

Audio Transcript: Environmental Justice and Covid-19

Solana Chehtman:

Hello. Good evening, everyone. My name is Solana Chehtman. I'm the director of creative practice and social impact here at The Shed. And I am truly excited to welcome you to Environmental Justice and Covid-19, our second encounter as part of our ongoing conversation series taking place in conjunction with the exhibition *Particular Matter(s)* by artist Tomás Saraceno, on view at The Shed through April 17.

I want to start by sharing the points of access that are available today. Live closed captioning is provided by Adina King. To turn it on, please click the CC button in the bottom right of your window. We also have American Sign Language with interpretation provided by Rorri Burton and Dresden Lamar, so they will both be pinned by our team and therefore should be visible at all times.

Please feel free to share any comments or requests regarding your participation through the chat feature and you can connect with our team at any point and also feel free to ask any questions for the panelists throughout the discussion. Using the Q&A button that's also on the bottom of the Zoom window and we will try to get to most of them towards the end of the conversation.

Tomás Saraceno is an artist whose decades long practice has been dedicated to imagining sustainable futures in an era of climate emergency. One core body of work that appears in the exhibition, among others, is his newly commissioned piece, *We Do Not All Breathe the Same Air*, delves into the uneven distribution of air pollution along geopolitical and racial lines across the United States.

And it does it through visually accessible data resulting from machines that kind of suck and imprint levels of pollution on strips of filter paper that for this piece were collected from different state government agencies throughout the country. This work has been greatly influenced by science journalists. And one of our speakers tonight, Harriet A. Washington, whose urgent book, *A Terrible Thing to Waste, Environmental Racism, and its Assault on the American Mind* from 2019, traces the ways in which communities of color suffer disproportionate harm from environmental crisis.

When we started putting together this series *Matter(s) for Conversation and Action* in close collaboration with Columbia Climate School and the Saraceno studio it was 2019 and we couldn't have imagined what was to come. Since then, Covid-19 has created a level of visible death and a sense of emergency that has forever changed our world. However, to quote Rebecca Solnit, while Covid ravaged across the world, air pollution kills about three times as many people. Deaths that are invisible, accepted and unquestioned.

And we must fight the climate crisis with the same urgency with which we confronted the coronavirus. And I will add, we must also understand and address head on the disproportionate effects on communities of color This is our second conversation of a series of six conversations through which we intend to provide both different entry points and perspectives into Tomás's

work, as well as expand on the connections between his work and some of the key contemporary discussions around environmental justice and the intersection of art and science.

And we couldn't imagine a more pressing conversation than the one that we will have tonight. We invite you to visit our website for more information and, of course, to get tickets to come see the exhibition in person. I want to thank very specially the Ford Foundation for supporting in making this series possible, as well as our partners and tonight's speakers.

Joining us tonight are Linda Goode Bryant, filmmaker and activist, Peggy Shepard, co-founder and executive director of WE ACT, Harriet A. Washington, science writer, editor, and ethicist, and our moderator, Courtney Cogburn, associate professor of Columbia University School of Social Work. Before inviting them to join us, I want to introduce my wonderful colleague, Alix Schroder from Columbia's Climate School, and I want to thank her for her ongoing collaboration.

And then I will ask, Alix, that you pass the baton to Linda, Peggy, and Harriet, thanks to everyone.

Alix Schroder:

Thank you so much, Solana.

Hello, everyone. My name is Alix Schroder. I'm the associate director of academic initiatives at Columbia Climate School. I have had the great pleasure to work with Solana and The Shed team to shape this public programming series.

Which connects to and builds on the incredible and thought-provoking work of Tomás Saraceno. So thank you to both The Shed team and Studio Saraceno for your inspiration and hard work on both the exhibit and this event series. I'm really pleased to be here tonight on behalf of the Columbia Climate School, which serves as the Integrated Center of Climate Activity at Columbia University.

Our school aims to provide the scholarship needed to tackle the climate crisis and related problems and provide potential solutions through interdisciplinary research, partnerships, education, innovative technologies, and the sharing of ideas. This public program series is a great example of the power of interdisciplinary collaborations, which is one of the core tenets of the school and something that you'll see on display tonight with this wonderful panel.

These discussions bring together scientists and artists and policymakers, philosophers, activists, community representatives, and more to explore a diverse, diverse range of topics connected to climate change and environmental justice. And on that note, thank you for everyone for joining tonight. And I will hand it off to my esteemed colleague Courtney Cogburn, who is moderating tonight's discussion. Thanks, everyone.

Courtney Cogburn:

Good afternoon, everyone. I'm delighted to join you this evening for this important conversation. Thank you to The Shed, the Columbia Climate School,

and the Ford Foundation and others who have supported this important discussion. I have personally been engaged with work related to racism and racial justice for more than 20 years, but I am new to work directly in service of the climate crisis and specifically the fight against environmental racism.

