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Essay

“Unruly Vernacular Riverfront”: Eileen Myles’s Queer Persistence in the Changing Climate of New York

DAVY KNITTLE

DAVY KNITTLE (he/they) is assistant professor of English at the University of Delaware, Newark. His current book project, “Urbanist Desire and the Ecology of Queer and Trans Survival,” describes how urban and environmental change shaped the central questions of queer and trans cultural production in the United States from 1950 to 2020. His work has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *Feminist Formations*, and in the collection *In the Daylight of Our Existence: Essays on Architecture, Gender, and Theory* (gta Verlag).

“This Is Not Climate Resiliency”: A Queer Approach to Urban Climate Futures

In April 2022, the poet Eileen Myles was arrested for chaining themself to a cherry tree in Corlears Hook Park in Lower Manhattan (“Bloom”). They were arrested while participating in activism opposing the demolition of East River Park, which is being demolished to facilitate one of New York City’s first large-scale climate resiliency projects, East Side Coastal Resiliency (ESCR). ESCR will cut down the park’s 991 trees, plant approximately two thousand new trees, lift the height of the park by between eight and nine feet, and build a floodwall along its edge (“Mayor Robber”; “Recovery”). The organizations of which Myles is a part—East River Park Action and 1,000 People, 1,000 Trees—explain that they do not oppose climate resiliency planning (“Save”; “1,000 People”; see fig. 1). Their objection is to a plan that does not allow residents to shape the priorities of climate resiliency projects and instead forces a choice between preparing New York’s coastline for storm surge and maintaining the only large park in their community. Myles’s critique of ESCR additionally draws attention to how the plan uses narratives of urgency and disaster to frame the demolition of the park as inevitable and ultimately a beneficial loss. As they argue of the project in a 2021 open letter, “This is not climate resiliency. It is crass and vulgar development, an obliteration of the culture of the East

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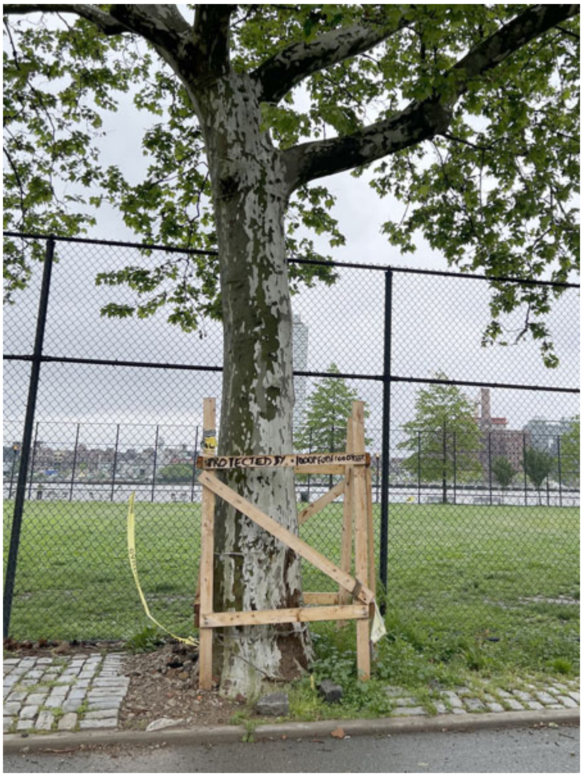

Fig. 1. American sycamore in East River Park, protected by 1,000 People, 1,000 Trees. Photo taken by the author, 19 May 2022.

Village and the Lower East Side" ("Letter" 5). Their objection is both infrastructural and ideological—they oppose the demolition of the park and refuse the premise that there can be only one useful or relevant idea of New York's future that guides large-scale climate resiliency projects. As Myles has done for decades in their gentrifying neighborhood, they use their writing to counter the temporal logics of large-scale redevelopment projects that claim to improve the lives of residents but actually exacerbate their existing precarity.

Myles is a white queer and trans poet in their seventies who has lived on the Lower East Side since the 1970s. They have written extensively about living in and identifying with the neighborhood during the decades-long neoliberal redevelopment that has dispossessed various marginalized New Yorkers. Dominant public narratives of these redevelopment projects flatten their neighborhood's history, often using undifferentiated conceptions of gentrification to describe the spatial transformation of the Lower East Side from the 1970s to the present. Against this flattening, Myles's writing asks readers to be "attuned to the 'now' of composition" such that "the 'now' is perhaps one of Myles's great subjects" (Campbell et al. 870, 872). For Myles, the "now" of composition is the "now" of urban change. Myles moved to their current apartment on East 3rd Street, a few blocks from East River Park, in 1977. They formed a relationship with the neighborhood amid public debate about the rise of gentrification, the early era of AIDS, and real estate development following the city's 1975 fiscal crisis.[1] For Myles, the trees in East River Park have been an ally in identifying a countertemporality that resists the narratives of progress that have bolstered waves of disinvestment and gentrification.

In this essay, I trace Myles's poetic documentation of the Lower East Side from the 1980s onward. Myles's writing offers a personal record of decades of predatory development on the Lower East Side. This record reveals East River Park as a granular marker of time in a changing city. As Myles notes of the park's trees, "They're this incredibly beautiful collective austere rendition of time that we live among and around" (Myles and Nelson 881). Myles's writing functions the way the trees do, by providing a "rendition of time" that complicates prevailing ideas of how neoliberal development has changed the neighborhood cultures and climate futures of the Lower East Side. Their decades of queer persistence document a series of presents that accumulate to form a nuanced portrait of desire amid neighborhood transformation, culminating in the climate resiliency plan that they view as destroying a beloved and environmentally beneficial park to make way for further development.[2]

Myles's writing offers to urban climate futures what Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen refer to as "a desire to persist in the face of precarity," which they describe as "the primary catalyst for queer thought in general" (193). Climate change exacerbates the uneven precarity of coastal city residents marginalized by norms of racialized sexuality and gender. Myles's poems make evident that the environmental humanities tools that provide vital strategies for conceptualizing climate justice on an urbanizing planet are inextricable from a queer approach to sustaining desire and loss amid precarity and from a history of urban redevelopment under neoliberalism. This relation between queer, urban, and environmental approaches to infrastructural and social transformation becomes apparent through Myles's decades-long engagement with the "now" in their writing that links their present negotiation of climate futures in East River Park to their desire to persist in a gentrifying early AIDS-era Lower East Side.

Myles's early poems share a public experience of loss with other writing about New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Myles reads New York's dominant temporality as what they describe in the poem "Weaving" as

> not
> future past or
> present. But
> a deeper now
> that speeds
> it along (*Maxfield Parrish* 78)

Myles's characteristic short lines break familiar categories of time, "future past or / present," into incomplete syntactic units that come to rest on the contrasting idea of "a deeper now" that is contained in its own line. In their attention to "a deeper now," Myles focuses on the way that urban space layers time through infrastructure, more-than-human life, and patterns of use that allow versions of the city that originated in different moments to combine and recombine in the present.

