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CLIMATE CHANGE RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION ACTIVISM

True Climate Justice Puts Communities of Color First

Black and brown communities have long borne the brunt of our addiction to fossil fuels—and now they are leading the fight for a post-carbon economy.

By Audrea Lim

MAY 22, 2017

A Black Lives Matter member speaks during a protest against the Dakota Access pipeline near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation on November 12, 2016. *(Reuters / Stephanie Keith)*

The day before the People's Climate March in Washington, DC, Preyton Lambert—skinny, dreadlocked and sporting black-frame glasses—was getting hustled on a boulevard near the National Mall. Another boy restrained his arms, before throwing him to the ground. His cheek pressed against the pavement. Two girls recorded the encounter on their phones as a crowd looked on.

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The youth were part of a delegation from Philadelphia's Soil Generation, a group of black, radical, urban farmers, and this was an act of street theater, organized by the national It Takes Roots coalition of grassroots environmental groups. Among them were indigenous, Appalachian, and immigrant activists, each performing the attacks and defense of their communities and environment. "This is what happens to young black men and women almost everywhere," explained Lambert. Their scene represented the most potent symbol of contemporary American racism: a young black man being brutalized by a cop. "We're not just here for climate justice."

So what does police brutality have to do with issues like carbon emissions, rising global temperatures, water pollution and government-by-oil-corporations that have dominated mainstream climate discourse?

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Peoples Climate March demonstrators march down Pennsylvania Avenue, April 29, 2017. *(Reuters / Mike Theiler)*

Standing before the Capitol Reflecting Pool at the 200,000-strong Climate March the following day, Katherine Egland, the chair of the Environmental and Climate Justice Committee for the NAACP National Board of Directors, argued that, because low-income minority communities suffer the most adverse impacts of environmental pollution and climate change, this is also where the transition away from fossil fuels should begin.

In the east of Egland's home state of Mississippi lies Kemper County, Mississippi, which is 60 percent African American and was home to some of the highest numbers of lynchings in the state from 1877–1950. It is also where the Kemper Project, soon to be operational, is located, an experimental "clean coal" plant that was a keystone of President Obama's climate plan for reducing carbon emissions. The only major coal plant currently being constructed in the country today, it would be the first large-scale plant to use the energy-intensive Carbon Capture and Storage technology (which gasifies the coal, captures the carbon emissions, and stores them in the ground).

Concerns about leaking pipes aside, Egland is angry that, with a $7.3 billion price tag, costs for the nation's most expensive power plant are now being passed on to residents of one of the nation's poorest states. "That's a huge investment in past, unsafe technology, when we could've had renewable energy and money to spare," she said. "I'm not sure why we continue this addiction to fossil fuels when we know that we should be looking at renewable sources of energy."

Kemper County is hardly the only black community to be sited near a coal plant: At least 68 percent of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired plant, compared with only 56 percent of the white population. This kind of data has largely been eclipsed by the numbers trumpeted by the climate movement: limiting atmospheric carbon emissions to 350 parts per million, and capping global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

But the racial disparity among victims of environmental pollution are stark: African Americans are exposed to 38 percent more polluted air than whites, and are 75 percent more likely to live in chemical-factory "fence-line zones" than the US average (Latinos are 60 percent more likely). And as global temperatures rise, climate change will also impact poor communities of color more drastically: Heat-related deaths occur at a 150–200 percent higher rate among African Americans than among whites, likely because cities tend to run a few degrees hotter than their surroundings (the "heat island effect"), and most African Americans live in cities and suburbs. As extreme weather grows more frequent, vulnerable communities will become yet more vulnerable.

The Carver Terrace hosing project sits next to an oil refinery in west Port Arthur, Texas. *(AP Photo / LM Otero)*

These communities remain deeply underrepresented in the climate movement. “When you have to decide between going down to do something about climate change or trying to feed your children, or worrying about police brutality—those kinds of things take immediate precedent over the longer-term issues of air pollution and soil erosion,” said Jazzlyn Lindsey, standing alongside her Black Lives Matter delegation at the march, the whole crew dancing and drumming on overturned buckets.

Yet, for Katherine Egland, climate change and environmental pollution are civil-rights issues, just like criminal justice or education. “What would Dr. King say if he were here today?” she asked. When she was a child, the civil-rights leader would stay at her church when he passed through Mississippi, but he couldn’t have known at the time that they would win the fight against segregated water fountains yet lose the fight for clean water in places like Flint. She recalls something she said at a presentation she made at the 2014 New York climate march: “I think he would be saying, ‘Fossil free at last, fossil free at last, we’re going to be fossil free at last.’”

