

# FEBRUARY/MARCH 2024



## Academic Year 2023-24 No. 3

[psc-cuny.org/retirees](https://psc-cuny.org/retirees)

### RETIREE CHAPTER MEETING REPORTS

#### ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: CRISES AND ACTION – NOVEMBER 6, 2023

BY DORIS HART

At the November 6th Retirees Chapter Meeting, speakers focused on environmental justice crises and actions. First, **Cecelia McCall of the PSC Environmental Justice Group** asked members to take a five-question poll and answer True or False. How would you answer?

1. Cutting greenhouse gas emissions will reverse the heating of the planet.
2. Future Americans will have to make little changes in lifestyle compared to ours.
3. Eating fewer hamburgers will reduce the production of methane.
4. New York State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli has divested New York State pension funds from fossil fuels.
5. In New York City, most air pollution is created by emissions from automobiles and trucks.

The answers: All are false except Number 3, which is true because when livestock belch and poop, they release methane which is even more destructive than carbon dioxide. As for Number 5, even more air pollution is caused by building emissions. McCall urged members to phone Comptroller Tom DiNapoli and tell him to divest pension funds from oil and gas.

## THIRD ACT

### Taking Action with Third Act

McCall pointed out that this summer was the warmest in history in the Northern Hemisphere. The results were disastrous and created problems such as serious floods and wild fires and rivers with record-low water levels. New York City, for example, had many basements, subway tracks and streets under water. McCall brought our attention to Third Act, a grassroots movement of caring seniors taking actions against fossil fuels. This is a national organization of 50,000 people whose mission is to engage in actions against fossil fuels. In New York City, chapter members have organized phone calls to Tom DiNapoli urging him to divest from fossil fuels.

Third Act lawyers held a webinar which noted how the Supreme Court has chipped away at Congressional authority over the Environment Protection Agency's ability to regulate air quality. The lawyers stressed that we must act locally, state- and region-wide to protect our environment, because this will not happen at the federal level.

Finally, McCall urged members to join Third Act, by contacting [thirdact.org](https://thirdact.org).

### Seeking Environmental Justices

The second speaker on Nov.6 was **Rebecca Bratspies of CUNY Law School, who is the Director of the Center for Urban Environmental Reform**. She noted that Environmental Justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of people in environmental decisions that

affect them and their communities. She spoke about how we got to where we are today, that law and regulations have created environmental injustices, and what can be done to change them.

Bratspies noted an ancient Nuisance Law, the unreasonable interference with the quiet enjoyment of property rights of others, which has affected modern laws and regulations. By the 1900's in New York City, there was a huge increase of poor immigrants, mainly from Europe. Landlords wanting to make a great deal of money had many tenements built and sub-leased them to sub-landlords. These tenements were death traps which lacked light, ventilation, and sanitation, and the sub-landlords had no incentive to make repairs.

Then in 1914, construction of the Equitable Building, a 38-story steel office building,



created an environmental nightmare by blocking the ventilation of and light to surrounding buildings. This gave rise to the first zoning law in 1916. The goals of the law were to promote health, safety, general welfare and reduce overcrowding. However, this led to legal challenge in court over what is a nuisance.

### **One Injustice Leads to Another**

As zoning spread, it became associated with racism. In 1936, an FHA (Federal

Housing Authority) Underwriting Manual emphasized that building highways was effective in keeping out undesirable groups (meaning Blacks and Jews). This led to redlining maps indicating which were good neighborhoods (white) and which were hazardous (Black, Jewish). These maps resulted in mortgages and funding for white neighborhoods, not the other areas.

Another example of environmental injustice had much to do with Robert Moses and the building of NY highways, especially the Cross Bronx Expressway. The construction destroyed thousands of apartments in integrated neighborhoods and displaced 60,000 people. Property values plummeted and white residents fled to the suburbs.

New York City created opportunity funds, allowing the development of polluting industries in poorer neighborhoods. These included waste management facilities, transfer stations, power plants, and medical incinerators. The results were noise and air pollution and a marked increase in asthma and children's hospitalization that remains today.