What Myles identifies as a distinctly queer experience of urban change that defies linear time, other accounts identify as a collective experience characterized by narratives of progress and disconnected from embodied desire. As the Marxist philosopher Marshall Berman notes of public loss in the New York of the 1980s and 1990s:

> If New Yorkers can come to feel how much we all have lost, it can help us work together fast before we lose it all. We need first to mourn, then to reform: to go through our grief together, and then to move beyond the work of mourning, to create a framework that can bring our city's future development under its citizens' control. Then we will be able to let go of our pain, and to build over the ruins a city we can share. (428)

Berman imagines the process of negotiating predatory urban change as mourning, a stage through which New Yorkers will pass, rather than as melancholia, a pervasive condition of grieving endemic to living in New York, as it is for Myles and many other queer New Yorkers. Furthermore, Berman reads the temporality of resistance to predatory development as following the linear time of urban revitalization. Myles, alternatively, rejects a linear approach to the temporality of urban change as rationalizing predatory development. They argue in their poems that developing more just ideas of urban change requires us to rethink how past, present, and future fit together in cities, suggesting that they are not divisible but instead that they overlap in complex ways.

A sense of identification with and desire for the overlapping infrastructures and temporalities of the Lower East Side appears across decades of Myles's writing, even as both the neighborhood and their own relationship to public life have transformed. For instance, in their recent collection *Evolution* (2018), Myles explains in the poem "The City of New York":

> what did I say
> the city being the only place
> that corresponds to my
> need
> to be every place
> at once (95)

Myles articulates an identification with the city that results from the city's capacity for multiplicity, what the queer theorist Carolyn Dinshaw refers to as a "crowded *now*" that is like the "deeper now" that Myles uses to signal that the urban present is an assemblage of temporalities (4). In the lines "my / need / to be every place / at once," Myles invites the reader to consider how the deeper or crowded now of the urban present layers locations as well as temporalities, facilitating the affective, if physically impossible, process of being in multiple places at the same time. By drawing a correspondence between the city as "the only place" and the speaker's "need / to be every place," Myles further echoes their long-standing description of themself, and the speakers of their poems, as being co-constituted with New York. These identifications at once extend from and reflect Myles's own intimate relationship with the Lower East Side. As Matthew Holman argues of the poems in *Evolution*, Myles engages in "narrating the basic facts of a life through the unstable truths of the lyricized and multivocal 'I' . . . that both is and is not the speaker's own" (974). The poems in *Evolution* share with Myles's earlier poetry an interest in personal experiences of urban change, which variously includes and departs from an autobiographical relation to the city.

Myles's turn to climate activism and their insistence on alternative temporalities of urban change can help provide nuance to thinking about climate infrastructure projects that builds on familiar narratives of progress in cities remade by neoliberal gentrification. Yet Myles's attachments to their neighborhood also present complicated and troubling analogies between divergent forms of harm. For instance, in a 2022 conversation with the writer Maggie Nelson, they note of their experience of the demolition of East River Park, "Like, oh my god, the settlers seem to think that my house is their house" (Myles and Nelson 891). Myles conflates the upheaval in their neighborhood with an experience of settler colonial dispossession. In doing so, Myles disavows the racial and class privilege that has made it possible for them to continue to live on the Lower East Side. Myles casts themself as Indigenous to their neighborhood, rather than as a white settler who has been able to stay for more than four decades while most of their Black and brown neighbors have been displaced. They disregard both the history of anti-Indigenous land claims that are constitutive of New York, to which they are attentive elsewhere in their East River Park writing, and the role of their racial and class privilege in their capacity to stay in their neighborhood.[3] Myles's work serves as both a positive and a negative example that focuses conversations about climate justice in coastal cities on the right of urban residents to help determine what is lost and how loss is mitigated. Reading Myles's recent work in the context of their long relationship with their neighborhood offers one example of why it is necessary to put these conversations in dialogue with narratives of ongoing loss from past displacement and harm but without eliding how residents with distinct relationships to economic power and demographic privilege differently experience changes to their neighborhood over time.

Below, I discuss two contexts for Myles's decades of grappling in their poems with the "deeper now" of urban change as it occasions a queer approach to loss, desire, and precarity. The first is Myles's complex negotiation of the citywide housing crisis in New York amid the early era of gentrification and AIDS. The second is Myles's engagement with queer loss and desire in relation to the fetishization of urban inequality. In these two sections, I demonstrate how Myles's poetry "asks its readers to be present and notice the 'constant movement' of time," such that being present in the "now" of these poems amid the loss of urban infrastructure, stability, and community in the 1980s and 1990s helps elucidate continuities with climate resiliency projects in the present and the futures to which they contribute (Campbell et al. 870; see also Myles and Nelson 881).

I close the essay by describing how Myles's poems create opportunities to use the language of desire to bridge discourses about loss and precarity in queer theory and in the environmental humanities. Queer theory has spent more than four decades thinking about how to desire in the face of precarity and loss. In discussions of futures made uncertain by climate change, environmental humanities scholarship often references precarity and loss in ways that obscure their queer history and draw analogies rather than continuities between queer and environmental loss. I argue instead that queer loss has always been spatial and environmental and that this history of loss is foundational to conversations in the environmental humanities about the uneven precarity of living with climate change on an urbanizing planet. I read Myles's poems that articulate an alternative temporality of urban change to demonstrate how environmental humanities strategies for representing climate precarity are shaped by queer methods of persistence and desire developed amid inequitable urban redevelopment and the loss of queer community.

"We Are Not Supposed to Be Here": Housing Precarity on Myles's Lower East Side

Myles repeatedly describes themself as co-constituted with New York and specifically with the Lower East Side. As Myles reflects in their 2019 Windham-Campbell lecture titled "Why I Write," the Lower East Side has shaped not only the content of their poetry but also its form. They note: "the city has taught me almost everything I know about language and existence and being a writer, density of impression etc. etc. of the forms and identities and textures that assault and excite and distract me living here" (*For Now* 6). In their more than forty-five years of living on East 3rd Street, they have documented the city's waves of remaking as a perpetual student of the city. What constitutes "the city" has transformed dramatically over the course of their decades on the Lower East Side. As the city has changed, Myles has benefitted from the forms of devaluation by which they have also been harmed. Myles's trajectory is indicative of the phenomenon that Neil Smith and James DeFilippis describe in which "artists were variously the beneficiaries and the victims of gentrification as well as, in some cases, activists against the displacement and homelessness to which the process contributed" (647). From this perspective, Myles's presence in their neighborhood was part of the cultural capital that signaled the desirability of the neighborhood for predatory private development, as the neighborhood became whiter despite the city's becoming majority of color in the mid-1980s (Sleeper, "Boodling" 414). Myles's experience in the neighborhood has been one of loss. Unlike most stories of loss in the context of neoliberal urban change, however, Myles's is one of pervasive loss without personal displacement.

