

Clockwise, from top left: Angela Adrar, Charles Ellison, Cecilia Martinez, Denise Abdul-Rahman, Elizabeth Yeampierre.

THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

Here's how environmental justice leaders are pushing forward in the Trump era

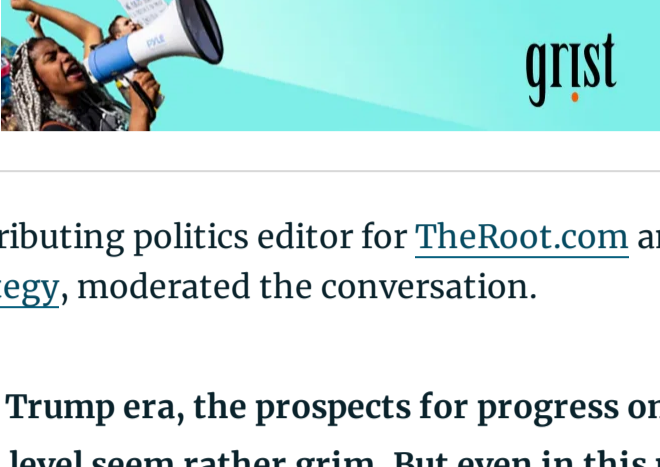
By Laurie Mazur on Mar 30, 2017



These are challenging times for [environmental justice](#) — at least at the federal level. Earlier this month, [Mustafa Ali](#), who led environmental justice work at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, [resigned](#) rather than preside over the dismantling of his program.

To understand the prospects for environmental justice work in Trump's America, we gathered (by phone) an impressive cadre of leaders from across the country:

- [Denise Abdul-Rahman](#), environmental climate justice chair for [NAACP Indiana](#) in Indianapolis;
- [Angela Adrar](#), executive director of the [Our Power Campaign](#) and Climate Justice Alliance in Washington, D.C.;
- [Cecilia Martinez](#), cofounder and director of research programs at the [Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy](#) in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and
- [Elizabeth Yeampierre](#), executive director of [UPROSE](#) in Brooklyn, New York.



[Charles Ellison](#), contributing politics editor for [TheRoot.com](#) and founding principal of [BLE Strategy](#), moderated the conversation.

Q. Ellison: In the Trump era, the prospects for progress on environmental justice at the federal level seem rather grim. But even in this political landscape, there's discussion about building alternative systems. What are those exactly?

A. Martinez: When the political system does not provide for the common good, those that deal with the consequences have to be creative, innovative, and action-oriented. And we do see that. All kinds of communities are coming together to try and figure out how to build systems that are both environmentally sustainable and equitable. [Cities are leaders](#) in developing plans on climate action and adaptation, irrespective of what federal legislation or international agreements are in place. That kind of action is feeding into a locally based national and international movement. The challenge continues, though, to move states and cities to incorporate justice into their institutional work.

Abdul-Rahman: Communities on the front lines can lead the way. We've formed a group called Women's Voices Unheard (in Indianapolis), and we're asking the women about their concerns and issues. We give them the tools and the knowledge they need to speak for themselves.

We look at the contrasts between communities. Who gets to have an aesthetically pleasing environment? Which community gets the natural gas plant that emits methane, or the coal-fired power plant? Who gets to decide about issues affecting the community? Then we look at another vision of how we can control our own destiny by honing in on solar and wind, and how our communities can benefit by getting the training and the jobs. We present another vision of the future, where we as human beings and as communities can change our own destiny. We can utilize our power and speak truth to power.

Adrar: With the issues we're facing in frontline communities, we can go issue by issue, rule by rule — or we can look at the underlying root causes. We see the enclosure of wealth and power; Trump's cabinet is one of the wealthiest in modern history. That creates an opening for greater extraction of fossil fuels and more human rights violations in our communities. So as our Native friends [who've been] [marching in D.C.](#) are saying, we have to end this colonial mindset.

Yeampierre: We need to build an economy that is not extractive, but regenerative. In our industrial waterfront community [in Brooklyn], we've been working with industries to operate in a way that's cleaner, retrofitting to reduce emissions. Our vision is to use the industrial waterfront as a place that creates good jobs in green industries — like building offshore wind turbines or community-owned solar. We see this as a solution that could prevent people from getting displaced, while addressing climate change and environmental justice.

Q. Ellison: Displacement is a big problem: As people are pushed out of gentrifying cities, we are seeing the rise of poverty in suburban areas and surrounding exurbs. How do you discuss and address that?

A. Martinez: I think it points to the deep structural issue that Angela talked about. There was a racial and class dimension to suburbanization in the first place. Suburbanization could not have happened without federal policy constructing a highway system that destroyed many communities of color. The reason many of our communities of color are in the state that they are in is because of federal policy and housing policy that promoted segregation, and redlining that extracted capital from certain communities to the benefit of others. So it was not an equal process.