But these aspects of my work are inextricably linked, and as we'll hear from our panelists, are inextricably linked in their work as well. In my short time working in this space, I have learned that we will fail miserably at meeting the hallmarks of democracy, human rights, and social justice if we do not send to the most marginalized and vulnerable in every aspect of climate change work, and more specifically, if we do not meaningfully engage structural racism in its many forms, which includes environmental racism.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made it painfully clear that pandemics do not impact us equally and that there has been, is, and will continue to be an imbalance of suffering until we collectively refuse to live in a world where we accept racial injustice as an inevitable truth. Tonight, let's begin our conversation with learning from these three brilliant and powerful women about how to make this collective refusal and find inspiration in the work that they've done on our behalf to make the world a better place.

Art, narrative, policy, collective action, and inspiration are indisputably critical to our fight for our climate crisis, against the climate crisis. A favorite quote of mine is that there are those who solve the problems of their disciplines and those who solve the problems of the world. Each of our panelists are helping to address and solve urgent problems of the world.

And I'm honored to help moderate our conversation this evening. Please join me, Harriet, Linda, and Peggy, and we'll begin our conversation. I'd like to first ask you to each introduce yourselves. I'll ask Harriet to begin. Can you? In my reading and knowledge of your work prior to this evening, I know that you've lived a rich and multidimensional professional lives.

You've done all sorts of things over the course of your careers. Can you tell us who you are, and in particular, how you came to the work of environmental racism? And environmental justice? Harriet, would you begin?

Harriet Washington:

Sure. Thank you, Courtney, and I will try the things that are most pertinent to my work around environmental racism are two things I can think of that really stand out.

One is that in the early 1980s, I had a fantastic job. I worked at the Poison Control Center and I loved it. I felt like a detective every day I went to work and there are people calling in all sorts of exposures. A lot of children doing mundane things like, you know, drinking things that they shouldn't have been drinking, but also a lot of very exotic things.

And one perennial, of course, was lead poisoning. But it was different from today. In the 1980s we were a focus on keeping children exposed to lead poisoning alive. Because the standards were very different. We were

concerned about children who had ten micrograms per deciliter, a huge exposure to today. But back then that wasn't threshold for treating them. And when you had a huge exposure like that, very often you don't.

The kid who had an acute exposure, bring them to the ED and treat them and keep them alive. We simply did not have the sophistication nor the resources to usually intently worry about the more subtle manifestations. We knew that lead assaulted the brain. We know among many other things we knew that many industrial chemicals actually potentiated this damage, but we didn't always have the luxury in the emergency department of actually addressing that.

And it's also true that in the news media that covered lead poisoning, you heard about dramatic acute poisonings. You weren't reading about long-term devastation or subtle devastation, and things began to change. They were poisoned. I began learning more and more about how poisons can be very exquisite and their ability to assail not only the body, but the mind.

The assault on the mind is what always fascinated me because it wasn't getting much attention. And we don't tend to indict exposures when we think about things like mental illness, about lower cognitive abilities, about psychiatric illness, and yet we know today that a lot of the things that we're treating are directly tied to early exposure, things like lead and mercury.

You know, we diagnosed a kid at 14 with conduct disorder but is severely suffering brain damage from early exposure to lead or the exposure to mercury or early exposure to PCBs. Probably we're not quantifying it well enough. I wanted to know more and I wanted people in general to know more about it to protect themselves. And that was one really strong passion of mine.

The other one was the mythology that still reigns around IQ, race, and intelligence. Hereditarian scientists have done a very, very good job of convincing most Americans that people who have low intelligence often have it because they have inherited from their parents and that in people of color, African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, they have lower intelligence because their parents had it.

And their forefathers. Hereditarians will make the claim that you inherit this. You can't do anything about it. If you're Black, you're fated to have 15 points on average lower IQ than anybody else. This is nonsense. It's not true. But we believe it. *The Bell Curve* published in 1994? Many people read it and we're convinced by all of the columns of numbers.

They didn't really understand the numbers, but they were assessed by them and I learned that the scientists are scientists, but they're also politicians. A shocking number of them have political ambitions and they've used their quote unquote research to fuel policies. Things like denying women in California access to public funds, be cut, unless they become sterilized. Things like Rich Fine of Harvard writing a paper to Congress saying we need to stop Hispanic immigration.

Hispanics have been shown to be lower intelligence and prone to criminality.

He— people listen to him because he's a Harvard graduate. But again, these are scientists I want to make the point. These are scientists, but they're also politicians and they're also funded consistently by the Pioneer Fund, a eugenic group dedicated to the preservation of Western civilization, which they tend to think of as white civilization, erroneously.

So these are the things that motivated me the most. My book focuses on the cognitive effects, exposure to levels of racism, and they're profound in their common now. Thank you.

Courtney Cogburn:

And so could you, we're putting the bios into the chat for everyone to see so that we can move into the conversation. So, Harriet, you are an award-winning author and have written about the legacy of racial oppression in our medical system and have moved into this conversation about environmental racism.

And it's helpful to hear you talk and think about to share how you got to this place. Can you speak to why you as a writer are so critical to this fight in the climate crisis? Why are narratives and storytelling around the realities of these systems so important to what we're trying to do here?