New York City disposes of 12,000 tons of waste daily, which is carried away by trucks to waste-transfer stations, mainly in poor neighborhoods in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens. Then trucks transfer the waste to areas outside the city. Noise and particulate pollution are prevalent in these communities, with some transfer stations situated right across from public housing and parks. This is devastating, especially for children, the elderly and those with compromised immunity.

Bratspies compared two transfer stations, one on the Upper East Side on 91st Street and one in Jamaica, Queens. The station on East 91st Street was well built and could be called the Taj Mahal of transfer stations. However, the Jamaica station expelled dust, dirt, debris, and foul-smells. After a lawsuit, some upgrades were made to this station.

## **“WORSE THAN MCCARTHYISM”: THE CURRENT POLITICAL ATTACKS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

**DECEMBER 4, 2023**

BY JOAN GREENBAUM

### **Ellen Schrecker and Katie Rainwater**

gave barnstorming presentations on the state of free speech in America today.

**Schrecker**, the widely acknowledged scholar of the McCarthy period (see *The Age of McCarthyism*, 3rd ed. 2016) told us at the outset that what is happening now is “worse than McCarthyism.” Rainwater, a Visiting Assistant Teaching Professor at Florida International University, gave us examples of some of the hair-raising attacks on Florida universities as well as on faculty and staff.

In comparison with the McCarthyism in the 1950s, Schrecker told us that the terrorizing attacks of that period were primarily on *individuals*, while also taking down unions and other organizations. This time is worse, she claims, because it goes directly at *institutions*, directly attacking higher education, limiting subject matter and what faculty and staff can and cannot say. She also addressed this current period when administrators are cancelling speakers, films and discussions about Palestine and Gaza—calling this issue the “toxic third wheel of academic freedom.”

Those of us who are old enough to remember the 1950s recall the “chill,” she said, “before they ran out of witches” to fire and blacklist. Universities, for the most part, said that they were against Joseph McCarthy and his witch hunts, but “they collaborated, putting up no effective opposition.”

Attacks on higher education have been going on since that time, but piecemeal, such as: implementing austerity at state campuses; adopting corporate

management practices; turning faculty into part-time gig workers, etc. And we are “unprepared,” she argues, for the full-scale anti-democratic push of the far-right to “delegitimize and demonize” higher education. Since Trump’s campaigns to create divisions by race, class, gender and immigration status, among others, we are left fighting the “culture wars” that have been hyped into the frenzy we are seeing in DeSantis’s direct move on Florida’s institutions. These anti-democratic actions come out of at least forty years of right-wing theory and practices, developed in places such as the Heritage Foundation and the Manhattan Institute.

### **Fighting Back in Florida**

**Katie Rainwater** “who is on the ground” in Florida laid out some of the details of what her union, the United Faculty of Florida, and others are facing: the defunding of DEI (Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion) programs; the implementation of the “Anti-Woke” Act; the introduction of bills to eliminate teachers’ unions; the introduction of policies requiring post-tenure review; the closing of departments such as those in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and of course the total take-over of the New University. These attacks are not all new or unique to Florida. She reminded us of other states, such as Wisconsin when Scott Walker was Governor, when he tried to eliminate tenure and unions. The unions won.

Rainwater gave us some hopeful examples she sees in her union. They have “Fightback Fridays,” where they get together and explore ways to build membership through working on issues confronting them. At her campus in Miami, they have had teach-ins as well as a large march and protest at the Academic building. But, she said, it is difficult to build union membership above 50% with so many faculty and staff working only part-time without contractual arrangements with the University. The attacks on free speech are so broad now that we will need far more understanding and long-range planning.