Some say that the environmental-justice movement is centuries old: Native Americans have been resisting the theft of their lands since the white man arrived; the Chicano-led United Farm Workers have been fighting pesticide use in the fields since the sixties; and black sanitation workers—the keepers of the urban environment—have been protesting unfair working conditions since the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968—where Dr. King was heading when he was assassinated.

Yet race has remained a consistent blind spot in the environmental movement. This has begun to change as public attention alights on Native communities along the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines. But without directly addressing how environmental injustice impacts poor communities of color disproportionately, racial and economic inequality is likely to deepen as climate change grows more disruptive.

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Climate change’s impacts can most frequently be felt through water: too much after a storm, too little during a drought, and how we manage and distribute it in between—*mni wiconi*, in other words: “Water is life.” Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy have battered America’s shores, and droughts in rural Syria helped fuel the civil war (migration to the cities exacerbated religious and political tensions), much as a severe water shortage is now fueling the civil war in Yemen (the capital city, Sanaa, could run out of water as early as this year).

But subtler environmental changes are also wreaking havoc around the country. Near Bethel, Alaska, gradually warming temperatures and coastal pollution are threatening the subsistence lifestyle of Julien Jacobs's Alaska Native Yup'ik community. "We're seeing waves wash over villages, and we're also seeing a break in our entire ecological system," he said. What will become of their culture if the whale, beluga, salmon, caribou, and moose they harvest become extinct?

Elsewhere in the United States, coastal retreat poses an existential threat to communities with identities connected to the land. On the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, which loses a football field's worth of land to the sea every hour, an entire indigenous community—Isle de Jean Charles—is relocating. Already, a matrix of pipelines and canals carved into the wetlands by the oil industry are exacerbating erosion, but Energy Transfer Partners is still planning to build the final leg of its Dakota Access pipeline, the Bayou Bridge, across 11 parishes, including the freed-slave community of St. James. This parish is surrounded by oil refineries and LNG terminals (the area is known as "Cancer Alley" for illnesses connected to the facilities), and according to Cherri Foytlin, state director of Bold Louisiana, they want to evacuate too.

But "the companies aren't buying them out." Still, their culture is under threat even if they remain: Some claim that the oil canals are cutting off oxygen to the crawfish in the Atchafalaya Basin. "Who loves crawfish more than Louisiana?" asked Foytlin. The basin is the only place in the state where crawfish are still caught in the wild. "Protecting them and that way of life is important to all the cultures of Louisiana."

Some communities live off the land more directly than others, but all communities remain inextricably connected to the earth; even Soylent, sometimes dubbed "the end of food," is made from plants. In California's Central Valley—America's produce basket—drought and rising temperatures are already pushing Mexican farmworkers to migrate north to Bellingham, Washington. Edgar Franks, an organizer with Community to Community, a Bellingham grassroots organization for food sovereignty and immigrant rights, recalls them talking about getting nosebleeds and passing out from the 115 degree heat. Cooler climates awaited them in Washington, but the large industrial farms remain, as do the threats of ICE raids on the workers keeping the agricultural industry afloat.

"We're bringing it back down to local communities, to build the resilience and power of our native nations."

These corporate factory farms are big contributors to climate change, from the petroleum-based chemical fertilizers to the fuel and refrigeration required to transport the produce across long distances. That is why Franks sees their efforts to establish worker-owned, organic farming cooperatives in Washington's Whatcom and Skagit counties as integral to the climate movement. "The hope is to start building relationships locally with our food vendors to localize our food system, so money that's exchanged stays within the community," said Franks. "So we're not transporting berries halfway across the world."

Tribes are shoring up their sovereignty in similar ways, said Tom Goldtooth, executive director of the Indigenous Environmental Network. "We're bringing it back down to local communities, to build the resilience and power of our native nations." Reverting to traditional ways of agriculture might entail a return to seeds that preexisted the arrival of white settlers (not to mention genetic modification). These would have naturally evolved to thrive in local ecosystems, and would lead to greater biodiversity than our current food system allows. "Many of them are starting to reevaluate the direction that they're going, and that's decades or 50 years from now," he said of the tribes. "Food sovereignty is very critical."