We've been able to institute some policies and laws that hopefully prevent the most egregious of those abuses, but the reality is that the dynamic still continues. So now white middle-class people are leaving the suburbs, which leaves these areas open to people of color and low-income communities. The amenities move with the capital and with the middle class, and the low-income communities that are left behind suffer.

Q. Ellison: Those low-income communities of color are going through some real struggles and disruptions on the economic front. So there's got to be a tug-of-war between the need for jobs and economic growth in those communities and protecting the environment and the climate. How do you strike that balance?

A. Yeampierre: It doesn't have to be one or the other. The clean energy jobs we are promoting in the industrial waterfront pay \$60,000 a year, and come with benefits. That would make it possible to retain the community, to keep people from being displaced. But the New York City Economic Development Corporation is going with conventional development models that would basically turn our community into a workforce for the privileged in their own communities. There is an opportunity to do it differently — to address climate change and create jobs.

I completely agree with what Cecilia is saying. In our community, we've had to bear all the environmental burdens. But the moment we start fighting for the amenities, all of the sudden we can't afford to live here anymore. Even our successes have displaced us. So our park, our greenway, the fact that we stopped a power plant from being sited in the neighborhood — all of our victories are being used by developers to displace us.

Martinez: The reality — at least in the communities I work with — is that people are very aware of environmental issues and that it isn't a tradeoff between economic development and environmental sustainability precisely because of the public health impact. So in our communities — whether they're Latino, African-American, or Native — there isn't the kind of disconnect that is popularly assumed between environmental sustainability and economic development. The question is, how do we bring those two together with the appropriate investment and in a way that is equitable and provides the kind of benefits these communities have been lacking in the past?

Adrar: I really appreciate that because, based on the intersectional work we've been doing since the administration came into power, it's clear that groups are mobilizing around environmental issues in a way that makes sense to them, using a different narrative than what we've been used to hearing in the media around carbon emissions.

We understand that climate change is a catastrophe: It's going to lead to flooding, droughts, and it's going to shift migration around the country and around the world. But groups are looking at how to create solutions for that. We are talking about a "just transition" away from the extractive economy and creating tools for reinvestment in communities. We want to create safeguards and make sure that public investment goes into these communities in ways that lead to community control of energy and resources. I just got off a Movement for Black Lives conversation yesterday and they're talking about divestment and reinvestment. Indigenous groups have moved incredible amounts of money from the fossil fuel industry.

Q. Ellison: Does the new political and social environment change how you think and strategize?

A. Abdul-Rahman: Indiana is now a hyper-conservative state, and we are continuously battling a lot of bad policy. So we find ourselves battling redistricting deals and anti-[Ban the Box](#) laws and laws against [obstruction of traffic](#) to prevent folks from being able to protest. For us it just means we need to organize more intensely and intentionally. For example, our communities — when they're inundated with pollution — need to advocate for [community benefits agreements](#), so they can benefit from the jobs and the movement of making their communities cleaner and better.

Q. Ellison: The innovation sector is so focused right now on creating technologies of convenience and efficiency. The word *disruption* is used quite a bit. What sort of pressure could we put on the innovation sector, on Silicon Valley, to develop technologies that help heal the planet?

A. Yeampierre: I think that these innovators should have people representing frontline communities at the table before they even shape these technologies. There is technology called [carbon capture and sequestration](#) that we oppose because it keeps us dependent on coal and other fossil fuels. So although it may be innovative, it is still not environmentally just.

So these folks could start by having a conversation with communities, saying, "What do you need, and how can we use our skills, our resources, our power, and our access to technology to address community needs?" Instead, what they do — because they're competitive and top-down and their behavior mirrors the problem that got us here in the first place — they create technology that we then have to stop, to react to, to respond to.

Adrar: At [COP22](#) at Marrakesh [the 2016 United Nations Climate Change Conference], when [then-Secretary of State] John Kerry said that the private sector was going to be the savior of the climate, we knew there was going to be favoritism toward techno-fixes and market-based solutions. I don't want our energy sector to make the same mistakes that the industrial agriculture sector made. We're overproducing food, but there are still hungry people on the planet, and we've overlooked ancestral wisdom and knowledge from native peoples, peasants, and people who've lived on the land.

Martinez: We have to keep in mind that technology is not neutral. Technology embodies certain social and political principles, for better or worse. Our energy system is a major contributor to climate change, and we have not integrated its social cost, its environmental cost in the market of technology development. We have an obese energy system, which is geared toward producing an abundant supply of energy year after year, into the next century. But what is the role of our community in managing, operating, and making decisions about that energy system? We need to ask: Energy for what? And energy for whom? And how do we incorporate those costs? That's inherently what [energy democracy](#) is all about.

Q. Ellison: What are you working on right now?

A. Adrar: What *aren't* we working on? A lot of our groups are working on rapid response, collaborating to be more responsive to direct threats to communities — on issues like immigration, police abuses and the defense of black lives, and the indigenous struggle. The Climate Justice Alliance just put forth a new strategy plan that has an ambitious goal of developing 50 [Just Transition campaigns](#) around the country, which means we'll be working with communities to understand the framework, share tools, and develop collective strategies.