To say that the Chapter Meeting was both informative and depressing is an understatement. It opened our eyes, certainly mine, to how much work we need to do.



image by Newtown graffiti via Flickr

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## PSC PRINCIPAL OFFICER PROFILE: FELICIA WHARTON BY MARVA LILLY

The last but not least Principal Officer to be introduced to the members of the Retirees Chapter in our series is **Felicia Wharton, PSC Treasurer**. Marva Lilly, one of our PSC Executive Committee members, was kind enough to interview her for this article. And here is what she discovered for us:

I asked Felicia when she decided to become a teacher? She said that she stumbled into teaching because of curiosity. She was curious as to why so



Felicia Wharton, PSC Treasurer

many students were in remedial math classes. As she taught, she realized that her students had “mathematical injuries.” Some were minor and others were severe. She saw her role as helping her students identify their injuries and helping them overcome the trauma. Has it been easy? No, but in all her years of teaching, she has helped many adults succeed in math and academia by meeting her students where they are, and showing them where they can go with the grit they bring from their daily lived experiences. One of her proudest moments was when one of her former students wrote to her in 2021, after being accepted into City College, to let her know that she inspired him to become an educator to help children who struggled, such as himself. As he said to her, “I am a treasure to the world of education.” This is the reason she loves being an urban educator.

### A Typical Day at the PSC

I also asked Felicia what her typical day was like in her role as PSC Treasurer. Each day is different at the PSC offices. However, she tries to organize her week to be most effective on her tasks and committees. Her day begins with replying to the many emails and requests she receives throughout the day, followed by regular morning meetings. In the afternoon, she dedicates time to analyzing and interpreting financial data, committee assignments/meetings, updating spreadsheets, and planning for the next day. As treasurer, you have to be organized to the nth degree and have a sense of humor, since you are in the public firing-line for questions. She brings a different perspective to the role, given her cultural background (from the West Indies), mathematical training, and being an urban scholar. If there are two words to describe Felicia, they are sincerity and integrity.

### Teacher and Scholar

Felicia is a doctoral lecturer at the Brooklyn Educational Opportunity Center



and an adjunct assistant professor at New York City College of Technology. Her degrees are multiple and varied. She graduated with a B.S. in mathematics from the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus. She has an M.A. in Pure Mathematics from Hunter College and a PhD from the CUNY Graduate Center, as well as an M.Phil. in Urban Education specializing in Mathematics and Technology and an MSED in Higher Education Administration specializing in Instructional Research from Baruch. Felicia taught mathematics at CUNY Prep, a transitional high school in the Bronx, CUNY colleges, and Adult Basic Education programs in New York City. Her research focuses on the teaching and learning of mathematics in urban K-12 schools, higher education, and Adult Basic Education Programs, using critical ethnography and cultural sociology to understand how student's social histories and the ways they understand the teaching and learning of mathematics truncate agency, participation, and create barriers to learning mathematics. Her research has been presented at the Adult Education Research Conference, the American Educational Research Association, and internationally at the Standing Conference of University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults.

Felicia is an accomplished scholar and has published such articles as "Co-teaching in International Contexts: An Examination of Ten Years of Research and Practice" and "Transforming Urban Education: Urban Teachers and Students Working Collaboratively."

### **Catching The Union Bug**

Felicia became active in the union in 2014 when she was elected chapter chair of the Brooklyn EOC and became a member of the PSC Finance Committee in 2017. Felicia is an active advocate for the Educational Opportunity Centers, ensuring that EOCs maintain wage and benefit parity with CUNY employees in similar titles. She established a strong

relationship with the City Tech PSC Chapter, since City Tech is the administering college of the BEOC.

Since becoming a member of the PSC EC, I have gotten to know and appreciate Felicia. I thank her for her time and cooperation in this article.

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## **FILM FORUM**

### **DECEPTION: FILM REVIEW OF *OPPENHEIMER***

BY JONATHAN BUCHSBAUM

Now that *Oppenheimer* has raked in almost one billion dollars in theaters, the film clearly satisfied many viewers. Rotten Tomatoes reports that 93% of nearly 500 critics liked it. Marketing may boost audience numbers, but it is hard to argue that massive hype alone, in this case part of the "Barbenheimer" phenomenon, forced people to go to the theater. Despite this irrefutable popular and critical success, I would like to offer a minority view.

Though based on a Pulitzer-prize-winning biography by Martin Sherwin and Kai Bird, which follows the chronology of his life, the screenplay chooses to scramble three separate parts of Oppenheimer's life. One part presents Oppenheimer's post-graduate education through his successful guidance of the Manhattan Project and some of the postwar years. A second part concentrates on the 1954 hearing before the Atomic Energy Commission to examine his appeal to have his security clearance restored. Third, the narrative includes the drama surrounding the disapproval in 1959 of Lewis Strauss, Eisenhower's choice to be Secretary of Commerce, in part for his role as Chair of the Atomic Energy Commission, in which he orchestrated the humiliation of Oppenheimer in its 1954 hearing.

