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## Environmental Education in Popular Press

### *Why Every Environmentalist Should Be Anti-Racist*

In *Why Every Environmentalist Should Be Anti-Racist*, Leah Thomas draws on their own experience as a Black environmentalist to examine the ways in which “the Black Lives Matter movement and environmentalism are linked”. According to Thomas, there is very clearly outlined data that indicates that BIPOC (Black/Indigenous/People of Color) communities are disproportionately exposed to “poor air quality and environmental conditions”. Thomas highlights the ways in which fracking waste sites are predominantly found in BIPOC neighborhoods, as well as the inequity of impact on BIPOC populations due to the increased frequency and damage of natural disasters caused by climate change. Thomas argues for the importance of *Intersectional Environmentalism*, “an inclusive version of environmentalism that advocates for both the protection of people and the planet,” identifying “the ways in which injustices happening to marginalized communities and the earth are interconnected.” They believe that so long as environmentalists neglect to address their own racist bias’, achieving climate justice and saving the planet will be that much harder.

### **Opinion: There is no climate justice without social justice**

Thomas states that “the longer racism is not addressed, the harder it will be to save the planet, in part because Black activists’ time and energy are being drained,” pointing out that the work of fighting for the right to exist is energetically taxing on both an emotional and physical level. As a Black woman in Canada, even living a life steeped in privilege, my involvement in the current anti-racist movement has drained me in such a way that my efforts

to live sustainably have become very limited. It is challenging to sustain the desire to save the planet and prioritize sustainability for all, when it feels as if many of the “all” that I am fighting for do not see the value in my presence on our shared planet.

According to Dr. Robert Bullard, “Individuals who physically live on the ‘wrong side of the tracks’ are subjected to elevated environmental health threats and more than their fair share of preventable diseases.” On July 2nd, 2020, the City of Syracuse held a Police Reform Forum, during which, Yusuf Abdul-Qadir and many other members of the Black community and their allies, spoke to the city’s council, demanding that changes be made to police and educational funding. Abdul-Qadir put into context the need to defund the police while also inadvertently linking systemic racism to the type of environmental health threats that Bullard is referring to.

Abdul-Qadir points out that “95% of all police in Syracuse don't even live in Syracuse, and they take hundreds of millions of dollars, over the course of their careers, and retirements, out of the city.” What this then means is that residents of Syracuse are directly funding the wages, health insurance, and pensions of their police officers, ultimately funding better facilities, hospitals and schools in the suburbs, while also increasing their ability to live a more sustainable life. Abdul-Qadir goes on to demonstrate how “the institution evolves out of white supremacy. It exists out of the concept of ensuring that slaves would be maintained. It then evolved to facilitating the maintenance of Jim Crow. It then evolved to maintain mass incarceration,” a system easily maintained through a below 50% graduation rate due to the disproportionate suspension of Black students. Without a high school diploma, the ability to obtain a well-enough paying job that can fund a sustainable lifestyle in a capitalist society is virtually impossible.

A 2016 study on the connections between racial isolation and exposure to airborne particulate matter and ozone in understudied US populations (Bravo et al.), found that racial isolation is associated with higher particulate matter concentrations, therefore suggesting that the disproportionate exposure of BIPOC communities to air pollution might be connected to

racial disparities in health. Add to this the ongoing fight for personal justice, while doing everything they can to simply keep themselves and their loved ones alive in a system that puts up constant roadblocks to their very survival, it's no wonder that Black people struggle to commit to saving the planet. They are too exhausted to spend time learning how to recycle and repurpose, or how to cook meat-free meals consisting of ethically-produced food products. They don't have the energy to ride or walk to where they need to be on a daily basis, instead of driving; and the lower-paid, yet gruelling work that they do manage to do leaves them far too drained to take soul-nourishing trips out into nature. Meanwhile, the choices they make only contribute to an unhealthy body and mind, which in turn, is less able to cope with the environmental stressors placed on their bodies due to the racism ingrained in the places that they live.

The fight to achieve climate justice is the responsibility of **all** who live on this planet; therefore, until all citizens feel institutionally valued and ultimately energized (read: social justice is achieved), our collective efforts to save the planet will be ever challenging and dangerously drawn out.