Harriet Washington:

Because America's tendency to ignore race when it's inconvenient or embarrassing has led us to carefully curate scientific discourse and the history of medicine to completely eliminate many important issues that pertain to people of color and African Americans.

And I see the need to fill in that void. People need to know everything that's happened and all the motivation. They need to know, for example, that although we tend to allude to risks as if they are economic, poor people are exposed to toxicity. Uneducated people, that kind of thing, know people of color. If you look at the data, it's very, very clear.

It's a person of color. You are more at risk of being exposed to this. We don't like to talk about that because it's shameful. To admit that racism is driving a lot of our healthcare policies. But that's exactly what's happening. And someone has to say it, quite frankly. What I find very often is you have scientists and politicians and academics talking to each other, but all too often they're excluding the voice of the people who are most profoundly affected.

And all too often the message that filters down to the news media and the general public is, you know, curated. It is the messages that indict the systems that we embrace tend to be either soft pedaled or mischaracterized as economic or completely eluded. And someone has to speak up and point out that this is happening. Someone has to fill in the holes in the dialogue and insist that we talk about things that are not terribly comfortable to talk about as factors for science, like everything else in American culture.

Courtney Cogburn:

Yeah. Thank you. I'm going to move to Linda. You are a filmmaker, an artist, a curator, or an activist. You have had a varied and again, rich professional career. When I was reading more about you and your work. You struck me as someone who does what you want to do and and don't, you know, don't generally take no for an answer.

And I'm just meeting these guys. I don't know if that's true. That's just my impression. And I don't mean that in terms of your focus on personal interest, in terms of sort of acting selfishly in your own self-interest, but really in terms of using yourself in service and the ways in which art, community, and social change can be leveraged for positive social impact. In my review of your work, you once said that you asked yourself what kind of world we live in.

Everyone should be able to grow their own food even if you live on concrete. So let's grow food and then you quickly realize you don't know anything about growing food or farming. And that didn't stop you. You moved forward anyway. Can you speak to why you would do something like that? What about you would motivate you to take on such a massive problem, even though you didn't have the, necessarily the immediate skill set that you needed to pull that off?

And you've clearly done it. You've built this urban farming ecosystem, but I think it's just really wonderful. How did you end up in that place of doing this kind of work, and does it have anything to do with you being an artist? And in the way that you think and engage the world that led you to that work?

Linda Goode Bryant:

Oh, my gosh. There're probably a number of factors, not the least of which is, was that as you know, I grew up in a family of all boys on both sides, which is not an easy place to be. And so I learned to do what I wanted to do, no matter who was trying to get in my way.

So I think it starts there. You know, the my, my interest in involvement in both environmental and racist, racial justice just comes from being born black in America and wanting to live healthy very healthily and thrive. I mean, that's just part of it. That's part of daily life.

The deciding to start a farm project when I was at that time working as an indie filmmaker is pretty much the quote you used. I was, I was cutting footage for a web series that chronicled the effects of the 2007 – 2008 global food crisis, where prices on cereal crops increased food prices worldwide and rapidly. It was all of a sudden it cost more.

And people living on lower and limited incomes were not able to buy food. And at that time, I was doing a project that involved people in six different cities who lived on low incomes. And so I asked them, back then they were flip cameras. Everybody now knows about our cell phones. They wear flip cameras that we had provided to the various groups and organizations and individuals we were working with and asked them to film what the impact of the crisis on them personally and their families.

And while doing that, which, you know, was heartbreaking to hear mothers

deciding not to eat so they could buy formula or Pampers. There are just so many things trading off one meal so that other family members could have the second meal of the day or the last meal of the day. In it, here in the United States.

And at the time, there was a lot of comedy around, you know, people going to big box stores and buying 100 pounds of flour and etc., that that comedy had nothing to really do with the people that I come from and was working with at that time. It was much more severe than that. And then I decided, hmm, let's tell this story globally.

How is it affecting people in countries that have limited financial resources? And I want to just underscore financial resources. There's so many resources in this world with value and to me, value that far exceeds that of monetary value that we get socialized into believing don't have value. And so anyway, in doing, pulling down footage, news footage, I came across some footage shot in Port-au-Prince where people were forced to eat my pie spiked with little pebbles and honey.

And I'm cutting this footage and sobbing and wondering what kind of world we lived in. And at that point, I decided notwithstanding the fact that I never, ever was able to grow a pea in a milk carton that was cut in half, the soil and never, ever did it grow, those peas, I decided we should be able to grow our own food even if we lived on concrete.

Courtney Cogburn:

Yeah.

Linda Goode Bryant:

Go on.

Courtney Cogburn:

And I was just going to say the word again. Audacity comes to mind when thinking about the work that you've engaged. So you're not a farmer. You could barely keep a pea, you know, you couldn't grow a pea. [crosstalk] What did you bring to being able to create this movement

Around urban farming, this ecosystem? What did you have that was useful for inspiring and moving this work forward?