The forty-five years during which Myles has written about the Lower East Side have coincided with a shift in US housing policy that the geographer Jack Jen Gieseking describes as "the financialization of the housing market, which cleaved the meaning of home from the value of an investment property" (xviii). The Lower East Side in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s was a key site of what Amy Starecheski explains, quoting David Harvey, as "'accumulation by dispossession,' which under neoliberal governance involves siphoning wealth and property from the poorest to the richest through privatization and commodification" (133; see Harvey 63). In the late 1980s, New Yorkers were grappling with one of the primary failings of Mayor Ed Koch's governance, the "failure to accept that the private market can't provide low- and moderate-income housing or prevent homelessness" (Sleeper, "Boom" 439). As the mayoral candidate David Dinkins argued of Koch in 1989, "The Koch Administration doesn't seem to understand that working people can no longer afford to live here." The affordable housing crisis raised the threat of housing loss for hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers.

Under Koch, New York's affordable housing crisis resulted in unprecedented numbers of people experiencing homelessness. As Thomas J. Main notes of the New York City shelter system in the 1980s, "While 7,584 individuals were sheltered in 1982, 21,154 were sheltered in 1985. Spending grew from $6.8 million in 1978 . . . to $100 million in 1985" (5). Increased levels of homelessness affected public narratives about New York. As Alex S. Vitale writes, in the late 1980s "[t]he number of homeless people grew, and their impact on the daily life of the city became more problematic as subways, sidewalks, and parks became the living rooms for tens of thousands of people" (4). The shift in narratives about the city and its future was informed in part by a shift in media coverage. As Ariel Eisenberg explains, quoting Barrett A. Lee and his coauthors, the tone of reporting on homelessness changed in the late 1980s from "'positive' to 'somewhat harsher,' with 'more stories on the deviance of homeless persons, the disorder they create, and the steps being taken to deal with them'" (Eisenberg 916–17; see Lee et al. 511). The early years of the AIDS pandemic further exacerbated the housing crisis on the Lower East Side, as "for every leaseholder who died of AIDS, an apartment went to market rate" (Schulman 38). The simultaneity of the early era of AIDS and the housing crisis reshaped the public life of the Lower East Side. For Myles, the housing crisis catalyzed their critique of inequitable urban change even as their gentrifying neighborhood served as a complex and often problematic object of desire.

Myles focused much of their writing in the 1980s on queer relationships with the Lower East Side and on the concentrated levels of homelessness and development there. Amid and even before the housing crisis of the 1980s, Myles also became anxious about the possibility of their own homelessness because of their experience of alcoholism in their twenties and early thirties. As Myles articulates in a 2016 interview, "When I was drinking, because my life was so unmanageable, I was afraid of not having a home. The fear of losing my apartment was visceral and haunting and persuasive" (Myles, "Why"). In the poems in their 1991 collection *Not Me*, Myles's fear appears in the speaker's complex orientation both to homelessness and to their obsession with it. In "A Poet of Compassion" they write:

> I think
> I will see the
> poor everywhere
> this year and
> feel for them.
> Is that a crime? (34)

In this poem, as in many others that Myles wrote in the 1980s, their speaker struggles with what it means to reconcile disidentifying with social norms and their comparative socioeconomic and racial privilege. Later in the poem, Myles continues to question the utility of empathy for people experiencing homelessness, even as their speaker expresses their empathy in dehumanizing terms. They write:

> Every bit of human
> garbage that lines
> the stairs to the
> subway this winter
> shouldn't move
> me. My boots
> cost 300
> bucks. I didn't
> do the wrong
> thing at the wrong
> time I did
> the right
> thing. Part
> of me
> should live
> in the
> street
> with the
> bums &
> my bleeding
> broken heart.
> Or perhaps
> I should
> be in a
> helping profession
> rather than
> an observing
> profession. (36–37)

Myles splits the pathologizing phrase "human / garbage" across the turn of the line, surprising the reader and establishing a tension between "human" as a modifier for "garbage" and the infrastructural terms "garbage," "stairs," and "subway," which are stacked on one another near the start of lines. The poem's short lines tumble the reader forward as though down a set of subway stairs, such that both speaker and reader observe but also move too quickly to observe carefully. The only single lines that counter the tumbling by conveying complete ideas are two pairs of adjective-noun phrases that act like landings between flights of stairs: "broken heart" and "helping profession."

Myles's characterization of their neighbors' relations with unhoused city residents rehearses a moralistic argument canonical to late-twentieth-century urban policy, what the sociologist Mitchell Duneier describes as the tendency to "blame poverty on the pathologies of the poor" (107). Additionally, Myles's speaker equates being emotionally affected by the injustice of homelessness or by other unnamed events in their life with the material experience of homelessness itself by asserting that they should “live / in the / street” because they have a “broken heart.” Yet even as they express this, they question the utility of being a poet, what they term “an observing profession,” and suggest that they might rethink their work to serve their unhoused neighbors more directly.

Many other poems in *Not Me* also grapple with how to think about homelessness. In “Everything’s House” Myles indexes the incomprehensibility of being housed during a period of widespread homelessness. Having a home becomes the distinguishing characteristic of the speaker, “Eileen Myles,” who is the poet and, as the book’s title suggests, is “not me.” They write:

> How
> do we live
> in houses in
> the middle
> Of New
> York City.
> Eileen Myles
> born in
> a house
> died in
> a house. (26)

In “Everything’s House,” Myles suggests that there is a paradox involved in being housed and living in New York. As in “A Poet of Compassion,” the poem tumbles forward, creating relationships in this excerpt between the few lines that convey complete syntactic units: “Eileen Myles” and “a house . . . a house.” In *Not Me*, the “now” of urban change is at once the present of sociopolitical precarity and infrastructural transformation and the present of the speaker’s desire for and in the neighborhood.

In their later work, Myles returns to the subject of their early decades on the Lower East Side as a foundational moment in their relationship with the city. In *Inferno: A Poet’s Novel* (2010), which according to Noah E. Gordon is “as much a memoir as it is a novel” (142), Myles writes about their experience as a writer in New York in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. They use an autofictive approach to the genre of the “poet’s novel” to characterize their decades on the Lower East Side as a strategic and inequitable usage of their racial and economic privilege to resist a deadening set of suburban spatial norms ascribed to white people socialized as women who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. As Myles recounts, Alice, a roommate in Myles’s first apartment in New York, explains to them in the mid-1970s:

> [Y]ou’ll come and live here in somebody else’s poor neighborhood. This is your upward mobility, Leena. Living in New York with the Puerto Ricans and the last old Jews on the Lower East Side. I wanted this, I explained, falling back in my chair. Leena, we are not supposed to be here. You’re supposed to be pumping out babies in the suburbs. Maybe teaching school. A nurse, she flirted. She gave me that evil witchy grin. I was being prodded but to what end.
>
> (*Inferno* 103)

Alice identifies Myles’s residence on the Lower East Side as part of a trend of white US feminists who refuse the procreative suburban life that was normative among people in their generation. Alice suggests that for Myles (or for the overlapping but distinct “Eileen Myles” of the poems in *Not Me*) living on the Lower East Side causes someone else’s loss, that Myles is orienting to an economic future of “upward mobility” by benefiting from displacement even as they worry that they too might be displaced. Alice’s suggestion to Myles that “we are not supposed to be here” contains at once the thrill of refusing the scripts of normativity and the violence of white feminists’ enacting their liberation at the expense of Black and brown urban residents.

