



CATALYST

A SOCIAL JUSTICE FORUM

Volume 1 | Issue 1 | 2011

RAISING THE POINT

JASON MENDEZ

Abstract

Raising the Point!, is an educational documentary which supports the South Bronx's Hunts Point community's efforts in improving the social, educational, environmental, and health injustices it encounters. Though the Hunts Point community faces many inequities, the film focuses on the issue of poor air quality. What does an educational film have to do with South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy? Educational discourse typically focuses its critique on educational improvements inside of the classroom. However, there are critical factors that affect a student's educational experience before they even walk through the school's door. For example, P.S. 48 Joseph R. Drake School, which is located in Hunts Point, serves a little over 1000 K-5 students. A quick search on P.S. 48's grade level assessment data reveals that P.S. 48 is above average in certain grade levels and below average in others. Assumptions can be made on the cause of the below average grade level assessments. Could it be a lack of resources or qualified teachers? Perhaps, but if you were to ask the P.S. 48 Principal, she would tell you that one of the biggest problems her school encounters is being located in a "desolate industrial neighborhood with high asthma rates." Educational reform typically focuses on improvements in the classroom, but students live in real communities with real problems. Since the majority of school absenteeism is related to asthma, giving a student an enriching educational experience in a community overcome by heavy truck idling is an injustice that requires action. The intention of the film is not to provide solutions, but to stimulate dialogue that leads to sustainable change for Hunts Point. As a result, this project is merely a part of a larger grassroots effort to support Hunts Point's mission in revitalizing the community.

This film is available online. Please go to <http://trace.tennessee.edu/catalyst/> to view.

Recommended Citations:

Jason Mendez, "Raising the Point!" *Catalyst: A Social Justice Forum* 1, 1 (2011): 124, 128-131.

R. Scott Frey, "Critical Commentary on Jason Mendez's 'Raising the Point!'" *Catalyst: A Social Justice Forum* 1, 1 (2011): 125-127.

Online Access: <http://trace.tennessee.edu/catalyst/>

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**CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON
JASON MENDEZ'S
RAISING THE POINT**

R. SCOTT FREY

Raising the Point! (2011) is a seventeen-minute documentary examining the problem of environmental injustice at the community level in the United States or what Steve Lerner has referred to as environmental “sacrifice zones” in his book of the same title.¹ The film is a study of the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx, New York. The film was written, directed, narrated, edited, and produced by Dr. Jason Mendez. The film consists of footage of environmental conditions in Hunts Point, as well as interviews with community residents, nonresidents working in the community, a physician who Chairs the Pediatrics Department at the Bronx Lebanon Hospital, a government official, the Executive Director of a local development group, and a Policy Analyst with the environmental justice group Sustainable South Bronx.

Dr. Mendez documents a case in which hazardous production practices and toxic wastes are displaced to a geographic area inhabited by an economically disadvantaged minority population, mostly African American and Latina/o residents. More than 60,000 diesel trucks drive through the community of approximately 11,000 families each week. Many of these trucks serve one of the largest food distribution centers in the world, which is located in the heart of Hunts Point. The film makes it clear that extant local and state environmental regulations regarding truck idling are not being enforced in this community. According to publicity promotions associated with the film, Hunts Point is also home to eighteen waste transfer stations, a sewage treatment plant, a sewage pelletizing plant, four

¹ Steve Lerner, [*Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States*](#) (Boston: MIT Press, 2011).

electrical power plants, and handles 40% of New York City's sewage and all of the Bronx's waste.

Diesel exhaust fumes of trucks and other toxic materials have contaminated the landscape, homes, and bodies of local residents. As a result of environmental exposure to particulate matter, residents are at increased risk for various adverse health conditions according to available scientific research and statements issued by EPA, including asthma (discussed in the film in terms of children), decreased lung function, and development of chronic bronchitis. Examination of 2002 US EPA air quality rankings indicates that Bronx county (the site of Hunts Point) is one of the most polluted counties in the United States.¹ Despite the seriousness of the situation, the film is decidedly upbeat; it celebrates the community and its lively arts scene, ongoing efforts to revitalize the community, downplays the problems of extreme poverty and crime, and presents the residents as engaged in the community rather than as helpless victims of environmental exploitation.

Raising the Point! is worth a close viewing and it can be used as an important teaching resource (whether for environmental sociology, introduction to sociology, social problems, social stratification, race and ethnicity, or urban sociology). Unfortunately, the film is not informed by a strong justice narrative and it lacks a theoretical frame for understanding the political economy of this particular "sacrifice zone." The viewer is left without a fully informed assessment of the Hunts Point situation.

The Mendez film does not address the issue of environmental injustice with the same depth and insight as Maro Chermayeff and Micah Fink's recent and much lengthier *Mann v. Ford* documentary.² This latter film explores the underlying causes and adverse consequences associated with the dumping of lead based paint sludge and other waste materials by a Ford Motor Company car assembly plant during the years 1967-1971 in the low income, minority community of Ringwood, New Jersey. The film also documents the active resistance of local residents to an inept Environmental Protection Agency and a

² "Scorecard: The Pollution Information Site," accessed July 28, 2011, <http://scorecard.goodguide.com/>

³ *Mann v. Ford*, Directed by Maro Chermayeff and Micah Fink (HBO, 2011).

cynical Ford Motor Company, and tells the story behind the class action suit that was brought recently against Ford over cancer and other illnesses linked to legacy pollution.