Linda Goode Bryant:

You know, what did, what can I say? Someone else telling me no makes no sense. Why not? Just didn't work for me. So there's that. And there's the internal voice of no. And I'm going "No..." and I curse like a sailor. I'm going to try not to because we have an audience but yeah, no, yeah, I can do this, and I'll and I'll make it happen.

And like I said, I think that just comes from probably being tortured as a girl in a family of all boys. And I, but like, I'm not going to let you know, I'm not sweatin'

you, I'm going to do what I'm going to do. So that's, it definitely, that comes from there. But it also comes from being an artist.

A curiosity, immense curiosity. Hmm. What happens if you do this? What happens if you do that? And, you know. Yeah, I mean, all of the elements of being an artist, being curious, imagining, believing that you can take this, imagine reality and make it a tangible reality that other people can experience that comes from that. Yeah, it comes from a family friend, Mr. Dillard.

When I was like five, six, seven and played with his kids who had a garage that was always locked. And I was like, Can I see what's in the garage? And he would say, no. And then one day he said, Okay. And he opened it up and he had collected all the things that we discarded and brought them back to life.

And in that moment, I said, Ooh, I want to be an artist. To me, that was art and it was pure magic. So it just comes from that. There's no. No. Except the one you accept. Yeah. You just keep, put one foot in front of the other. Yeah. So, you know, my current work is about creating farms in communities throughout New York City that need fresh, organically grown food to live healthier lives and thrive and using the resources in each community.

We find ways to do that and to do that on small plots, growing high yields so that we can distribute food throughout the community. Um, and, and also to some market rate folks in the city who pay a little more. We make sure that it's income. We think, yeah. Method where it's income based, you pay with your basis.

So, so we do it in small ways, providing opportunities for people to develop farm skills. And we're about to launch plant-based prepared foods, to who want to develop culinary skills. And then we hire those who want to work with us. Yeah, there's so many ways we do it and you know, it is- making films is heaven for me.

So the idea that I was going to push the camera aside and the computer aside and start growing food was, was just, what are you doing? Uh, and I said, I'm going to do something that's more fulfilling and so in terms of artwork, like using the space and the materials and the activities of daily life in ways that make it possible for people to shape the conditions they need to live healthily and thrive.

Courtney Cogburn:

Nothing better than that. Yeah. Yeah. I think that some of the, the biggest and I hope what's clear in our introduction to you all is that we can read about the specifics of what you've done and what you've created and the amazing careers that you've built for yourselves and the amazing work that you do. But I hope what part of what we can walk away with this evening is also an understanding about who you are and what inspires you and what pushes you.

And again, what got you to this place? And I think sometimes the biggest innovations come from people who didn't start with a specific skill set in that area the way you imagine and do these, you know, engage in this complicated

work is inspired by being an artist. It's inspired by being a sister to a lot of boys and having to fight your way through things and not taking no for an answer.

And as we all are trying to move each other to this collective place of action, I think finding inspiration in what keeps you going and what has pushed you to this place is an important part, important part for us to understand as well. Peggy, I'd like to move to you. You and your team at WE ACT have been incredibly effective at transformative social change.

And just really mind blowing, everything from hybrid and electric buses in New York City, BPA in baby products and greenhouse gas and lead poisoning legislation and steering resources to environmental justice committees. My phrase that came to mind when learning more about your work is you get things done, and if it takes 10 years or five years or whatever it is, you find a way to get this work done.

I would love to hear you talk about how you think about advocacy. There's a part of our work that asks us to explain and convince people to care and pay attention. There's another part, and I might describe that as the polite knock on the door. Right? There's another part of advocacy work that requires kicking doors in and doing the work anyway, in spite of your unwillingness to engage in their stand.

Have you dealt with that dynamic? The polite knock on the door, the call in, as opposed to the kicking in and making people and pushing people to do things anyway? How do you approach that balance and in your work in moving such important legislation and policy forward in ways that really result in tangible change as it relates to environmental injustice?

Peggy Shepard:

Well, you know, I came to this work because I had worked in political campaigns around New York City and was able to see if the differences between communities, community benefits, community conditions based on the political clout and community engagement and civic engagement of those communities. And so when I had the opportunity to run for office I had a political mentor, Bill Lynch, another lot of people know who helped Jesse Jackson and helped get David Dinkins elected and he asked me if I wanted to be out front with my own ideas, if I wanted to remain behind the scenes promoting other people and it wasn't something I'd ever thought about.

And I decided I would take that risk. And so I ran as Democratic district leader in West Harlem with Chuck Sutton, who was the nephew of Percy Sutton. The idea was we were going to bring a new political consciousness to the west side of Harlem which most people forgot, because Harlem means, you know, central Harlem and the Apollo Theater.

But those of us over on the West Side, you know the Riverside Drive and Compton Avenue area. We kind of forgot. And so I became district leader. I was elected. And the first issue that volunteers came to me about was a sewage treatment plant that was opening up in the Hudson River. And at first we thought it was about jobs. And so Chuck and I went on WBSL radio, WLIR.