Despite having encountered ethical questions about what their presence meant in their neighborhood when they moved to New York, Myles continues in the 2020s to reside in the apartment on East 3rd Street where they have lived since 1977. Although they now own a home in Marfa, Texas, the apartment is still their primary residence after a legal battle to avoid eviction.[4] Myles’s situation exemplifies the utility of Gieseking’s call “to hold lgbtq people accountable for their role in gentrification while also celebrating the ways in which they have survived, thrived, and contributed to resisting the precarity enforced by heteropatriarchy" (xxiii). Myles's relationship to the gentrification of the Lower East Side, and their documentation of the affective and economic dimensions of that relationship in their poems, cannot be condensed into either side of the binary of gentrifier and of resident harmed by gentrification. Their complex relationship to the multifaceted loss of the Lower East Side in the 1980s helps reframe queer conceptions of loss developed in the early era of AIDS and the simultaneous unprecedented housing crisis.[5]

The mundane emergency conditions that were normalized for Myles in the 1980s came to dominate their sense of loss that spilled over into the 1990s. For instance, as Myles writes in the poem "Looking Out, a Sailor," from their 1995 collection *Maxfield Parrish*:

> Everyone
> dying around
> me now. But
> not yet,
> not me yet. (68)

As both the housing crisis and the AIDS pandemic wear on into the 1990s, the disidentification of "not me," a means of at once identifying with and setting themself apart from the loss rampant in their neighborhood, becomes "not me yet." Myles's characteristic "now" holds the visual center of these five lines, the "now" tugging against the uncertain futurity of the "yet." Walking through the Lower East Side in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Myles documents an intimate relationship with their neighborhood that developed through overlapping forms of trauma. As the queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich writes in her discussion of lesbian activism in the early era of AIDS, "When serving as a point of entry into understanding the affective life of social systems, trauma must be seen to inhabit both intense sensation and numbness, both everyday and extreme circumstances" (43). Myles frames this intersecting set of losses as simultaneously extreme and quotidian. They live a daily life characterized by "Everyone / dying around / me." This orientation anticipates recent work in the environmental humanities, what Kari Marie Norgaard describes as the study of "how and whether groups of people think about climate change and whether they perceive the topic as relevant for everyday life" (6). Living in the rapidly redeveloping Lower East Side during a housing crisis and the early era of AIDS created for Myles a set of mundane emergency conditions in which the everyday was composed of anecdotal encounters with manifestations of extremity, an affective state to which they have returned as they document the demolition of East River Park. Against climate resiliency projects that obfuscate the everyday to prepare for storm surge, Myles approaches New York's climate future from the perspective of decades of living amid queer and urban loss that oscillates between the everyday and the extreme. Climate change extends the overlap of what Cvetkovich refers to as "everyday and extreme circumstances." When scholars in the environmental humanities grapple with that overlap, they revisit the core questions of queer theory, but often without the texts of queer theory as their guide.

"Magnetic to the / Death of Things": Loss in Queer and Urban Lives

Loss was a dominant affect both for queer people in the 1980s and for other working-class and middle-class New Yorkers watching their city be remade out from under them. This pervasive sense of loss shapes foundational discussions in queer theory about loss as a dominant queer affect that developed as a response to the early era of AIDS. For instance, as David Eng and David Kazanjian argue, "the work of mourning remains becomes possible through melancholia's continued engagement with the various and ongoing forms of loss" (4–5). For Myles, as for many queer New Yorkers in the 1980s, the loss of queer life was inseparable from the loss of a feeling of housing security and a sense of community. Myles's writing rhymes with Dagmawi Woubshet's description of narratives of mourning that address the early era of AIDS. These narratives "do not recount, respond to, and reflect upon singular events of mourning, but instead explicitly underscore . . . the serial and repetitive nature of the losses they confront” (3). Myles’s writing recognizes how this ongoing loss is amplified by neighborhood redevelopment.

As Myles laments the loss of people, places, and community, they also imagine these losses as constitutive of their queerness, reading them as at once material and metaphoric. For Myles, the continuous loss of the people, businesses, and the built environment of the Lower East Side is part of an experience of loss that is fundamental to their identification as a queer person. Their descriptions of loss caused by housing inequality on the Lower East Side frame the neighborhood by turns as populated by people experiencing homelessness and as entirely abandoned. For instance, in the afterword to *Not Me*, Myles notes of summer 1987 in the city and of composing the poem “Hot Night”:

> In the summer the city seems like a big rotten museum, or an empty abandoned culture where no one lives anymore which suits me just fine. For me the holiday weekends in the summer are the kind of wreck for which I feel like the ideal narrator—so being in the city for the 4th of July weekend was a kind of set up for this poem. The city’s outsides look like your insides if you’re feeling that way. (199)

Myles’s portraits of the city are motivated by a resonance between their neighborhood’s material environment and Myles’s affective orientation. Myles describes themself as the ideal narrator for the “wreck” of the city because the Lower East Side during a housing crisis on a summer holiday weekend—“rotten,” “empty,” and “abandoned”—looks the way they feel. In their affiliation with the city, Myles enacts a typically queer relation to a feeling of social irrelevance. As Heather Love argues, “contemporary queer subjects are also isolated, lonely subjects, looking for other lonely people, just like them” (36). However, the commonality Myles identifies is not one of a shared affective orientation—finding others who feel the way they feel. It is instead an identification with affects that Myles extrapolates from the material experience of unhoused people and disinvested places—feeling the way others look. In their description of summer on the Lower East Side in 1987, Myles draws a link between their feelings of social marginalization as a queer person and the widespread experience of economic marginalization playing out in the ongoing redevelopment of their neighborhood. This link is misleading, though, because Myles is not having an experience typical of marginalized people in their neighborhood. They might feel like an ideal narrator, but their experience is not economically, racially, or socially representative of New Yorkers living in disinvested neighborhoods in the late 1980s.