The film intercuts these three strands in ways that make it difficult to keep track of

the relatively large cast of characters, often cutting after a few seconds from one to the other, with sound transitions bleeding across the cut. Director Christopher Nolan presents the events from the first years in color, the 1954 hearing in color, and the 1959 Congressional hearing in black and white, though some of the earlier post-war years are also in black and white, with no dates given to any of the strands. Because the book follows a linear chronology, presumably director Nolan, who takes sole screenplay credit, made that creative decision.



Why did Nolan take this creative path? In this case, aside from sowing confusion, the narrative slicing and dicing effectively turns a bit player into a formidable antagonist. Lewis Strauss, with no more than a high school education, is elevated to be the scheming bureaucratic *bête noire* of Oppenheimer's post-war life. As a trustee of the Institute for Advanced Study located in Princeton, Strauss chose Oppenheimer to be its academic director. Subsequently, Strauss ascended to head the Atomic Energy Commission. As a military hawk eager to rattle nuclear swords at the Russians, Strauss decided to go after Oppenheimer in full McCarthyite times. As was well known from his security vetting before the Manhattan Project, Oppenheimer was a fellow traveler on the left, including friends who were [Communist] Party members, but there was never any evidence to suggest that Oppenheimer was disloyal to the US.

After the war, however, Oppenheimer's internationalist leanings were viewed by cold warriors like Strauss as a security risk. Once chair of the AEC, Strauss worked behind the scenes to cancel Oppenheimer's security clearance, ending whatever productive role he

might have played within government in tamping the nuclear arms race.

The film presents the 1959 Congressional hearing to approve the nomination of Strauss as hinging on his role as the toppler of Oppenheimer. But political winds had shifted. The Senate turned on Strauss in a close vote. While the coverage of that hearing takes up major chunks of the film, two lengthy biographies of Oppenheimer, by Bird/Sherwin and Ray Monk, devote only a single page to the 1959 confirmation hearing.

Thus, Nolan turns the incredible story of Oppenheimer's guidance of the Manhattan Project into a revenge story by the scheming, uneducated Strauss. But the animus of Strauss almost certainly could not have brought Oppenheimer down without the historical context of the Cold War, and specifically the McCarthyism of 1954. So Oppenheimer's loss of security clearance, no doubt deeply traumatic for Oppenheimer, is best understood as a casualty of the times more than the personal vendetta of one deep-pocketed ambitious bureaucrat.

But the frenetic hyperkinetic editing of time periods and characters, most of whose names would be unfamiliar to contemporary audiences—Bohr, Bethe, Lawrence, Szilard, Fermi, Lomanitz, Teller, Rabi, Groves, Borden, Nichols, Chevalier—cannot help but at the very least distract audiences from following a sequence of events that in written accounts is simple to follow. Nolan largely ignores the tensions of the Manhattan Project to turn the film into a thriller focused on the outcome of the hearing to cancel Oppenheimer's security clearance. Yes, that is an interesting story even without the hyperventilated fancy editing. But while the security clearance hearing certainly had an impact on Oppenheimer's life (though the film does not show that), Oppenheimer's clear world historical status derives from his absolutely fundamental role in bringing off the development of the first atomic bomb.

By 1954, Oppenheimer had failed to deflect the hawkish direction of US atomic weapons policy, demonstrated perhaps most dramatically by Teller's triumphant, hawkish crusade for "the Super," the hydrogen bomb.

It's hard to know what Nolan thought to gain from the decision to fragment the story through the bewildering intercutting. There are many famous examples of such assertive editing—think of the baptism scene in the first *Godfather*, for a relatively simple mainstream example—but Nolan's editing only addles a straightforward story.