I don't know if you remember those days, and we were on radio and all these call-in radio shows, and we told people to go downtown and go to the Department of Environmental Protection and knock on the door and get a job. So we got about 30 people hired. Then the plant began operating and the air emissions were making people sick. So from almost day one, my organization has worked on air quality because those were really the exposures and impacts we were seeing.

So, you know, the air emissions from the sewage treatment plant that's supposed to be cleaning up the Hudson River. So it needs to be there so we're not going to close it down. So how do we get it to operate the way it should? And so that was our first big campaign. We were able to reach out to the Columbia School of Public Health, and I began working with two research centers there that do research on environmental health.

And over the years, that partnership has really contributed to, you know, the conversion of every single diesel bus in New York City. Now to hybrids and moving to electric. So this really the fact that I lived in the community, people came to me and said it's your turn to provide some leadership, help educate everyone around this issue.

And so for six long years under Mayor Koch, we organized with at least 100 people coming out to Riverside Drive every month. And until David Dinkins became borough president, you know, political momentum is so critical to all of these issues. Especially climate and environmental issues that require such costly infrastructure and technology. And so we were able to sue SUNY York City, get a settlement of our lawsuit for \$1,000,000 Environmental Benefits Fund.

And then we were often running, you know, one of our attorneys said, well, I guess you'll use the money to, you know, bring the Sierra Club up to environmental activities in Harlem. And we said, no, we're going to create our own little natural resources defense council uptown. And so, yeah, that was the start of WE ACT for Environmental Justice.

So it started out as West Harlem Environmental Action. And then we looked around and saw the buses. We housed over one third of the largest diesel bus fleet in the country in uptown neighborhoods. And uptown meaning East, West, Central highland, Washington Heights, Inwood. And so it was really understanding that there was a strong negative health exposure for me. And my neighbors.

And this doesn't have to happen. And how do we fix it? And so I became a community organizer and ever since we have used organizing and policy to work with the most affected residents of color and low-income by the Issue. And those are the voices that are rarely heard. And so as a result, not only our Harlem office, but we've opened up a federal policy office in Washington to raise the voices and perspectives of the environmental justice movement, because there's a national movement of hundreds of groups doing what I'm doing around the country.

And to really raise that perspective in the Congress and with our federal agencies. So that's sort of how I've come to this work action. For me, our theory of change is organizing the most affected to engage in community-based planning and environmental decision-making. I think that that's one just so inspiring. And, you know, as I entered this space myself, it's clear to me that many people just assume that communities of color in black communities have not historically been engaged in this space and aren't actively engaged in this fight.

Courtney Cogburn:

And it's the work that you all are doing. One sort of counters that in such significant ways. And it's important for us to highlight the work that has been happening and is continuing to happen. I would like for all of you if you could address, whoever wants to jump in and help us think about this question of environmental racism.

What is that as it relates to your work? What does that mean and why is it inextricable from thinking about the climate crisis and climate change? Why is environmental racism so important for us to address directly? Why is it so important to your work?

Peggy Shepard:

Well, I'll just start by saying that, you know, there's really a complex legacy of racism in this country, whether it's in housing discrimination.

You know, the prison complex, police brutality, whatever that sector is. Racism has permeated our entire society. So why is it surprising that in terms of environmental quality, that we're also going to be discriminated in terms of, you know, we're consumerist in this country, so we're the products of that consumerism going. And we now know from numbers of research that it's going to, number one, primarily communities of color.

And number two, low income. And so race is the primary predictor. And as a result, we understand that polluters often target communities. Why do we have something called Cancer Alley, for God's sake? And we're all comfortable with that term. We've used it for decades. How can that actually be occurring? And so why when you see one plant, one oil or gas refining plant, they suddenly, you're going to find another 10 or 15.

Why are there some small communities in the South that are opposed to 20 landfills and solid waste sites? Why? In urban communities, our highways going through our communities and our schools in parks, facing out on highways, where people are really impacted by air pollution. The fact that 80 percent of Latinos in this country live in a nontransit area for clean air standards and over 70 percent of African Americans tells you why more Black people were dying of Covid because, as the Harvard studies showed, folks living in the most air-polluted communities died and got sick.

Mortality and morbidity rates were higher than any other community. So environmental-based and basic is that intentional targeting of pollution in

communities of color because they're less powerful less informed about the issue. But it's also the lack of diversity and green groups in our green national mainstream groups, the lack of diversity in our government agencies, in philanthropy, in the commissions and boards that are deciding on utility costs and water costs.

So again, it's a continuum of racism, and we shouldn't be surprised that it also affects our communities, our health, and our education.

Courtney Cogburn:

Harriet, anything to add? I know that you have you know, you've written about this directly. Why is it so critical? Why is it such a release and and I think in your writing and work, you think you emphasize the significance of race just as Peggy has done. It's not always a story of socioeconomic status. Race is a significant factor here, specifically- you're muted.

Harriet Washington:

I know by now it's racism, not race, that creates the risk. And it's also a historical reality. The thing about systems is you don't need an actor of ill intent. Once you have set a system in motion that generates higher risk, higher death and lower resources for a group, it does its work without the need to implement any racist motivation or racist intent.