“Hot Night” is a love poem to Myles’s neighborhood, typifying their recurring and complex conflation of queerness with disinvestment. The beginning of the poem reads:

> Hot Night, wet night
> you’ve seen me before.
> When the streets are
> drenched and shimmering
> with themself, the
> mangy souls that wan-
> der & fascinate its
> puddles, piles of
> trash. Impersonal
> street is a lover
> to me—growling
> thunder lightning
> to flash and light
> up 7th as a little
> mangy boy weaves
> towards me &
> laughing couples
> kiss the puddles
> with intended
> sex in bright
> shirts. It could
> be another city
> but it’s this
> city where
> I start
> being alone
> & alive (*Not Me* 51)

Myles addresses the poem to the hot and humid night in the hours after a rainstorm. As Myles notes of the opening lines in the afterword to *Not Me*, “The easiest you is the ‘Hot night, wet night / you’ve seen me before.’ Addressing the environment, we know that” (200). In the poem, the weather merges with the street and its activity, anticipating Myles’s descriptions in their more recent writing on East River Park of the city’s built environment as inextricable from its natural environment. Weather—thunder and lightning—makes the street the speaker’s lover. The street is at once hyperspecific—a block of the Lower East Side on a particular night at a particular time—and general. “It could / be another city” that is rendered specific by Myles’s experience. In their work on queer placemaking, Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter argue that “queer sites are usually characterized by contradictions and ambiguity, allowing for a wide range of erotic and other forms of social contact” (Ingram et al. 295). They go on to explain that “the least constraining places are those that are neither totally public [n]or private, containing rich striations within short physical distances” (295). In “Hot Night,” Myles layers a film of privacy onto the public space of the street by making the street and its environment the addressee of their poem as they create a portrait of the city captured in the “now” of urban change. The affective content of the poem further complicates the relationship between public and private, as “Hot Night” contains feelings that are private to the other users of the street yet are made public to readers of the poem.

In the poem, Myles emphasizes that queerness can be an orientation to infrastructure. There are people who populate the street—“laughing couples” and a vaguely racialized “mangy boy”—but it is the infrastructure itself that holds Myles’s attention. Myles’s description of the speaker’s intimacy with the city’s gentrification infrastructure concretizes the anthropologist Brian Larkin’s argument that infrastructures “emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy,” which Larkin refers to as “the poetics of infrastructure” (329). “Hot Night” demonstrates that a poetics of infrastructure always already exceeds the shape of desire constituted by expectations of cis-heteronormativity, which cannot account for intimacy with the built environment. The couples suggest “intended / sex” but the actual sexualization is reserved for the surface of the pavement, which Myles describes as “drenched and shimmering.” Myles’s intimacy with infrastructure allows them to chart a relation to a changing neighborhood with which they feel precariously co-constituted. As Jack Parlett argues of “Hot Night,” “it is a poem that sees Myles writing themself into a landscape they appear to be excluded from” (202). Their intimacy with infrastructure is how they belong. What is queer about their attachment is not that it is a relation between humans that exceeds cis-heteronormativity, but that their sex object is the street itself. Myles’s attachment to the street locates disinvested infrastructure as a site of queer engagement with ecology. As Luciano and Chen argue, “Queer ecocriticism . . . takes up an understanding of ecology as naming not the idea of the ‘natural world’ as something set apart from humans but a complex system of interdependency” (188). In the poem, Myles describes a system of queer ecological interdependency shared between the poem’s queer speaker and a version of more-than-human life that includes both elements of urban infrastructure and weather systems, anticipating their present urban climate activism.

Myles’s uneven attachment to the Lower East Side suggests another facet of a typically queer experience of loss in the 1980s: an orientation to a pre-AIDS past that is also an orientation to the pre-gentrification city. As Myles notes of New York in the 1970s in an interview with Daniel Kane, “the city was in despair, but we *loved* the city in the ’70s because it was a mess . . . that’s why we loved it” (qtd. in Kane 188). Myles not only identifies New York in the 1970s as being overdetermined by loss and producing negative affect for its residents, they also anthropomorphize the city by ascribing to it the affect of being “in despair.” In *Not Me*, Myles describes the New York of the late 1970s as a fundamentally queer place, as they share with the city a common experience of being rejected by US social, sexual, and economic norms. Myles documents at once a loss of self as the neighborhood with which they identify gentrifies and becomes socially and economically normative and a loss of community as their friends die and their neighbors are displaced. This identification is complicated by how their identification with the city's disinvestment causes them to ignore their comparative racial privilege and to conflate uneven forms of racialized precarity.

Myles's relationship with the pregentrification city suggests the identification of queer people with loss that is sutured to the various associations of queerness with the past, what Love describes as "feeling backward" and Elizabeth Freeman describes as "temporal drag" (Freeman 62). Myles applies this relationship to the history of their neighborhood. Queer theory shares with critiques of predatory urban development a resistant relationship to normative narratives of progress. The literary critic Thomas Heise refers to urban revitalization as "a narrative whose teleology is the source of its persuasive power" (240). Myles experiments in *Not Me* with resisting a teleological orientation to the neighborhood's future while also questioning their identification with the neighborhood's disinvestment and asking what alternatives there might be. In their recent work, the decades-long extended "now" of their poems continues to resist a teleology organized not around revitalization but around managing storm surge, as they refuse ESCR's narratives of environmental disaster and the assumption that these narratives are the only viable way of approaching climate change in the city.

Myles's work suggests that the conditions of climate change make queer time the only available cohort of temporalities for the future of the coastal city. Various nonlinear temporalities become descriptive both of city policy and of private development, even as plans for climate resiliency like ESCR deprioritize thinking about a future to which there is no linear or entirely controllable route from the present. Myles's turn to climate activism as an extension of their decades of queer analysis of urban change contextualizes Kian Goh's argument that "we know that the future will be urbanized and that the urbanized future will be defined by what we have done to climate" (183). Myles's objection to ESCR suggests additionally that climate futures will be defined by what we have done to cities. Their climate activism charts a continuous line from the urban renewal policies in the 1950s of "having to destroy the city to save it" (Zipp 364) and ESCR's method of what Myles refers to as "destroying a park to save it" ("Mayor Robber"; see fig. 2). Myles's critique builds on their long-standing skepticism about sudden neighborhood change, as exemplified by their bewilderment described above at the rapid redevelopment and economic transformation of the Lower East Side in the 1980s. Now, as then, they move to put their body in the middle of the demolition, to visually register that they reject both the demolition and the linear temporality that rationalizes exchanging the city's present to preserve its future.

Precedents bear out Myles's predictions about the clearance of East River Park. As E. Melanie DuPuis and Miriam Greenberg note of similar infrastructure projects on the Hudson River, "redevelopment has tended to include—and be funded by—luxury housing" (361). Climate resiliency, as both Myles and DuPuis and Greenberg argue, requires not only protection from storm surge, increased flooding, and sea level rise but also support for existing residents such that they are able to retain access to the city and shape the priorities of climate resiliency plans. The park has been integral to Myles's nearly fifty-year struggle to make and remake space against and within the city's neoliberal development projects. The demolition of the park is a demolition of their queer New York in the pursuit of an environmental future from which they believe they and their neighbors are excluded. As they articulate their objections to the future proposed by ESCR, they demonstrate how queer strategies for describing loss and desire are central to environmental humanities approaches to representing climate justice amid uncertainty.

