

Real Talk Diversity Series – Environmental Justice Panel Discussion

Panel Title: Real Talk Diversity Series – Environmental Justice Panel Discussion

Panelists:

Remi Harrington

- Community Farms Project Coordinator at Kalamazoo Valley Community College's Food Innovation Center

Shannon Sykes-Nehring

- Regional Coordinator for We the People
- Sitting Kalamazoo City Commissioner
- Community Activist & Organizer
- Homeschool Teacher

Zhaawanong Nimkii Kwew aka Linda Cypret-Kilbourne

- Co-founder of Michigan Coalition Against Racism (MCARSM)
- Founder & Chairperson of the Native American Student Community Organization
- Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership Fellow
- Community Activist & Organizer
- Mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother

Ivan Martinez

- Western Michigan University (WMU) Student
- Immigrant Rights Activist

Moderator: Laura Donders – Internship Coordinator, WMU Office for Sustainability

Abstract: As a part of the 2017-2018 Real Talk Diversity Series – a sequence of activities and events aimed at engaging campus community members on topics of identity, difference, and cross-cultural understanding – the WMU Office of Diversity & Inclusion and Office for Sustainability collaborated to host an Environmental Justice panel discussion. Bringing together prominent activists and organizers in the Kalamazoo community, this discussion was aimed at building an understanding of justice in terms of race, class, and how those identity markers relate to the occupation of land. The Environmental Justice movement brings into question systemic issues that put historically marginalized and low-income communities at an elevated risk of experiencing environmental hazards (i.e. pollution, food insecurity, airborne and

waterborne illnesses, etc.). Panelists discussed aspects within and beyond the environmental justice movement as it intersects issues of social justice and environmental sustainability.

Full Discussion Audio: [Environmental Justice Talk](#)

Writeup: The panel began with some introductory information on the Environmental Justice movement, tracing its evolution through the lasting effects of [colonization and slavery of black and brown peoples](#). From there I, as the moderator, also gave background on defining the term “Environmental Justice” itself. Although Environmental Justice issues have been pursued long before these efforts were given a name, Environmental Justice as a social movement emerged at the intersection of environmentalism and social justice in the late Civil Rights era. However, popular environmental entities that have adopted Environmental Justice as a part of their own doctrine have often neglected some of these crucial nuances to the context and nature of the movement. Considering this, I introduced the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) definition of the term – *the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies* – while explaining that this is not a universally representative definition. Although this definition contains some largely agreeable ideals of the Environmental Justice movement it does not encompass some key issues that the movement seeks to combat and therein leaves some room for negligence and limited success. It also erases the identities and devalues the experiences of those facing Environmental Justice concerns every day. A large part of the panel conversation stemmed from this introductory information and ways in which the core components of these issues are systemically glossed over or swept under the rug in pursuit of other prominent issues that affect more privileged populations.

Environmental Justice issues are complex and manifest in different ways for different communities especially regarding the disproportionate impact of environmental injustices [on low-income communities of color](#).

This is a pattern that has occurred in the U.S. for decades. It takes forms such as higher levels of proximity to toxic waste facilities, food insecurity, pollution and different health risks similar to these. Environmental hazards occur in low-income communities of color, rather than predominantly affluent white communities.

The Environmental Justice movement grew as a response to these injustices. So, the lack of attention to these crucial factors in the EPA definition, and other prominent environmental organizations’ approaches to Environmental Justice, leaves much to be desired. Conversations and action toward Environmental Justice issues in general have often received [limited prolonged support](#) outside of the communities of color directly affected by them. Additionally,

the future of any progress that has been made in the movement thus far in the U.S. has become [particularly threatened under the current political administration](#). This panel discussion was organized to combat this lack of attention and misrepresentation, clarify what Environmental Justice activism actually means, and set the course for those interested in joining such efforts in the future.

Following this synopsis of contextual information and individual introductions, the first discussion question was presented to the panelists:

How do you define Environmental Justice and where do you see a need for it?