And yet, what happens when people of color have tried to sue polluters they've been told by the court all too frequently- they've been told by the court it's not enough to prove that you're disproportionately affected. You have to prove that the intent was to target people of color. That's absurd. That's an impossible, high barrier. We have to remember, it's a very American phenomenon, and it's a phenomenon that's been with us since the 17th century.

Segregation is to blame. Segregation is something that existed during enslavement. African Americans, most slaves, were kept in the worst parts of the land, the areas where animals were, where pathogens abounded, where there was very little protection from the elements, where there was what they called malarious climates, areas known to be unhealthy as far from the white encampments as possible.

And that didn't change in our country. We maintained segregation. And in speaking with Dr. David Williams a few years ago at Harvard, he re-emphasized that it's an illusion the segregation has ended. We still have segregation in this country. We don't have residential parity, in fact. If we wanted to have residential equity in this country, two-thirds of African Americans have to move somewhere else.

So segregation is still with us. That alone raises a risk. But there's more. The fact is that polluters are people who make money by not attending to the health effects of the pollutant they dispense. They make money by not allowing proper testing or conducting proper testing, by not safeguarding the health of people there, by not entertaining the vulnerability of people there.

And to preserve that, they find the course of least resistance are people of

color, people who are less likely to be able to go to the courts for the reason they said. And so we have this kind of conspiracy. You don't need to have evil actors to have a conspiracy. You have to have institutions. We'll do it quite well.

With joint interests and saving money and a lack of concern about the health of people of color. And that's what we've got. And then you compound that with the fact that our public health systems, which do a good job. I'm not saying they don't. They do do a good job, but they have serious flaws. Look at the EPA, the reins were handed by Donald Trump to someone who vowed to ruin the EPA.

That was his mission. Now, he was running it. The EPA quite efficiently rolled back a lot of the protections that we've been enjoying since the Nixon administration. And so the EPA is far from protecting the health and rights in it. And protecting Black people from exposure actually compounded that. They lowered the rates, the things that had been put into action during the Obama administration for protecting people that actually ended under Obama.

The mercury plant, emitting plants were being shut down. They're only four to go but the EPA decided, no, we're going to stop shutting these plants down. No, we're going to stop having surprise inspections. We're going to warn the polluters when government inspectors come. You can imagine how efficient that turns out to be. Right. So we have a, you know, we have a synergistic effect from our unwillingness to protect people of color.

The courts are not protecting them. EPA is not protecting them. Government groups that we are paying for through our taxes are not protecting us. And so people are being herded into sacrifice zones, people of color. And yet there's a reluctance to admit that that's what's happening. This language, the semantics, are really distorting what's happening. They are confusing a lot of people into believing that we're looking at a social-economic issue.

We are not. We're looking at a racial issue. There are all kinds of studies, there's no question about that, that clearly show. But the discussions talk about social economics. In fact, if you read the account of Flint, as I did, I went back years to find out what's the coverage look like early on. And until 2016, the people in Flint were being assaulted heavily with a variety of toxic chemicals, were described as people who are poor, low socioeconomic, only very late in the game was there an admission that, okay, we're going to Black people and people of color? And so the semantics are operating against us. Even today, a *New York Times* article. You know, I'm seeking to evade the fact that we're talking about a racial issue and the data. I can't stress it enough. It's not a matter of opinion. The data are very clear.

There's no ambiguity here. Studies are showing things like African Americans who earn \$50,000 a year, solidly middle class. Right. They're exposed to more toxicity than profoundly poor whites in Appalachia who only earn \$10,000 a year but have less environmental exposures. It's clearly race we're talking about. And it's for some people, for some white people, it's difficult to admit that.

You know, it sounds better to say that poor people are at risk than to say that

Black people are at risk and unfortunately, the question is, who are we more concerned about the feeling of shame experienced by white people or the deaths and disabilities of masses of people of color? We decide that as a country, what we want to do.

I think that the frames that we use to describe these issues are critical. The language that we use, right, as evil people and sort of mystical figures who are doing harm or concrete patterns, clear data, etc. that document the nature of these these harms. But let's pretend for a moment that we don't have to spend so much time convincing people that racism is real and that environmental racism is real.

And where we have very clearly the right of who's being most harmed by the climate crisis because it's not up for debate. And it's very clear, the data very clear. So let's pretend our audience tonight agrees with us and we're all on the same page. What do we do next? Because you all are not only engaged in this piece of advocacy that I talked about, of describing and convincing people, which is a part of being in this space.

Courtney Cogburn:

The other part is making choices to change and doing action. I think about the work that you're doing, Linda, that is an action. That is an act that is working against these very systems. What leverage do we need to poll not only as individuals? Right. You're working from a political perspective, legislation and policy where situating this work in a historical context.

Linda Goode Bryant:

We're building systems in communities to help promote access to healthy foods, etc.. What levers do you think we need to be pulling, sharing this assumption that racism is real environmental racism in particular, and that we have clear data to start steering our decision making and policies in this space? Linda, you pulled some specific levers. What do you think?

