect minorities. The direct destruction caused by bulldozers tore down 620 Black homes, 27 apartment houses, and six Black churches. The remnants of the city that were not

bulldozed suffered further economic damage. In Nashville, after the construction of the I-40 highway, the businesses suffered, the property values fell, and the residents were physically separated from the places, such as playgrounds, churches, and businesses, that were important to them. Additional effects included a continuous stream of air pollution and noise pollution that came from the new incoming traffic (Karas).

Air pollution may not seem like a product of systemic racism, however, not all the consequences perpetuated by highway racism are explicit. The air pollution caused by highways has affected minorities at a disproportionate level, and this leads to a disproportionate level of health impacts on communities of color. One of the components of air pollution is the concentration of ultra-fine particles, which come from tailpipes of cars originally as heated gases; however, as they cool after leaving the car, they shrink to the size of 100 nanometers (*Community Assessment*). Though small, these particulate matters have been linked to increased risk of heart attack, Alzheimer's, and neurological problems (LeMoult), in addition to the common risks of air pollution such as asthma, cancer, and respiratory/cardiovascular diseases (Boehmer). In more pressing terms, the long-term exposure of ultra-fine particles can potentially increase susceptibility to other respiratory diseases, such as COVID-19. In a study conducted by Harvard University in June of 2020, the researchers have found that counties that had more long-term exposure to ultrafine particles from highways had experienced more deaths from COVID-19 (Wu). From the health consequences of highways, we see how the effects of systemic racism can spill into other areas of life outside of solely financial obstacles. The financial challenges, health impacts, and the combination of these factors are only some of the effects of systemic racism perpetuated by highways (Boehmer). Although these effects can be quite despair-inducing, the reason behind sharing this information is to increase awareness, as these disparate effects on

minorities have not received enough exposure nor consideration by urban planners. By bringing to light these pressing issues, we are increasing the pressure on city planners and local governments to make these concerns heard and to open up new modes of thinking for better solutions. There is still hope for change as we can take action.

What can we do about this? Some may suggest a removal of the highway or, at the very least, certain sectors of the highway, especially those that cut through these communities of color. In place of these highways, cities would create boulevards, which are wide streets that would be typically lined with trees (McCormick). Some are skeptical of this solution because a highway removal and refurbishment may entail the threat of gentrification. Although the improvement of a city's conditions around highways is the goal of highway removal, increasing the attractiveness of the area may in turn increase property values. Current residents may be displaced again and forced out of their communities if they cannot afford their new expensive homes (Dewey). If we face problems from the lowering of property values due to the construction of highways as well as the rise of property values due to the removal of highways, what solution will protect residents and simultaneously dismantle the systemic racism embedded in these institutions?

Despite the recency of this issue, some cities have already implemented these ideas into practice. They have removed sections of highways and rebuilt boulevards in their place. What about the threat of gentrification? For some cities, they have created initiatives to protect residents and secure housing for the most vulnerable populations in the city. The city of Rochester in New York has implemented this plan and actively worked with local businesses and residents to create boulevards that are community-centric rather than car-centric. After years of work, the town had gained “\$229 million in economic development from \$22 million in public

investment” while also avoiding future \$34 million highway repair costs had they kept the highway. The project had also created 170 permanent jobs and over 2,000 construction jobs. With the new land available, the city created “534 housing units, more than half subsidized or below market rate, and 152,000 square feet of new commercial space, including services and amenities such as a day care centers and restaurants” (McCormick). The construction of these services and public housing for current residents will serve as protection against gentrification while allowing their city infrastructural conditions to improve immensely. The solution for highways and gentrification is certainly possible with the collaboration of urban planners, cities, and residents to ensure that the communities are healing from the lasting harm from highways.

Highways are institutions that contribute to systemic racism in the lives of Americans. From the beginning, they have split communities of color, leaving few viable living options and creating many barriers such as redlining, covenants, and direct violence that prevented them from moving to suburbs. The divisions caused by these institutions have worsened their city’s environment and economy and have even attached an additional cost to their health. The air pollution and ultra-fine particles accumulate within minorities, increasing their risk for certain diseases and harm to their health. A removal of these highways could disassemble the complicated issues that have arisen from highways, if done properly. With the construction of a boulevard and implementation of measures to protect minorities from gentrification, we begin a process of healing. The key to this solution was the act of listening and involvement of those who have experienced the ills of highways. By listening to their history, understanding the present effects, and preparing for future implications, we can address the complexity of systemic racism. By bringing to the table people who have been historically marginalized and excluded, we can all care for one another and bring equity for generations to enjoy.

Works Cited

- Boehmer, Tegan K. "Residential Proximity to Major Highways — United States, 2010." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 22 Nov. 2013,
<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/su6203a8.htm>. Accessed 3 Nov. 2020.
- Community Assessment of Freeway Exposure and Health*. Tufts University, 2011,
<https://sites.tufts.edu/cafeh/>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.
- Demby, Gene. "Housing Segregation and Redlining in America: A Short History | NPR." *Youtube*, uploaded by NPR, 11 Apr. 2018,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5FBJyqfoLM&ab_channel=NPR. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.
- Dewey, Caitlin. "Advocates Rally to Tear Down Highways That Bulldozed Black Neighborhoods." *The Pew Charitable Trusts*, 28 Jul. 2020,
<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/07/28/advocates-rally-to-tear-down-highways-that-bulldozed-black-neighborhoods>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.
- History.com Editors. "The Interstate Highway System." *HISTORY*, A&E Television Networks, 27 May 2010, <https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/interstate-highway-system>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2020.
- Karas, David. "Highway to Inequity: The Disparate Impact of the Interstate Highway System on Poor and Minority Communities in American Cities." *New Visions for Public Affairs*, vol 7, 7 Apr. 2015,
https://www.nashville.gov/Portals/0/SiteContent/Planning/docs/trans/EveryPlaceCounts/1_Highway%20to%20Inequity.pdf. Accessed 1 Nov. 2020.

LeMoult, Craig. "Car Pollution In Boston Area Neighborhoods Poses Health Risk To Residents, New Research Finds." *WGBH News*, 22 Sept. 2019, <https://www.wgbh.org/news/local-news/2019/09/22/car-pollution-in-boston-neighborhoods-poses-health-risk-to-residents-new-research-finds>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.

McCormick, Kathleen. "How Urban Highway Removal Is Changing Our Cities." *Lincoln Institute of Land Policy*, 14 Apr. 2020, <https://www.lincolninst.edu/publications/articles/2020-03-deconstruction-ahead-urban-highway-removal-changing-cities>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.

"Racial Restrictive Covenants," *University of Washington*, <https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/covenants.htm>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.

Segregated by Design. Directed by Mark Lopez, Silkworm Studios, 2019. Accessed 3 Nov. 2020.

Wu, Xiao, et al. "Fine particulate matter and COVID-19 mortality in the United States." *The President and Fellows of Harvard College*, <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.