In response, the entire panel agreed on the basic assertion that Environmental Justice should include the effort to ensure basic needs – clean air, clean water, healthy food, and suitable living spaces – for everyone regardless of how they identify or where they live. But, the whole panel being comprised of activists of color or indigenous descent, they each had their own perspective on how and why these conditions have not been met for their own communities. From [discrimination toward undocumented Latinx community members](#) in Flint water crisis relief efforts to repeated federal treaty violations inflicted on indigenous communities as in [Standing Rock](#) last year, panelists brought forth numerous events exemplifying social systems used to further oppress communities of color even under the guise of some sort of “environmental aid” or “economic advancement.” Panelists described the need to heal from [systemic poverty](#) in the Environmental Justice movement as it affects people of color and determines where they can live and how they navigate social systems. It defines their relationship to the *environment* in which they live. Without a critical analysis of the most prominent environmental injustices (i.e. the Flint Water Crisis, the DAPL in Standing Rock, Post Hurricane Katrina & Hurricane Maria relief etc.), the historical traumas and oppression that allowed these events to occur, and the social hierarchies entrenched with racism and classism upheld by powerful entities that neglect to center the needs of those most marginalized, Environmental Justice will not be afforded in full.

Each panelist brought forth examples of socially or economically powerful entities, whether it be government, the Land Bank, corporations, or well-intentioned homogenously white environmental organizations, exerting control over people of color during specific times of heightened suffering while highlighting the fact that these are not isolated incidents. They are the culmination of a history of these atrocities, and while Environmental Justice is acknowledged somewhat by environmental organizations today, it has taken a lot of suffering and fighting by affected communities of color for these issues to even be mentioned as a side note in environmental circles. Discussion brought forth the fact that Environmental Justice has to involve a critique of the environmental movement itself as it is a [white, male dominated field](#), which seems counterintuitive to the fact that populations of people of color are most affected by the issues these movements purport to address. While this homogeneity may not seem problematic at face value, the reason the environmental movement is structured this way is no accident. It is a consequence of [deeply entrenched racism](#) in the very framework of the

U.S. environmental movement which is a direct result of colonization and slavery. Panelists spoke on the fact that because the violent social, political, and economic domination of people of color – white supremacy – forms the foundation of this country's relationship to its land, environmental stewardship is an inherently exclusionary pursuit of a better future. They elaborated further to explain that while beginning to address issues of diversity and Environmental Justice within environmental institutions is a step in the right direction, it is the bare minimum as far as true transformative justice is concerned.

In response to the second discussion question,

“In your opinion, should Environmental Justice issues be centered more in prominent social and environmental movements and why?”

Panel members outlined an urgent necessity to center the needs of the most marginalized across movements. They described the need for [a decolonized approach](#) to healing the human relationship to the environment in the U.S. and all colonized nations. They explained that this requires breaking down the social hierarchies at play not only in the environmental movement but in all institutional facets of the capitalist, globalist world in which we live. Namely, they spoke on the responsibilities we each must face to recognize and dismantle white supremacy and unjust class dynamics in the institutions and organizations we are a part of. Decolonization means deconstructing the violent [stereotype that people of color don't care about the environment](#), when they are so often the people whose backs colonized nations have built their entire survivability upon. It also means transforming social, environmental, and economic structures to serve populations who have historically been denied agency over their relationship to the land. This requires asking ourselves and those with the most power and influence over social, environmental, and economic institutions who their efforts are benefitting. And if they are not primarily benefitting the most marginalized, sustainability and quality of life for all will not be ensured in the future. Decolonization requires us first and foremost to detract attention and resources away from the desires and priorities of the beneficiaries of white supremacy and settler colonialism and honor the needs and rights of enslaved and colonized peoples.