Yeampierre: We've got three community-owned solar initiatives, and we've spent a lot of time thinking about what governance and financial engineering look like for a utility that would be owned by low-income people. And, in partnership with the Climate Justice Alliance, we are organizing the largest gathering of young people of color on climate change in the country, scheduled for Aug. 3 this year at Union Theological Seminary.

Abdul-Rahman: Our main mission is to work on energy-efficiency policy and climate resistance and moving more renewable, clean energy. In East Chicago, where [drinking water is contaminated by lead](#), we are delivering water and filters and helping the people lift up their narrative. We recently filed a petition with some other groups to rebuild East Chicago's water infrastructure, which is connected to making the community resistant to climate change and creating a new vision. In lieu of being gentrified, could we build affordable housing there? Could this affordable housing have solar on it? And who gets to build that? We want to help move that community forward toward a just transition.

Martinez: We are continuing to do research on how you develop climate-resilience indicators from the perspective of communities, particularly communities of color and low-income communities. I think everybody on this call is also working on a very important national initiative called [Building Equity and Alignment for Impact](#), which is about shifting philanthropic and other resources to grassroots community organizations and environmental justice groups that have not been funded at the level of larger mainstream environmental work. And, given that the federal state of the art right now is problematic for moving environmental justice issues, we continue to look for other policy levers at the state and local level.

This piece was produced by the [Island Press Urban Resilience Project](#), with support from the [Kresge Foundation](#) and the [JPB Foundation](#).

Environmental journalism powered by you

As a nonprofit news outlet, we set an ambitious goal to raise \$65,000 by the end of December. **Donate now, and all gifts will be matched. Double your impact today.**

Did you know we're one of the few news outlets dedicated exclusively to people-focused environmental coverage? We believe our content should remain free and accessible to all our readers. If you dig our work and agree news should never sit behind a paywall only available to a select few, donate today to help sustain our climate coverage.

DONATE NOW



[Show comments](#)

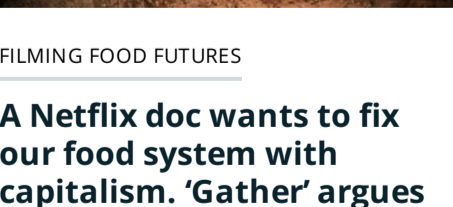
More in Justice

All Justice



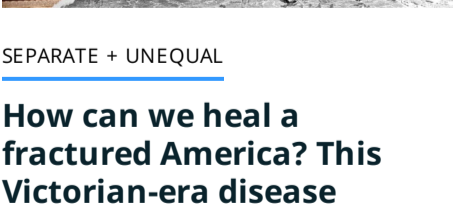
COAL DISCOMFORT

As South Africa clings to coal, a struggle for the right to breathe



FILMING FOOD FUTURES

A Netflix doc wants to fix our food system with capitalism. 'Gather' argues that's how it broke.



SEPARATE + UNEQUAL

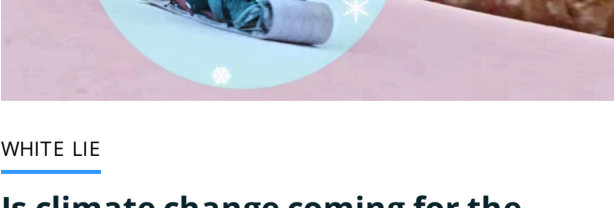
How can we heal a fractured America? This Victorian-era disease detective offers clues.



SEE NO EVIL

Why did EPA air monitors fail to detect an oil refinery explosion?

Can't Miss



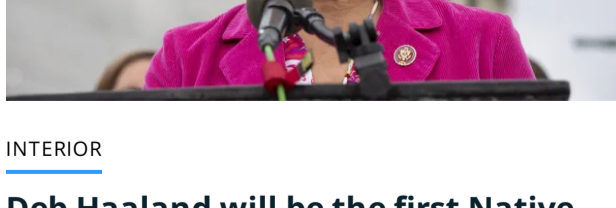
WHITE LIE

Is climate change coming for the Christmas rom-com?



COVER STORY

How the Kingston coal ash spill unearthed a nuclear nightmare



INTERIOR

Deb Haaland will be the first Native American head of the Interior

SECTIONS

Grist 50: 2020

[Climate](#)

[Justice](#)

[Politics](#)

[Advice](#)

[Science](#)

[Food](#)

[Video](#)

[My Climate Candidate](#)

[Fix](#)

[Podcast](#)

MORE

[Donate](#)

[About Grist](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Grist Team](#)

[Pressroom](#)

[Become a Member](#)

[Grist Visionaries Bureau](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Fellowship Program](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

FOLLOW

[Newsletters](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[YouTube](#)

[RSS Feed](#)

[JSON feed](#)

A Beacon in the Smog®

© 1999-2020 Grist Magazine, Inc. All rights reserved. Grist is powered by WordPress.com VIP.