"A Politics of *Desire*": Queer Theory, Environmental Humanities, and Climate Futures

In their current work to locate climate resiliency planning as continuous with their lived history on

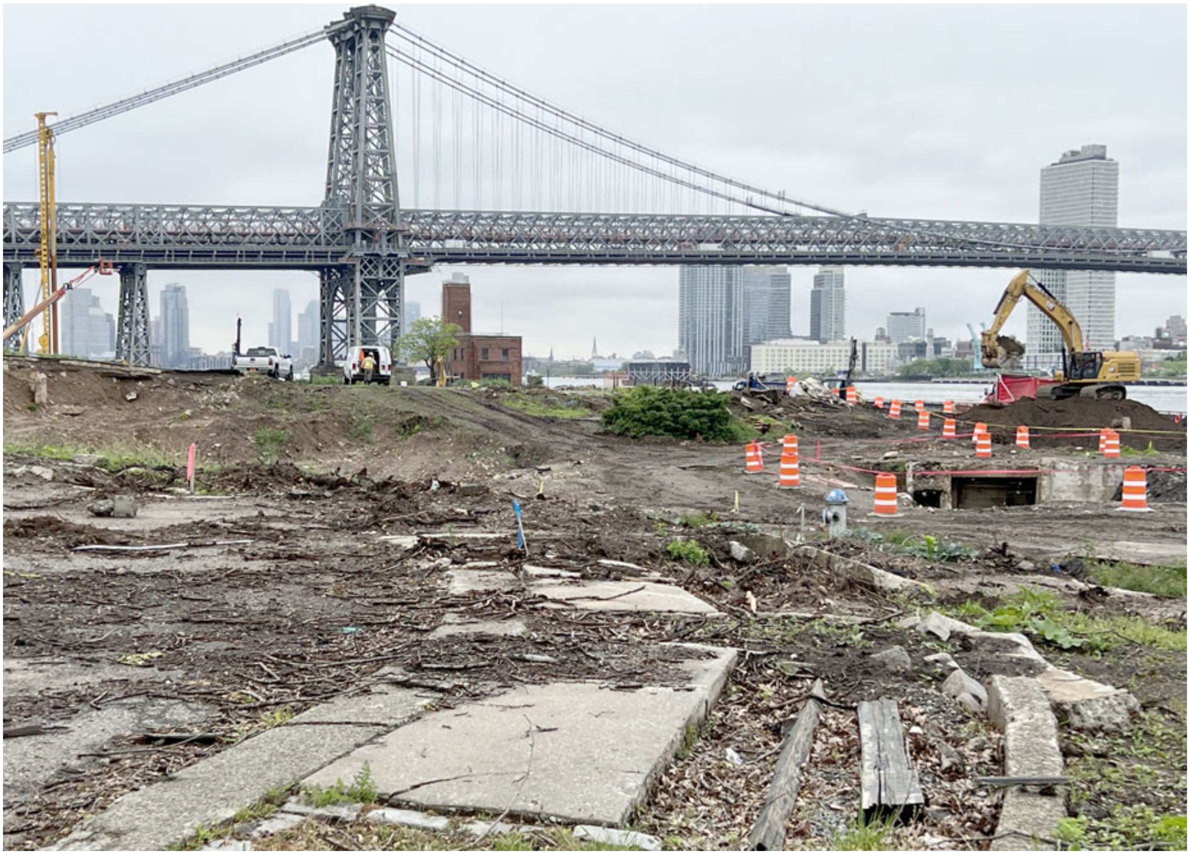

Fig. 2. Demolition of the southern end of East River Park. Photo taken by the author, 19 May 2022.

a dynamic and unstable Lower East Side, Myles links earlier emplaced queer affects to the affective experiences associated with climate emergency. As Sara Ahmed argues, "Bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force" (145). For Myles, their body took shape in response to the normalized infrastructure of loss caused by the city's prioritization of real estate interests and disregard for people with AIDS. The norms embodied by these losses shape how they confront the loss of East River Park.

It is Myles's complex desire for and identification with the Lower East Side that motivates their climate activism against ESCR. This identification helps explain their specific objection to the demolition of East River Park's 991 trees. As Myles wrote in December 2021, "They are in the throes of uprooting all 991 trees, many eighty years old, among the older trees in the city" ("Mayor Robber"; see fig. 3). As ESCR ignores the demolition of the trees in its narrative of the kind of change it is providing, Myles notes that "the all-new ESCR is always presented as an addition, not a subtraction." The trees demonstrate for Myles the city's failure to negotiate with East River Park as both a built and nonbuilt place. Because residents have been consistently demanding the right to retain the park's trees even as the trees have been cut down, the destruction of the trees suggests that ESCR is not motivated by the equitable distribution of resiliency for the longtime residents who have been protesting for years.

Myles's desire for the city motivates their climate activism. Recent work in the environmental humanities on climate futures has argued that desire is an alternative organizing mechanism for