If Nolan was seeking to make an "arty commercial film," at least most—but by no means all—of those sequences appear to conform to the real story. Two departures from that reality support a quest for commercial titillation as motivation. Nolan inserts some very mildly kinky sex into the proceedings, which are not to be found in the biographies. In one case, Nolan has one of Oppenheimer's lovers (Jean Tatlock) pull the Bhagavad Gita off the shelf of his bookcase, straddle Oppenheimer lying on the bed, cover her naked breast with the opened book and order Oppenheimer to read—from the original Sanskrit facing him—the most famous sentence Oppenheimer ever uttered from that very book ("I am become death, destroyer of worlds"), which of course Oppenheimer was said to have intoned after the Trinity test in New Mexico. In a later scene, during the 1954 hearing, when asked to recount his relationship with the same lover, once a communist, as his wife looks on in the hearing room, the audience is treated to the same naked lover once again mounting the fully clothed seated Oppenheimer (though mercifully without the Bhagavad Gita).

I don't mean to suggest that the film is boring. The story has too much historical significance for its interest to be easily extirpated by Nolan's creative input. In short, Nolan appears to have found the

challenges of the Manhattan Project less compelling than the tribulations of Oppenheimer *after* one of the greatest—if not the greatest—collaborative scientific project in history. Perhaps the scientific debates among the world's most brilliant theoretical and experimental physicists proved too difficult to transform into drama, but chronicling those pressures during the war would have probed what made Oppenheimer's work world historical, not the loss of his security clearance. As Oppenheimer wrote at one point to Rabi, "We have been wondering for some time when you could come out again. The crises here are so continuous that it is hard to find one time which would be better or worse than another from our point of view."

Perhaps after combing through the historical record, Nolan could not crack the enigma of Oppenheimer. In that case, a simple chronicle of Oppenheimer's life would have little interest for spectators. Given his demonstrated, even trademark proclivity for narrative pyrotechnics, Nolan decided to do Oppenheimer's opacity justice by jumbling the chronology, inflating the role of the dark Strauss to create a proper antagonist amidst the bewildering parade of characters wandering in and out of different historical moments. If so, then Nolan was following the path trod by a famous earlier biopic. In a contemporaneous review of *Citizen Kane*, Borges cited Chesterton's observation that "nothing is so frightening as a labyrinth with no center."

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## OPINION FORUM

### A POISON PILL IN THE MEDICARE BILL?

BY DAVID KOTELCHUCK

On Sept. 14, 2023, Representatives Richie Torres (D-NY) and Nicole Malliotakis (R-NY) announced their introduction of the "Right to Medicare Act" in the U.S. Congress. In an accompanying statement,

## U.S. Reps. Torres, Malliotakis Introduce Bipartisan Legislation Protecting Rights of Seniors to Access Traditional Medicare Coverage

Rep. Torres said, “For me, there is no greater responsibility than protecting and strengthening healthcare for those with the greatest need—our senior citizens.” He went on to say, “No employer should be able to involuntarily kick retirees off the plan they chose and earned in favor of a private plan they don’t want and didn’t have a say in selecting.”

This is a good provision, embodying a right which NYC municipal retirees have been fighting for in recent years. However, there is another provision in this bill which many would consider a “poison pill,” that is, a second provision which negates some or all of the good in the first.

On Rep. Torres’ website is a fuller explanation of the bill, and it says clearly the bill “would amend title XVIII of the Social Security Act to require employers to offer an opt-in option for seniors who might want to change from traditional Medicare to Medicare Advantage. The legislation would also put Congress on the record as affirming that all U.S. seniors have a right to enroll in traditional Medicare which cannot be taken away and to choose for themselves between traditional Medicare and Medicare Advantage.”  
(<https://ritchietorres.house.gov/posts/u-s-reps-torres-malliotakis-introduce-bipartisan-legislation-protecting-rights-of-seniors-to-access-traditional-medicare-coverage>.)

So, while it would protect those who wish to choose traditional Medicare when in retirement, it would also amend the Social Security Act to require employers to get into the Medicare Advantage business by recommending one or more MA plans to their retiring or retired employees. If the bill passes, every

retiring employee would now be offered the choice of some MA plan when they retire. This would be further advertising for MA plans, even beyond all of its tidal wave of TV advertising each year. Employers could also make an additional profit by selling their recommended choice of an MA plan for a fee—much as insurance agents do now when they promote the MA plans which give them greater fees. And I fear what Congressional conservatives would do to Social Security once they have put their cold, hard hearts into amending it.