This is cause for drastic change in the way environmental institutions in particular work and operate. If environmental efforts are concerned with improving quality of life for all organisms without addressing issues of race and class they are actively neglecting two of the most important components of the human experience. If race and class are not accounted for as they inform quality of life for different groups of people, these institutions will continue to value those at the top of social hierarchies and leave the rest to bear the disproportionate burdens of this world. Panelists called on these organizations to breach their realms of comfortability and adopt an antiracist framework going into the future. They called for environmental and governmental institutions to not only reference or incorporate the experiences of frontline communities, but [actually listen and bear witness to their suffering](#) and make it a priority to aid in healing from it. Inclusion strategies have proved inadequate because on top of the systemic

discrimination that has excluded them from these institutions, they have to bear the weight of the effects of climate change here and now. The effects of climate change are not far off, distant consequences for people of color and low-income communities as they seem for so many of us privileged folk. When we are able to truly value these experiences and translate that into organized action that supports their needs first, that is when we will make progress toward ensuring a healthy relationship with the environment for all people. That goes for all of us with power, privilege, and agency over our relationship with the environment as well as institutions. Panelists highlighted a need for the consistent practice of asking ourselves *“Who are the people that are currently suffering from a lack of clean, non-toxic environmental conditions TODAY and what positions do I occupy/resources do I have access to in order to help change that?”* This is not a matter of “inserting” voices of color and the voices of poor people into the environmental movement or asking permission for their experiences to be considered. It is not a matter of “lifting up” or “making space” for these voices because that deploys a level of paternalistic colonial ranking where the privileged remain the gatekeepers of the environment. Rather than “making space” for voices of color, those in power need to take account of the space and resources they take up in excess compared to others and rethink the way they navigate the world in that context. We need to begin initiating our environmental conversations with prioritizing the needs of those experiencing the effects of climate change here and now instead of constantly portraying environmental concerns through the lens of the privileged as threats that will only affect people in the future.

Panelists spoke on the fact that we need to support each other in these structural changes and build coalitions amongst the siloed conversations we have in our communities on these topics. We need to work together to hold institutional leaders accountable to a new set of ideals that value the human experience of those most affected by environmental hazards. In response to the final discussion question –

“What would you say to audience members wanting to get more involved in Environmental Justice efforts or movements pursuing related issues?”

– the panel brought forth examples of where this work is already happening as well as some of the barriers to reaching Environmental Justice goals. One of the biggest barriers is that assuring the wellbeing of marginalized communities is a responsibility many powerful entities are not willing to take on. Accounting for the historical context of Environmental Justice issues and how that history has caused disproportionate harm to certain communities takes time and effort. It requires environmental institutions to confront the ways the dominant white hegemony benefit from the oppression of communities of color and actively dismantling the structures that allow that discrimination to occur. It requires identifying the ways they participate in systemic discrimination and holding themselves accountable to the communities most affected by Environmental Justice issues in the future. Although this is indeed a complex and intentional process, those within the most powerful environmental organizations have the privilege of position and capital to strongly influence these patterns that have saddled poor communities of

color with most of the environmental degradation they seek to combat. Panelists asserted that because of this privilege, these organizations have a responsibility to build an analysis within their institution and in their work to prioritize people over profit through a commitment to antiracism and anti-oppression.

An overall message to the audience was that community members who occupy positions of influence and privilege have the power to make this work happen. White community members, financially stable community members, and educated community members have a certain amount of agency over their influence on the environment in a way that those most affected by environmental hazards do not. They have opportunities to bring these issues forth to their elected officials, challenge the institutions they are a part of to prioritize Environmental Justice, and identify and support people of color already doing Environmental Justice work. The panelists themselves listed off numerous examples of organizations and individuals already engaged in this work. They shed light on [Afrocentric pedagogy in schools in Detroit](#) teaching youth to take ownership of their land and invest in their city. They mentioned urban agriculture initiatives such as [Southwest Detroit Grows](#) and community resilience projects like the [Sweetwater Foundation](#) in Chicago. Panelists explained the value of investing your time and energy into local food systems that expand the boundaries of food access and work toward land reclamation for communities of color. One panelist described indigenous communities' efforts to [re-rice North American rivers](#) and fight for [food sovereignty](#) through the revival of native food cultures. On a larger scale they spoke on the need for the American environmental movement to learn from the example of these community of color centered efforts and to adopt principles of social justice into their work. These are the first steps in truly decolonizing the human relationship to the environment in a way that supports the rights and agency of all people. This panel discussion acted as a sort of observance for conceptualizing how Environmental Justice affects and requires effort from each and every one of us.