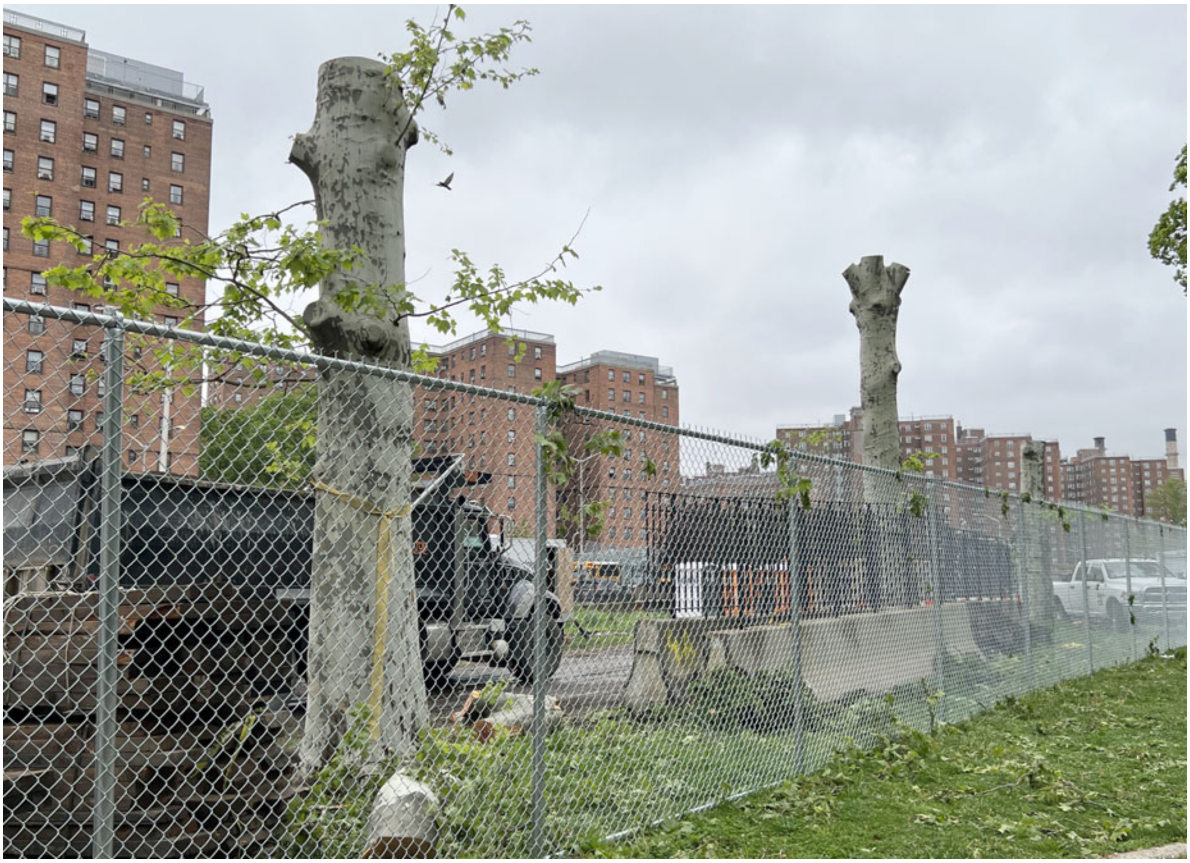

Fig. 3. East River Park trees in the process of being cut down. Photo taken by the author, 19 May 2022.

environmentalist narratives that otherwise focus on scarcity, impending apocalypse, or collapse. For instance, Sarah Jaquette Ray writes that “reframing environmentalism as a movement of abundance, connection, and well-being may help us rethink it as a politics of *desire* rather than a politics of individual *sacrifice* and consumer *denial*” (7). An orientation to desire allows at once for the acknowledgment of environmental harm and for the refusal to participate in a linear narrative in which communities are defined by the harm they experience. As Eve Tuck notes, “Desire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities” (417). From the perspective of queer theoretical engagements with desire and its politicization, Ray’s “politics of *desire*” represents a disidentification with dominant environmentalism. José Esteban Muñoz explains that when a marginalized queer subject disidentifies with something, they “desire it but desire it with a difference” (15). To desire climate futures other than those proposed by large-scale infrastructure projects like ESCR is to desire climate futures with a difference.

Reading Ray and Muñoz together suggests that the archive of queer theory, and particularly queer writing about persistence and desire amid the politicization of loss, is a necessary interlocutor for scholarship in the environmental humanities on conceptualizing potential affective orientations to climate futures. Climate change shifts the terms of precarity such that different desires might become, in the case of East River Park, desires to support both human and nonhuman lives by regenerating marshland instead of building a seawall. They might also become desires to be relocated away from areas at increased risk of both tidal flooding and storm surge. Such a politics of desire might also become a desire to advocate for policy that would allow the largest number of people to make decisions about how to approach climate futures and to change their minds as the relationships between their lives, city, and environment combine and recombine.

Loss is always already integral to thinking about the climate futures people might desire. Myles has opposed ESCR in part because East River Park is essential to how they have maintained desire and managed loss. Myles understands the installation of the first movable floodgate along the East River, in February 2022, not as a moment of fissure but as a moment of continuity, another opportunity to negotiate a relationship between loss and desire with the park at the axis between them (fig. 4). As they write in a 2021 essay, "this unruly vernacular riverfront has always astonished me. In the 80s I liked running along the East river with headphones listening to opera. For newly sober me that was an immersive experience" ("Deal"). The waterfront, like the queer subject, is "unruly." It defies the linear goals of planning, and the river will likely also defy the linear physical division of a seawall. For the queer subject, defiance is a survival strategy. It is at once a method of negotiating loss and an act of resistance. For the waterfront, planning that attempts to control defiance ignores the fact that unruly weather events will defy flood control planning, with possibly catastrophic results.

Myles's description of the waterfront as "unruly" and "vernacular" proposes that the East River will exceed the containment measures currently being constructed by ESCR. Kate Boicourt, the director of Climate Resilient Coasts and Watersheds at the Environmental Defense Fund, makes a similar argument in dialogue with the

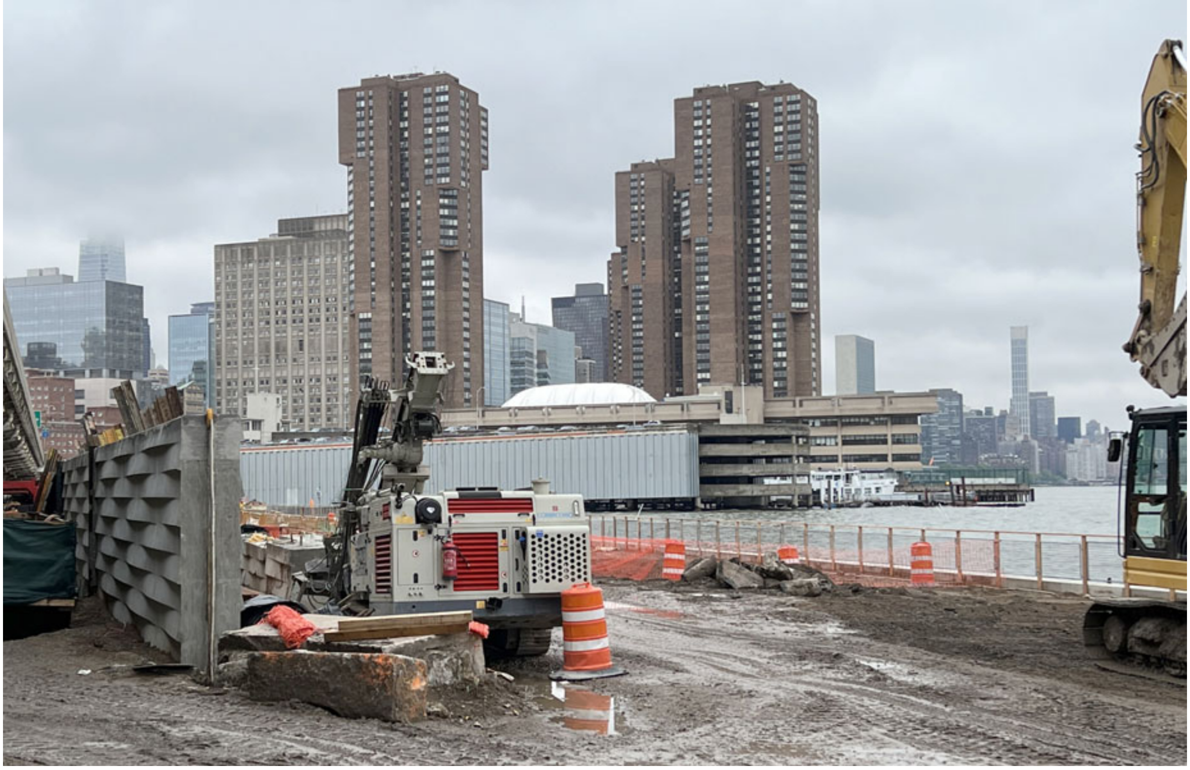

Fig. 4. Installation of the East River seawall near Stuyvesant Cove Park. Photo taken by the author, 19 May 2022.