### **On The Other Hand**

While Thomas suggests that the work of fighting for the right to exist is energetically taxing on both an emotional and physical level, one could argue that your ability to fight for the planet should have nothing to do with your time and energy. If you really wanted to save the planet, then you would make the time and just get to it. By the same vein, if an individual, as Dr. Robert Bullard puts it, lives on the 'wrong side of the tracks', then perhaps they need to just move to the right side. For example, if the residents in Syracuse believe that funding is disproportionately leaving the city by way of police wages, health insurance, and pensions, then they should just move out of the city and into the suburbs.

Black people and individuals from the BIPOC community continue to highlight the notion that systemic racism not only exists, but that it is rooted in racism built centuries ago.

Abdul-Qadir puts white supremacy in the context of an evolution that has led to the current day low graduation rate of Black students due to their disproportionate rates of suspension in the school system. He claims that this makes it nearly impossible for Black students to graduate and find jobs. However, it's 2020; there are plenty of well-paying jobs that you don't need a high school diploma for. Even if you do need the diploma, there are night classes and ways of completing your final year. The website, Best GED Classes, lists countless jobs available for people without a high school diploma:

<https://bestgedclasses.org/jobs-without-diploma-or-ged/>

Though it may be true that there are connections between racial isolation and exposure to airborne particulate matter and ozone in understudied US populations (Bravo et al.), this does not provide enough reason to claim that racism interferes with one's ability to seek out climate justice and healthier ways of taking care of themselves. In fact, this comes across as outright laziness. If one cares enough about their health, then they'll find a way to take care of it. Black people need to prioritize riding and walking to where they need to be. If they have a car, then there's no reason why they can't get out into nature.

Although everyone is responsible for playing their part in saving the planet, the most significant and negative impacts of climate change (read: greenhouse gas emissions) are being caused both directly and indirectly by the wealthy and those in power, the 1%. Efforts by the 99% will do little to save the planet in the end.

### **The Path To Reconciliation**

If we look at climate justice and environmentalism as a human issue, then anti-racism should be central to the quest for this said justice. I am reminded of the way in which some people will boldly state that "all lives matter". If this is indeed the case, then it should matter that Black people are disproportionately impacted by climate change, and that the ability to lead a sustainable life is limited for Black people and other marginalized communities due to the ingrained limitations of the institutions that we are a part of.

As a teacher, discussing this concept of anti-racist environmentalism with school age children and their parents is a necessary part of the job, regardless of that teacher's subject area. In fact, it seems to me that children are the most important factor in helping the adults around them gain much needed perspective. In a recent interview with Science Friday, Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, founder of the Urban Ocean Lab, notes that there is "compelling social science research that showed that middle-aged men are most likely to be persuaded on an issue by their adolescent daughters" (Bergquist). As such, talking to school age children especially about the links between social justice and climate justice is essential.

Interdisciplinary environmental education cannot exist without intersectional environmentalism, just as climate justice cannot exist without social justice. As such, drawing on Thomas' definition of *Intersectional Environmentalism*, my approach to this issue of anti-racist environmentalism in a classroom setting will be rooted in the C.A.R.E. framework.

Complexity in the classroom will require that we investigate the placement of industrial structures, with deep emphasis on the impact they have on the communities that they share land with. What process determines where these structures are placed? Is there a need for them? What laws are in place to protect those so-called needs, and do those laws dismiss the lives of the marginalized and oppressed?

Following Complexity, I would stray from the order of the acronym and focus on Responsibility, in order to facilitate each student's understanding of human roles in climate change, from the prioritization of funding within communities, to political decisions that reinforce the oppression of marginalized people.

Ethics will then provide students with a clearer picture of their values, specifically in relationship to their rights to clean air, clean water and life itself. Once a firm grounding in Ethics has been established, students will be better able to appreciate the Aesthetics of nature based on their own values and how an intersectional lens is necessary in maintaining those values. They will feel a greater commitment to protecting their natural world, whether it be the coral reefs of the Caribbean Sea that they may be fortunate enough to travel to, or their local

parks under threat of industry or mass development. By centering intersectional environmentalism within the C.A.R.E. framework, it is my hope that my students will be firm in their belief that regardless of whether they are part of the 1% or the 99%, they all have a significant role to play in achieving both climate and social justice.

### Work Cited

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