



A residential street alongside a major oil refinery in Port Arthur, Texas, a city that is more than two-thirds African American and Latino. AP PHOTO/DAVID GOLDMAN

INTERVIEW

## Unequal Impact: The Deep Links Between Racism and Climate Change

*Activist Elizabeth Yeampierre has long focused on the connections between racial injustice and the environment and climate change. In the wake of George Floyd's killing and the outsized impact of Covid-19 on communities of color, she hopes people may finally be ready to listen.*

BY BETH GARDINER • JUNE 9, 2020

The killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have cast stark new light on the racism that remains deeply embedded in U.S. society. It is as present in matters of the environment as in other aspects of life: Both historical and present-day injustices have left people of color exposed to far greater environmental health hazards than whites.

Elizabeth Yeampierre has been an important voice on these issues for more than two decades. As co-chair of the [Climate Justice Alliance](#), she leads a coalition of more than 70 organizations focused on addressing racial and economic inequities together with climate change. In an interview with *Yale Environment 360*, Yeampierre draws a direct line from slavery and the rapacious exploitation of natural resources to current issues of environmental justice. “I think about people who got the worst food, the worst

health care, the worst treatment, and then when freed, were given lands that were eventually surrounded by things like petrochemical industries,” says Yeampierre.



Elizabeth Yeampierre

Yeampierre sees the fights against climate change and racial injustice as deeply intertwined, noting that the transition to a low-carbon future is connected to “workers’ rights, land use, [and] how people are treated,” and she criticizes the mainstream environmental movement, which she says was “built by people who cared about conservation, who cared about wildlife, who cared about trees and open space... but didn’t care about black people.”

**Yale Environment 360:** You’ve spoken about the big-picture idea that climate change and racial injustice share the same roots and have to be addressed together, and that there is no climate action that is not also about racial justice. Can you describe the links you see connecting these two issues?

**Elizabeth Yeampierre:** Climate change is the result of a legacy of extraction, of colonialism, of slavery. A lot of times when people talk about environmental justice they go back to the 1970s or ‘60s. But I think about the slave quarters. I think about people who got the worst food, the worst health care, the worst treatment, and then

when freed, were given lands that were eventually surrounded by things like petrochemical industries. The idea of killing black people or indigenous people, all of that has a long, long history that is centered on capitalism and the extraction of our land and our labor in this country.

For us, as part of the climate justice movement, to separate those things is impossible. The truth is that the climate justice movement, people of color, indigenous people, have always worked multi-dimensionally because we have to be able to fight on so many different planes.

When I first came into this work, I was fighting police brutality at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund. We were fighting for racial justice. We were in our 20s and this is how we started. It was only a few years after that I realized that if we couldn't breathe, we couldn't fight for justice and that's how I got into the environmental justice movement. For us, there is no distinction between one and the other.

In our communities, people are suffering from asthma and upper respiratory disease, and we've been fighting for the right to breathe for generations. It's ironic that those are the signs you're seeing in these protests – "I can't breathe." When the police are using chokeholds, literally people who suffer from a history of asthma and respiratory disease, their breath is taken away. When Eric Garner died [in 2014 from a New York City police officer's chokehold], and we heard he had asthma, the first thing we said in my house was, "This is an environmental justice issue."

The communities that are most impacted by Covid, or by pollution, it's not surprising that they're the ones that are going to be most impacted by extreme weather events. And it's not surprising that they're the ones that are targeted for racial violence. It's all the same communities, all over the United States. And you can't treat one part of the problem without the other, because it's so systemic.



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## With Hurricanes Maria and Katrina, the loss of lives came "out of a legacy of neglect and racism."

**e360:** Can you more explicitly draw the connection between climate change and the history of slavery and colonialism?

**Yeampierre:** With the arrival of slavery comes a repurposing of the land, chopping down of trees, disrupting water systems and other ecological systems that comes with supporting the effort to build a capitalist society and to provide resources for the privileged, using the bodies of black people to facilitate that.

The same thing in terms of the disruption and the stealing of indigenous land. There was a taking of land, not just for expansion, but to search for gold, to take down mountains and extract fossil fuels out of mountains. All of that is connected, and I

don't know how people don't see the connection between the extraction and how black and indigenous people suffered as a result of that and continue to suffer, because all of those decisions were made along that historical continuum, all those decisions also came with Jim Crow. They came with literally doing everything necessary to control and squash black people from having any kind of power.

You need to understand the economics. If you understand that, then you know that climate change is the child of all that destruction, of all of that extraction, of all of those decisions that were made and how those ended up, not just in terms of our freedom and taking away freedom from black people, but hurting us along the way.

It's all related. You can't say that with Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans the loss of lives was simply because there was an extreme weather event. The loss of life comes out of a legacy of neglect and racism. And that's evident even in the rebuilding. It's really interesting to see what happens to the land after people have been displaced, how land speculation and land grabs and investments are made in communities that, when there were black people living there, had endured not having the things people need to have livable good lives.

These things, to me, are connected. It's comfortable for people to separate them, because remember that the environmental movement, the conservation movement, a lot of those institutions were built by people who cared about conservation, who cared about wildlife, who cared about trees and open space and wanted those privileges while also living in the city, but didn't care about black people. There is a long history of racism in those movements.



Demonstrators march in Sunset Park, Brooklyn last September in support of community-led climate justice initiatives. ERIK MCGREGOR/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

**e360:** So how do you have a fight for climate action that is intertwined with a fight for racial justice? What are the steps, the policies, that we should be thinking about

looking forward?