So, based on its two provisions, does the Torres-Malliotakis bill deserve our support? Do we need another bandage put on a dysfunctional health-care delivery system already plastered over with decades of earlier bandages? Or do we need to say it’s time for a bill providing universal health care for all, free at the point of delivery?

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## CULTURE CORNER

### GOOD LOOKING/LOOKING GOOD

BY MARCIA NEWFIELD

The aura of Valentine’s Day lingers throughout February. Three museums are highlighting innovators and fashion houses. Another is bringing the work of Black artists, historic and contemporary, to the fore.

#### **Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) Statement Sleeves—until August 25**

*Statement Sleeves* celebrates the seemingly endless creative variations on this fundamental element of fashion, past and present. The styles on view explore the innovation, allure, and fun of fashion. A circa 1830 gown made from cream silk satin has short, puffed sleeves enveloped by full over-sleeves of sheer chiffon. Although transparent and coquettish, the over-sleeves would have added a layer of modesty to the ensemble, and it is possible they would have been removed for more formal evening events. A Spring



2011 ensemble in orange and fuchsia silk, designed by Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton, features full sleeves that are split down the length of the arm and gathered into a cuff at the wrist, allowing them to billow out as the wearer moved.

### **Metropolitan Museum *Women Dressing Women*—until March 3**

The Costume Institute's exhibition explores the creativity and artistic legacy of over seventy womenswear designers from The Met's permanent collection, a lineage of makers from the turn of the Twentieth Century to the present day. It highlights celebrated designers, new voices, and forgotten histories alike. It includes French *haute couture* from houses such as Jeanne Lanvin, Elsa Schiaparelli, and Madeleine Vionnet, to American makers like Ann Lowe, Claire McCardell, and Isabel Toledo, along with contemporary designs by Iris van Herpen, Rei Kawakubo, Anifa Mvuemba, and Simone Rocha.

### **Jewish Museum *Mood of the Moment: Gaby Aghion and the House of Chloé*—until February 18**

As creative director of the house of Chloé starting in 1952, Aghion liberated women's bodies from the restrictive attitudes and styles of the time, as well as pioneering the emergence of luxury ready-to-wear. By capturing the mood of the moment, Aghion founded a fashion brand characterized by an easy elegance. The show displays 150 garments created by geniuses she hired, including Karl Lagerfeld and Sheila McCarthy.



Jewish Museum exhibition on the left; Folk Art Museum exhibition piece on the right.

### **Folk Art Museum—until March 24** ***Unnamed Figures: Black Presence and Absence in the Early American North***

A corrective to histories that define slavery and anti-Black racism as a largely Southern issue, this exhibition offers a new window on to Black representation in a region that is often overlooked in narratives of early African-American history. Through 125 remarkable works including paintings, needlework, and photographs, this exhibition invites visitors to focus on figures who appear in—or are omitted from—early American images.

### ***Marvels of My Own Inventiveness***

Features an immersive viewing of approximately 22 paintings (both large-scale and smaller works on paper, canvas, wood, and metal) by five contemporary Black artists in the American Folk Art Museum collection. By positioning these artists in conversation with one another, the exhibition will explore the artistic self-expression of Black makers working in and around abstraction.

### **PLEASE LET US KNOW**

Many publications have moved to a digital/online-only format in recent years. Publishing in paper takes longer and costs more; online publications can be longer and come out more frequently. But the best publication is the one that is read by the most people. The editors would like to know how the members of the PSC Retirees Chapter actually read this newsletter. Please help by answering a short (3-question) survey at <http://tinyurl.com/pscnet>. Thank you.

The ***Turning the Page*** editorial committee this month is made up of Joan Greenbaum, Dave Kotelchuck, Michael Frank, and Diane Menna; graphic design is by Amanda Magalhaes.

***TURNING THE PAGE*** is a publication of the Retirees chapter of PSC-CUNY, Local 2334 of NYSUT and the AFT.