Why? Why? Why was that the lever you pulled and what do you think we need to be doing in response to some of this. I come from a self a- I come from a place of believing in self-determination and that we need to assert that, to be one strategy toward change. And we can do that in the places where we live.

Working collaboratively, collaborative learning together as a community. That, to me, I think is just one of many strategies, but a very critical one, because then people are able to experience a power that society denies. They're able to experience and build on that and I believe shape the conditions that are in their community. Obviously, you know, pollution and the state of our environment is not something that can be done just in the community.

But I think it's very key that community be self-determined in how it addresses it with resources in our-

Courtney Cogburn:

I agree. 100 percent. It's one. One critical piece of this puzzle. I think moving to other pieces of the puzzle. Peggy, you think about this right? In terms of you don't end pollution through self-determination. That's one piece of this. You need legislation. You need policy. What are some of the key levers that you think we need to be pulling? What kinds of things are you all focusing on as critical next steps?

Peggy Shepard:

Yeah, I don't want to jump to policy without really understanding that we got to create advocacy systems in communities of color. We have a lot of social service groups.

We don't have advocacy groups for the most part. Maybe there's a tenant. Maybe there's a tenant group, or maybe there used to be an AIDS group. But otherwise we don't really have these kinds of advocacy systems. So the lack of civic engagement and real grassroots political engagement, you know, not being subservient to some, you know, congressman who's in your district. But I mean, real political activism is really important to engage the people who are most affected. And, you know, when we hear that people of color in low income aren't that interested in these issues. Number one, people of color rate higher on surveys on climate than any other folks. And then secondly, our membership. 20 percent live in public housing.

And most, maybe, I say 80 percent are Latino and African American. And we're getting like 120 people Saturday morning every month on Zoom. And of course, you know, we don't all have access to them. And so that's what keeps me getting out of bed every day. I mean, that makes me feel relevant that we're trying to create a community that has some relevance and that we are supporting people to take those actions themselves.

So certainly that but we better do the coalition building. We've got to have the partnerships with science and academia because we need that technical expertise. We need the health data. It was the Columbia Children's Environmental Health Centers. A backpack air monitoring with pregnant women. And then stunting their children, the resulting children that gave us the ammunition to continue to hammer the Metropolitan Transit Authority for 18 years.

Let me repeat that. 18 years. But let it happen. But without that data and the fact that it was a community-based study of women in Harlem and the Bronx, it was very, very important. And so having those kinds of partners also gives, adds to not only our credibility as a community group, but academics, credibility as a sincere and committed partner.

And so that is an important lever to pull. And certainly you just can't do this without elected officials unfortunately. And I shouldn't say unfortunately to do, but you've got to know who are the people on the committee that is important to your, to your issue. You've got to have relationships with those people. You've got to be sponsoring legislation and, you know, getting sponsors and legislation and really pulling those policy levers.

But again, the thing we've got to understand is, you could do something in a year or it could take 18 years. And it's really about the political moment. And right now, with the Biden administration, we're hoping we have that moment. It seems to be closing a bit, but we still have a little optimism that something better might happen in terms of environmental and climate justice.

Courtney Cogburn:

Well, we'll have to see and I see those. That's that. The point is well taken, Peggy, about advocacy systems and grassroots civic and political engagement. And I see your point in Linda's point as being sort of inextricably linked. Right. That self-determination, that's community-driven activism and advocacy. And movement and problem-solving and solutions coming from the communities that are most affected by the harms of the climate crisis and creating systems and infrastructure that help them take care of themselves.

In addition to advocating and holding our politicians more accountable and engaging them in this work as well, it seems like that's critical, a critical piece of doing this. So of course, philanthropy is critical. We need money to do this. All of us here understand the racism and the bias that has taken place in philanthropy for so many years.

That's opening up and certainly a bit more lately, thanks to the Black Lives Matter and the whole host of, you know, terrible events we've had over the past year. George Floyd's death and murder and others. But again, every sector of our society is playing a role in this challenge. And without the resources, without the national, a national movement, no one group can do any of this alone.

You've got to really build a coalition as well. Yeah. There was a question from the audience.

Harriet Washington:

I would actually like to weigh in on this because I've written about the time of a very different take on it. And that is that advocacy is indeed important. In the last two chapters of *A Terrible Thing to Waste*, I devoted to community advocacy and things individuals can do to protect themselves.

But it's not enough. We can't rely upon individual action, and we, there's no need to, we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We have a government. We pay taxes like everybody else. We need to have a government that will devote resources to maintaining and protecting our health. And that can be done. I think that's the proper direction for more effort.

There has been a lot of advocacy attempted by communities, and some of them have worked long and hard. Many have gotten nowhere through no fault of their own when it comes to affecting the law. Look at in North Carolina, you know, six weeks of protests carried by the news and they still were not successful. And look at Anniston, Alabama.