planning history of Lower Manhattan. In a July 2022 article on coastal resiliency planning in Lower Manhattan, Boicourt recounts that "Canal Street used to be a stream, and if you look at the future high-tide line, and especially when you look at the future flood plain and even the current flood plain, you can kind of see that history there" (qtd. in Allen). Like Myles, Boicourt questions the viability of cleaving past from present and future in climate resiliency planning. Boicourt raises skepticism about whether the return of the East River to parts of the Lower East Side that have been land for hundreds of years should be narrated as unexpected, and therefore whether keeping water from returning in cases of storm surge should be the primary goal of climate resiliency projects. Additionally, any universalizing description of climate resiliency planning ignores how the contours of racialized sexuality and gender, which many queer theory scholars have traced, extend to the inequitable distribution of risk intensified by climate change.[6] In their poems, Myles illustrates that their history of queer persistence takes shape in response to the same logics of stratifying urban redevelopment that, so they argue, now motivate climate resiliency projects like ESCR.

Myles's work also reframes the relationship between queer and environmental loss animating queer ecology scholarship that takes the early era of AIDS as a model for politicizing the subsequent loss of nature. As Catriona Sandilands asks, "How can the overtly politicized understanding of melancholia located in the midst of AIDS illuminate unrecognized losses in the midst of environmental destruction?" (342). The links Myles draws between urban and climate planning in New York suggest that the early era of AIDS is not an object lesson for climate change but rather part of a continuous history of queer resistance to marginalizing redevelopment. Thinking with Myles locates the city as a crucial subject for queer and trans ecologies, in which the urban trauma of redevelopment that has unevenly devalued many queer and trans lives is a precondition for the neoliberal spatial and environmental politics of climate change on an urbanizing planet.

At stake for Myles in the redevelopment of East River Park is both the environmental harm caused by the ESCR plan and one of their only remaining physical connections to the neighborhood to which they first cathected in the late 1970s. Desire for ongoing relationships with places threatened by climate change can become targets for what Lauren Berlant refers to as cruel optimism, a relation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Flourishing in a coastal city in the context of climate crisis might well mean ceding presently residential land. Ashley Dawson explains that "retreat remains anathema in public discourse, a kind of admission of weakness that most contemporary politicians are unwilling to countenance" (34). For residents of coastal and riverine cities, as well as residents of many other geographies who are orienting toward building an everyday life in and with the precarity of extended climate emergency, it is not that they are waiting in fear of a disastrous event. Rather, they are figuring out how to care about and for one another and the places where they live while understanding that the manifestation and location of that care must necessarily transform, sometimes gradually and sometimes suddenly.

Myles's poems demonstrate how conversations about climate resiliency planning extend from earlier negotiations with urban redevelopment. As I have argued, continuities in the dominant temporality shared between urban climate futures and neoliberal redevelopment need to be understood in relation to queer critiques of social and infrastructural inequality and of unequal precarity in the face of climate change. As a contributor to public conversations about how power shapes urban climate futures, Myles stages queer critiques of urban remaking as part of an environmental history that conditions who can claim the right to a city that will be fortified by seawalls and floodgates. Cutting down the trees, for Myles, forecloses one way of relating to the city and its ecology—one way of keeping urban time—in favor of another. Those relationships—with the trees and the park and the water and the infrastructure by which it is all managed—are constitutive of their queer intimacy and desire in and for a climate-changed New York. The documentation of these relationships in their poems over decades on the Lower East Side reveals Myles's queer persistence as a continuous recommitment to the "now" of urban change. Attached to a cherry tree in Corlears Hook Park, Myles desires the city's infrastructure and ecology as components of how they have experienced and negotiated the city's transformation for almost fifty years. Situating their work in dialogue with conversations about loss, precarity, temporality, and desire in queer theory and the environmental humanities makes evident that decades of queer persistence amid unequal urban change register both a continuity with climate futures and a vital set of strategies for representing and resisting how power shapes those futures.

NOTES

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1. The geographer Neil Smith explains gentrification as a process that occurs at the meeting of shifts in economic policy and the distribution of the built environment. He frames gentrification as "the restructuring of national and urban economies in advanced capitalist countries toward services, recreation and consumption; and the emergence of a global hierarchy of world, national and regional cities" (7).

2. The sociologist Amy L. Stone develops the term "queer persistence" in the context of their archival research to refer to a process of "relentlessly following leads, researching in unexpected places, pushing past self-doubt" (221). I use the term to describe Myles's process of developing a sense of queerness in relation to the pervasive fear of displacement as their neighborhood has been redeveloped continuously in the more than forty-five years that they have lived there.

3. As Holman notes, "In 2021 Myles self-published a prose-poem and manifesto, 'Letter for East River Park,' which was an impassioned address to the lawmakers and city-planners responsible for the East River Park redevelopment plan. In it, Myles returns to the accusation of a 'stolen country,' and specifically the 'ongoing and unacknowledged GENOCIDE' of the Lenapeyok people" (976).

4. In 2018, Myles undertook a legal battle with their landlord to stay in their apartment. As they explain in *For Now* of being invited to give the 2019 Windham-Campbell lecture, of which *For Now* is composed, "Writing is my alibi. . . . Around the time that I received the invitation to create an alibi I also received an eviction notice. By now my building had cameras on every floor and at the front door and I think they decided they had enough information on me to pry me out of my apartment and they claimed I didn't live there anymore. But I did" (14–15). Myles subsequently won their legal case and was able to remain in their apartment.

5. Schulman argues that "[e]very gay person walking around who lived in New York or San Francisco in the 1980s and early 1990s is a survivor of devastation and carries with them the faces, fading names, and corpses of the otherwise forgotten dead" (45).

6. On coalition politics organized around dispossession by norms of racialized gender and sexuality, see for instance Cohen, esp. 459–60.

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Abstract: This essay reads the poet Eileen Myles's recent turn to climate activism as an extension of their queer critique of predatory urban change on Manhattan's Lower East Side, where they have lived since the 1970s. Myles's climate activism opposes the demolition of Manhattan's East River Park to facilitate one of New York City's first large-scale climate resiliency projects. Myles argues that residents' desires should shape climate resiliency planning priorities. I read Myles's earlier poems and essays to describe how the queer persistence and the attention to the "now" of urban change that they develop in response to New York's housing crisis in the 1980s during the early era of AIDS inform their climate activism. I argue that the environmental humanities tools needed to represent climate change on an urbanizing planet are inextricable from a queer theory approach to sustaining desire and loss amid precarity, as becomes apparent through Myles's writing.