Faith Spotted Eagle—the Yankton Sioux Tribe grandmother famed for resisting Keystone XL under Obama—calls the centuries of "manifest destiny" that robbed indigenous Americans of their land, their livelihoods, and often their lives a "holocaust." The Indian Wars, which accompanied the largest land-grab in US history, were intended to secure farmland and natural resources for white settlers, and were carried out through the mass displacement, genocide, and confinement to reservations of Native people .

Many at the Standing Rock encampment saw their treatment by Energy Transfer Partners and local police (who deployed dogs, tanks, flash grenades, and sound cannons against the water protectors) as just its latest iteration. Now Spotted Eagle is reviving the Cowboy and Indian Alliance—the coalition of white landowners and grassroots indigenous activists who rode into Washington and helped bring down Keystone XL in 2015—in response to the newly resurrected Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipelines. But this is not the only component of the Sioux resistance against the fossil-fuel government.

A row of law-enforcement officers faces Dakota Access pipeline protesters along North Dakota Highway 6, south of St. Anthony, North Dakota, on October 10, 2016. *(Tom Stromme / The Bismarck Tribune via AP)*

Along the sidelines of the Climate March, Spotted Eagle spoke with pride of the wind farms that her South Dakota tribe, along with six other Sioux tribes, was launching through the Oceti Sakowin Power Authority (established in 2015, it includes the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe as one of its members). This came about after a series of failed attempts by outside developers to harness the muscular prairie winds for a share of the profits. "So we became our own developers," she said.

The result was the first tribal public power authority in the United States, an independent, nonprofit entity to construct and operate renewable energy resources at a local scale, and for the benefit of the community. Owned and controlled by the tribes (Spotted Eagle is on the advisory council of elders), the agency is designed to distribute surplus revenues back to the tribes for use in local development. And it also provides affordable clean energy to tribal ratepayers, helping to weaken the stranglehold of the fossil-fuel industry, and shoring up their self-reliance and sovereignty.

Community-owned renewables are not only a rural or tribal phenomenon. They exist in cities throughout the United States (including Los Angeles; Seattle; and Chattanooga, Tennessee), with residential customers of public power utilities paying average electricity rates that are 14 percent lower than for investor-owned utilities. In the Brooklyn neighborhood of Sunset Park, home to a sizable Latino and Chinese immigrant population, the community group UPROSE is working on three solar projects that will be community-owned and -governed, and will lower electricity costs for local subscribers (low-income households will be prioritized). But these solar projects are only one part of their larger vision for neighborhood development.

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"The focus has always been on the climate," said Elizabeth Yeampierre, UPROSE's executive director, of the environmental movement. "But we have to think about co-pollutants, we have to think about racial justice, we have to think about displacement, we have to think about all the things that are putting our communities in harm's way."

At the center of her concerns is Sunset Park's waterfront, home to one of New York City's six Significant Maritime and Industrial Areas (where heavy industry is clustered). "But we're losing it because of speculating developers who are turning it into the next destination location for the privileged," she said. As in other gentrifying neighborhoods, skyrocketing housing costs are already pushing many low-income residents out of Sunset Park. But reserving that waterfront space for green manufacturers (and possibly offshore wind turbines) would not only slow this process but also provide local green jobs. "The industrial sector is the vehicle for our salvation," she said.

To this end, UPROSE is part of the New York Renews coalition that is drafting state legislation to levy fees against companies for greenhouse-gas emissions, with 40 percent of the revenue to be earmarked for green-energy investment in "disadvantaged communities"—a statewide policy that could encourage decentralized, community-owned renewable energy. (The week of the Climate March, Senators Bernie Sanders and Jeff Merkley also introduced a similar federal bill, the "100 by 50" Act, but with a Republican-controlled Congress and an administration staffed by climate-science deniers and fossil-fuel executives, this was largely symbolic).

"Cap-and-trade can either hurt or help us."

Five years ago, California paved the way with a similar piece of legislation, Senate Bill 535, and Vien Truong, director of the Van Jones–founded organization Green for All, helped push it through. Truong was born in a Hong Kong refugee camp to parents fleeing Vietnam, but grew up in the Oakland neighborhood known at the time as the "Murder Dubs" because it had the country's highest homicide rates. It was the kind of place where "you don't think about climate justice. You think about murder, drugs, education," she said. Life expectancy in parts of Oakland were comparable to North Korea's—but this turned out not to be only because of the murders. There was also groundwater contamination, an abundance of freeways bordering the Murder Dubs, and a lack of fresh food.