They've won several large lawsuits, but in the end, they're still left with a

poisoned community, sick children. And now the clinic that was set up to help them has shut down. I think that it's very, very important to tap into governmental resources and make sure that we get our share of that. And that has to be done through political action, can be a variety of types of political action.

But it seems foolish to me to not do everything we can to force the government and force public health institutions to do what they should to protect their health like everybody else's. And I don't I don't see that as a different take. I see that as an elaboration on what was already being shown and talked about it. So I brought it up.

Courtney Cogburn:

Yeah. I don't think we were saying, I think we talked very explicitly about policy and legislation and civic engagement, which I think including holding governments and political figures accountable and also talking about the importance of work happening in communities. And I think we were explicitly stating right that these are some of the levers that can be pulled. So I don't think anyone was arguing that the community-based work and efforts are more important than other issues. And I think [crosstalk].

Harriet Washington:

I thought I would and also talk about the fact that if we're going to have the government undertake attention to this, it's important to make sure the government label, too, is what it is addressing as a population imbalance.

Courtney Cogburn:

You raise an important point earlier about the the challenge of the legal definition of racism and racial discrimination, that doesn't quite align with reality. And that's a, that's a big barrier. But I agree that all of these pieces are critical and that this is fundamentally a structural problem that requires structural solutions. But engaging communities and having, creating infrastructure within communities so that people can also organize themselves and figure out how they like to build their communities and solve these problems. What types of policies do they think would be most effective, etc., etc. is also a critical piece of this puzzle.

Harriet Washington:

Right. As I said, I wrote a chapter about that is so important but historically has not been very effective. Through no fault of the people, you know, letting it do it, they've been met with, you know, very severe, unfair and possibly illegal barriers to what they do. Yeah.

Courtney Cogburn:

One of the we're closing out and one of the audience members asked a question about what do we do? And we're talking a bit about some of that. And I think you've alluded in some ways to people thinking about their sphere of influence. Right. Related to the point around philanthropy, you don't need

to go start your own organization, maybe send money to Linda and Peggy and help them do the work that's already happening in other community-based organizations, but also right this question around political engagement and pulling those important levers, as well.

00:58:38:22 - 00:59:03:05

Unknown

Who have been important partners for you in getting this work done and really seeing forward movement in these areas? We don't have to get specific, we don't have a lot of time. But who are critical, key partners in helping us move forward in this space around environmental justice and environmental racism?

Harriet Washington:

Well, I think Earthjustice has been very helpful to communities that reached out to it. They are lawyers who focus on environmental issues and they help communities and prevent them from reinventing the wheel and also help them with paperwork that can be extremely intimidating and very difficult to navigate. You know, there have been groups I read about devote a lot of time. And in the end, were unsuccessful because they had sold out some the wrong paperwork even though they were directed to the wrong paperwork by the EPA, Earthjustice, the group of lawyers that will prevent things like that from happening and help people to focus in the best way. So I'm very happy about what they've been doing.

Peggy Shepard:

Yeah. Earthjustice is a wonderful organization. And, you know, they're really working to to be more diverse and to focus more on community-based challenges. I would also say law schools have been very helpful to us on the Columbia expansion into West Harlem. We had Fordham Law School working with this. They had an open house every week for community residents to come in so we can help them develop their testimony for the years of hearings that that happened.

And we created a community benefits agreement as a result. You know, Columbia School of Public Health, Mount Sinai have been very helpful in terms of research and data and support. You know, being able to have the experts come to the city council and testify not as an advocate, but as the fact, you know, to the facts that they know about. So in the course, other community-based organizations and the big mainstream groups, some of them at different times, can be excellent partners.

Linda Goode Bryant:

In the work with regards to growing food in New York City, the partners are it's a wide range of partners. And it starts obviously with the people living in the community. It includes the stakeholders in that community from or other stakeholders in the community, from medical providers to interestingly enough, developers who, you know, when we partner with the developer, we put them through hell to vet them in terms of their position on gentrification and etc. What type of housing the building and stuff and form partnerships

with them. So they provide rooftops for us to grow food or a ground space for us to grow food on it. It's the schools the public schools, we're in the public schools working providing opportunities for students to learn experientially, which is just not a method of learning in our school systems today.

Our public school systems actually go on and on and on and, and it really does take a village. It's not one but many, many, many. And the universities I will say that we have many partnerships with universities located here in New York City that are providing everything from professional faculty staff to students to help as we envision a better future.

Courtney Cogburn:

And I hope we can, we can continue to expand the university commitment to doing less harm and doing more good as it relates to this work. Thank you all for joining us. I know it's always a challenge to distill your vast experiences and thinking and work in this space. But I hope our audience has been inspired by you and the important work that you're doing.

This is difficult, challenging, complicated, long-game types of engagements. And thank you so much for taking a moment to help us learn more about your journeys and the work that you're doing. And thank you for your contributions to this fight. You are each invaluable to our growth and progress in these spaces. Thank you to The Shed, the Climate School, and the Ford Foundation for hosting.

These are a series and I look forward to our ongoing conversations in the series and beyond. Thank you, everyone. Thank you. Thank you. Good night.