**Yeampierre:** With the Green New Deal, for example, we said that it wasn't a Green New Deal unless it was centered on frontline solutions and on ensuring that frontline leadership would be able to move resources to their communities to deal with things like infrastructure and food security. When that happens, we'll be able to move the dial much more efficiently. In New York, for example, we passed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, which is aggressive legislation that looks at how you move resources to frontline communities and how you invest in those communities.

Nationally, we need to be looking at stopping pipelines – reducing carbon but also reducing other pollutants. We need to start focusing on regenerative economies, creating community cooperatives and different kinds of economic systems that make it possible for people to thrive economically while at the same time taking us off the grid.

In every community there are different things people are doing, everything from putting solar in public housing to community-owned solar cooperatives. This is not the '60s or the '70s or the '80s where we follow one iconic leader. This is a time where we need to have numerous people really taking on the charge of directing something that's big and complex.

**e360:** Can you talk a little bit about the idea of a just transition to a low-carbon future and how that dovetails with anti-racism efforts?

**Yeampierre:** A just transition is a process that moves us away from a fossil fuel economy to local livable economies, to regenerative economies. Those are different economies of scale that include not just renewable energy but healthy food and all of the things that people need in order to thrive. The word justice here is important because for a long time people would talk about sustainability, that you could have sustainability without justice, and the climate movement focused on reducing carbon but didn't really care about other pollutants.

“Climate activists talk about moving at a big, grand scale, and we talk about moving at a local scale.”

A just transition looks at the process of how we get there, and so it looks at not just the outcomes, which is something that the environmentalists look at, but it looks at the process – workers' rights, land use, how people are treated, whether the process of creating materials that take us to a carbon-neutral environment is toxic and whether it affects the host community where it's being built. It looks at all those different kinds of things.

I can give you one example in New York City. We have been advocates of bringing in offshore wind. One of the things that we learned is that in order for that to happen, the

pieces have to come from Europe and be assembled in New York and they would be coming in these huge container ships. Now these ships operate by diesel, and so what happens is they park themselves on the waterfront of an environmental justice community and the climate solution becomes an environmental justice problem. The climate solution is we reduce carbon, but the environmental justice problem is we dump tons of nitrogen oxides and sulfur oxides and PM2.5 [particles] into the lungs of the host community.

We need the climate solution, but then we need to talk about how we electrify the industrial waterfront and how these ships can plug in so they're not burning diesel. While we're doing that, we also need to look at how we create the market instead of following the market – wind turbines that are built in the United States so we don't have to bring the parts in from Europe.

These are the kinds of things that we think about when we're thinking about a just transition. A climate activist will be like, "Okay, we need offshore wind" – right, that's it. But a climate justice activist will be like, "Okay, let's look at it a little closer and let's figure out what the process looks like and how we can engage in remediation to make sure we are not only reducing carbon but we're also reducing co-pollutants, and let's make sure that the people that are hired are hired locally." So there are all of these other pieces that are involved in a just transition. Climate activists talk about moving at a big, grand scale, and we talk about moving at a local scale, and then replicating those efforts.

**e360:** Racial justice would presumably have to be at the heart of that.

**Yeampierre:** It has to be at the center. For example, in Sunset Park [Brooklyn, where Yeampierre runs the Latino community group UPROSE], we just launched the first community-owned solar cooperative in the state. Okay, we want renewable energy. We need to be able to prioritize the people that are going to be most impacted. Low-income communities. People of color. It has to matter to white folks because when our communities succeed and get what they need, everyone benefits from that.



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**“These [environmental groups] have to get out of their silos and out of their dated thinking.”**

With the cooperative, the community actually owns the utility, owns the energy source. People will be able to access renewable energy, at a reduced cost, be hired locally to build it – and have ownership. So it's really exciting. We're hoping this model will birth more projects like this.

Now, we're reaching out to small businesses. They're struggling because of how Covid-19 has affected the economy. When we started this project, we were thinking it would provide resilience to disruptions of the grid and other systems from extreme

weather events. We hadn't anticipated the disruption would be something like Covid. But these models become a real benefit in moments like this where you don't know where your next paycheck is coming from. You have access to energy that is both renewable – which means it has a health benefit – and also benefits your pocketbook.

**e360:** With the pandemic and its racially disparate impact, and then the killing of George Floyd and the protests that have followed, we're at this moment where these longstanding racial disparities and racism are on vivid display. What would you hope the climate movement and the environmental justice movement take away from this moment and apply going forward?

**Yeampierre:** I think that this is a moment for them to start thinking internally and thinking about some of the challenges that they're having. I think it's a moment for introspection and a moment to start thinking about how they contribute to a system that makes a police officer think it's okay to put his knee on somebody's neck and kill them, or a woman to call the police on an African-American man who was bird-watching in the park.

These institutions [environmental groups] have to get out of their silos and out of their dated thinking, and really need to look to organizations like the Climate Justice Alliance and Movement Generation and all of the organizations that we work with. There are so many people who have been working with each other now for years and have literally put out tons of information that there's no need to reinvent the wheel. It's all there.

There has to be a fundamental change in the culture of these institutions. If they were thinking strategically, they would be saying, "Hey, let me see. I'm in New York. Who's doing this and how can we support them?" We've had groups of white young people who have contacted us and have said to us, "How can we support you? How can we best use our resources and our skills to support the work that you're doing?" And, we've been like, "You know what? That is the right question. Let's do this together."



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*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

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**Beth Gardiner** is a journalist and the author of *Choked: Life and Breath in the Age of Air Pollution* (University of Chicago Press). Her work has appeared in publications including the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *National Geographic* and *Smithsonian*, and she is a former longtime Associated Press reporter. **MORE** →

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