So when California began considering cap-and-trade—a scheme requiring companies to pay a penalty when they exceed a limit on emissions—Truong saw an opportunity. "Cap-and-trade can either hurt or help us," she said. "If you do it wrong, you actually force polluters to move their pollution to the poorest, polluted communities, and clean up the richer and more affluent areas." Her coalition secured a requirement that 35 percent of the revenue be reinvested in California's most polluted census tracts—communities with some of the highest asthma and infant mortality rates, rent burdens, and numbers of high-school dropouts. Once the funds began rolling in, the communities chose how their allotments would be spent: trees to break up the concrete jungle, affordable housing to combat gentrification, bus passes for seniors, and free solar panels. This in turn created local jobs in solar installation, energy efficiency, and public transportation.

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Critics argue that cap-and-trade, like fining small-scale drug dealers to curb organized crime, fails to address the root of the climate crisis: the limitless economic growth and endless consumption that lie at the heart of capitalism. (These critics include Pope Francis). Others believe that, short of ending capitalism tomorrow, a just transition to renewables will require redistributing wealth from polluters to the most polluted communities (through policies like SB 535 and New York Renews). Either way, the grassroots campaigns agree that the fossil-fuel era must end.

"Trump's here wasting money on walls when we need water and food," said Preyton Lambert, still buzzing from his performance.

In fact, this broader view of climate justice, which also encompasses issues of inequality, oppression, and sovereignty, hints at a more profound truth: The climate crisis offers a unique opportunity to reshape our economic system, and to create real alternatives to the profit-driven, fossil fuel–dependent system of white, corporate capitalism.

"The way that they zone us, where they locate their coal factories, where they plunder lands in Africa—that's how slavery started, stealing resources from black and brown communities," said Jazzlyn Lindsey. The day was balmy, and her Black Lives Matter contingent seemed to be hosting an impromptu party near the head of the march. "Healing that is part of the long list of reparations that America and colonialism has to make up for." N

Audrea Lim Audrea Lim is a journalist in New York City. She writes *The Nation*'s "Taking Heat" series.

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Climate Change

Public Art, Yerbabuena Cultural Center, San Francisco, Calif. Photo by Alessandra Mondolfi.

By Alessandra Mondolfi

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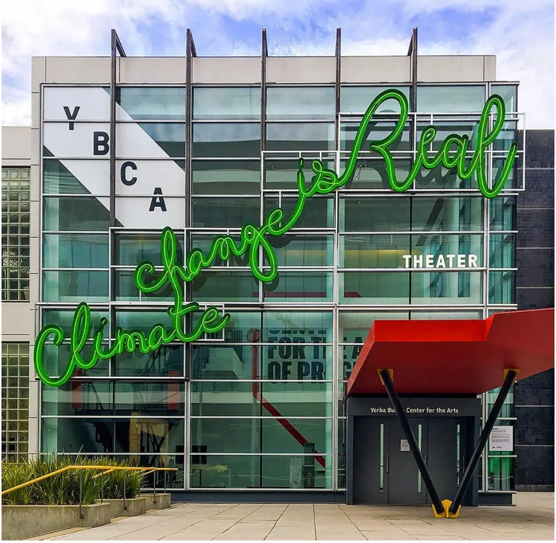

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Alessandra Mondolfi Alessandra Mondolfi is an artist, designer, and fabricator whose creative practice has recently shifted toward activism in response to the current political climate. More of her work can be seen at alessandramondolfi.com. Instagram: @alessandramondolfi

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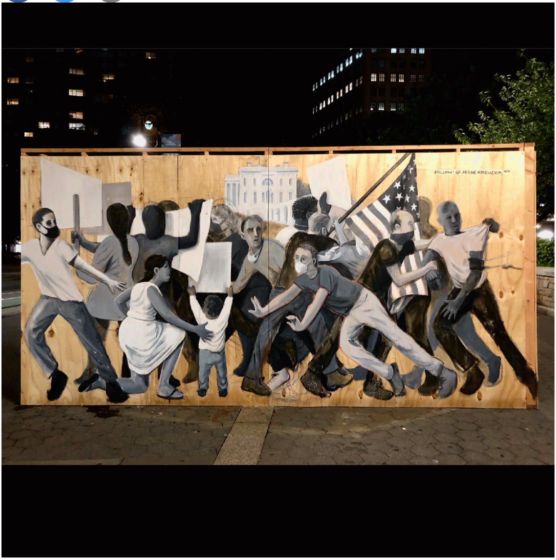

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Jesse Kreuzer Jesse Kreuzer grew up on Long Island and is grateful for being fortunate enough to get a free education at Cooper Union in New York City.

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