DIRECTOR'S REPLY

JASON MENDEZ

Although I held many roles in the creation of the film, *Raising the Point!*, none was more important than that of being a Hunts Point native. It has always been disappointing that the first reference point people have regarding the Hunts Point community is HBO's documentary series *Hooker's at the Point*. The Hunts Point community encounters numerous complex social inequities. As a result, one seventeen-minute documentary will probably not result in NYC government officials implementing policy changes that would lead to sustainable outcomes for Hunts Point residents. However, I do adamantly believe that one seventeen-minute documentary can serve as an introduction to a dialogue that seeks to change the ideological representation (Hall, 1997) of a community that's public depiction has been limited to images of prostitution, drugs, and crime. *Raising the Point!* is aesthetically encoded with various implicit messages which perhaps can only be read by those sharing a positionality (Noblit, Flores & Murillo, 2004) similar to my own. Therefore, this response provides explanation on specific content areas the reviewer identified as lacking.

In addition to discussing the issue of poor air quality due to high volumes of truck traffic and idling, *Raising the Point!* is a counter narrative (Delgado, 1995) to the dominant ideological representation of the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx. One of the strategic aesthetic objectives of *Raising the Point!* was to humanize the Hunts Point community and not sensationalize it by perpetuating the poor, drug infested, crime-ridden monotonous discourse that plagues "low income, minority communities." As a Hunts Point native, I choose to represent Hunts Point the way I remembered it growing up. Therefore, though this film might give the perception of "downplaying the problems of extreme poverty and crime," I intentionally selected footage that shows a side of Hunts Point that is rarely seen; a place that people enjoy rather than a place people are trying to escape.

During speaking engagements, I typically start with a quote from Mos Def's (1999) song *Umi Says*, "I ain't no perfect man, I'm trying to do the best that I can, with what it is I have." I then proceed to explain to my audience what exactly I had when I began my work. My only resources included a \$500 budget, an HD camera, and Seku Grey (a close friend who is a fellow South Bronxite). The intentions of my disclosure is to illustrate that one does not need a Ph.D., a theoretical framework, a large budget or be an award winning producer/director (i.e. Maro Chermayeff; Micah Fink) to have the critical consciousness to access our personal agency in advocating for targeted communities. Granted, my film does not explicitly state a "strong justice narrative," but that leads to my next point of clarification. *Raising the Point!* is a supplementary visual tool which supports a larger dialogue concerning one of the social inequities (poor air quality) that exist in the Hunts Point community.

After viewing the completed film for the first time, I felt apprehensive about releasing it to the public because, similar to the reviewer, I thought I left my audience "without a fully informed assessment of the Hunts Point situation." However, after thoroughly contemplating on the quality of *Raising the Point!* I realized that my intention with this film was not to be the end-all be-all concerning high levels of industrialization in Hunts Point. The inception of *Raising the Point!* was a result of a book chapter I had written, *Raising the Point!: An Artistic Approach in Supporting A Community's Call to Action* (Mendez 2010). Coupling the impact of *action* and arts as social justice in education, this chapter discusses an arts installation piece¹ I created that was used to foster dialogue amongst Hunts Point residents, businesses, and local government officials by inciting critical consciousness concerning the detrimental effects of truck traffic and idling in the community. Independently, the chapter, the arts installation piece, and the film do not provide a "fully informed assessment of the Hunts Point situation" However, collectively these components work together to help contribute to the Hunts Point's community social justice efforts.

¹ View the art installation [here](#).

Although *Raising the Point!* focuses on the issue of poor air quality this work is not solely dedicated to environmental injustice. As an educator, my interest in Hunts Point's poor air quality was a result of the high number of cases of children with asthma in Hunts Point. "Since the majority of school absenteeism is related to asthma, giving a student an enriching educational experience in a community overcome by heavy truck idling is an injustice that requires action" (Mendez, 2010). The intersections of health disparities, environmental injustices, and educational inequities illustrate the complexities of the social problems the Hunts Point community encounters. Therefore, juxtaposing *Raising the Point!* to *Mann v. Ford* (2011) is a difficult comparison when the driving motivation behind each project is deconstructed. After viewing this film one should ascertain that this documentary is ambiguous in context. *Raising the Point!* is an example of détournement.² The film intentionally leaves openings for productive dialogue (i.e. the review and the response to the review) about plans of action and potential solutions to occur. In addition, the film conceptually challenges the beliefs and assumptions regarding the representation of targeted communities in news media. Ultimately, I hope this continued grassroots inspired work leads to positive improvements in the overall quality of life for Hunts Point residents while simultaneously stimulating dialogue amongst academics on the importance of action rather than theory in social justice efforts.

² An artistic and often political technique where works of art or popular culture such as comics, film, advertisements, etc. are reworked or placed in different surroundings, such that something different is implied than what was originally, or the original piece is called into question. Hence, the use of Detournement Films in the opening credits sequence. See Debord's (1989) "Methods of Detournement" at <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/~mma/teaching/MS80/readings/detournement.pdf> for more on détournement.

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