

In These Times, Season 2 | Environmental Justice and Race

Alex Schein:

Last fall, we launched our podcast in these times with an examination of COVID-19 and its far reaching impacts. This season, we're focusing on Black lives and exploring the nation's complex history with race. We'll consider some challenging questions, who controls the narrative about the US? How far have we moved beyond our history of enslavement and Jim Crow? Are we at a moment of reckoning? In these times, knowledge is more important than ever.

Speaker 2:

As the number of cases and deaths continues to mount a clearer picture is forming of the disproportionate toll COVID-19 is having on Black people and communities of color. In New York City, Blacks and Hispanics are dying at roughly twice the rate of Whites. In Chicago, Blacks are dying at nearly three times the rate of Whites and in New Mexico Native Americans account for more than half of all confirmed cases, despite being only 11% of the population.

Alex Schein:

When COVID-19 delivered a disproportionate blow to communities of color in the form of higher rates of serious complications and death, environmental hazards, like air pollution that are all too frequently present in these communities was one of the contributing factors cited by experts.

Speaker 3:

In fact, people living in the most polluted areas are indeed 15% more likely to die from coronavirus than those living in places where pollution is only slightly lower.

Alex Schein:

The idea that race is a factor in determining who has access to resources that allow a community to thrive is not so much news as it is part of the American story. It's a chapter that some have said began when native tribes from the East of the Mississippi were driven along the trail of tears to arid lands of the West. Today, there is a wider recognition that environmental racism is one of the many forms of systematic racism. And increasingly there is recognition that environmental justice and climate change are interconnected problems. In this episode, we'll hear perspectives from a professor of English, a College senior, and a sociologist on what it means to live under a system of environmental racism and how to move forward towards environmental justice. Welcome to episode five, Environmental Justice and Race.

Earlier this season we heard from experts who discussed the problem of residential segregation and how mechanisms like red lining and urban renewal, the State sponsored raising and redevelopment of supposedly blinded neighborhoods were used to define African-American spaces.

Today we hear from Herman Beavers about how these spaces reflect environmental racism as seen through the lens of literature. A poet and a Julie Beren Platt and Marc E. Platt President's Distinguished Professor of English and Africana Studies. Dr. Beavers teaches courses on Southern modernism, 20th century African-American poetry and the literature's of jazz. He's currently at work on an essay that considers how Black bodies negotiate urban space in the context of modernist literature.

Herman Beavers:

What I'm getting back to working on is an essay for a volume being produced by Cambridge on the culture of jazz. And I've been asked to write about jazz fiction, but the way that I want to approach that is to think about one, the fact that we go back to the 1920s in a novel like *The Great Gatsby*. *The Great Gatsby* which is produced in what is often known as the jazz age, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel that is very much about race. We don't really think of it that way, but it's very much about race. It's very much about the anxieties that Black bodies produce when you start talking about people negotiating urban space. And so one of the things that I'm really interested in is what I'm calling the epidemiology of modernism, which is to say that in the 1920s just as people are saying in the present moment, in the 2020s, that racism is a public health issue, in the 1920s, when there were lynchings happening in the South at the rate sometimes of one per day, racism was a public health issue then also.

And so I'm interested in the epidemiology of modernism because jazz as a modernist phenomenon comes out of the cultural intersections that take place in places like Harlem and places like Manhattan. And so the idea of White people getting in taxis in downtown Manhattan and going up to Harlem to enjoy jazz at the Cotton Club, where Black people are not allowed to be patrons. When you think about the stress that, that puts on Black people, the idea that there are places that you can't go that White people can go and enjoy what is essentially your culture, a cultural practice that came out of your cultural lineage. One of the things that the epidemiology of modernism is in many ways about, is the ways that the dominant culture appropriates the culture in this case of African-Americans and makes it their own.

Alex Schein:

In the fall of 2019, Professor Beavers delivered a micro talk on campus as part of a series of 1.5 Minute Climate Lectures, where he considers the inequitable social outcomes associated with this geography of race. In that talk, he discussed two examples from literature where the lives of African-American characters are in some way at the mercy of the climate.

Herman Beavers:

One of the things that I thought about was, could I find instances where climate was impactful on Black people's lives? And the examples that I used, one was from Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, and the other was from a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem that he wrote in the late 19th century called *A Warm Day in Winter*. And both the novel and the poem are about unseasonable days in the winter time. So the Dunbar poem is about what happens on a plantation when there's a spring thaw and all of a sudden the weather turns warm. And what Dunbar describes is a moment where the slaves are freed from their usual labors in the fields to having leisure time, because the master of the plantation and the mistress are engaged in their own forms of leisure. And so all of a sudden the slaves get to be human beings.

And this is a poem that I've taught many times and what I always tell students is what does it mean that Black people's humanity is pegged to an anomalous instance in climate, that you get to be a human being in the winter time when winter is acting like spring or winter is acting like summer. And as I thought about that, it really speaks to the manner in which Black communities have often been victims of contingent on their relationship to the climate. So the 20th century, the late 20th century example of that, obviously is Hurricane Katrina.

Alex Schein:

Professor Beavers observes that in Philadelphia, the luxury of shade trees is a sign of how environmental justice is often denied to Black communities. But he also notes that achieving environmental justice require a break from old patterns of gentrification, where neighborhoods get cleaner and greener while displacing the people of color who live in them.

Herman Beavers:

Well, one of the things that I thought about was, in West Philadelphia, Black communities have a lot less in the way of canopy cover, shade than White communities do. In part because the trees are torn down, in part because nobody thinks that Black people care about living in green spaces. There are a variety of reasons, but when you think about that, when you think about the ways in which Black communities are on average five to 10° hotter in the middle of the summer than White community, because they don't have shade, that speaks to the manner in which all of this talk about climate justice is really pegged and racialized toward White communities. So one of the things I talk about at the end of my lecture was these instances where gentrification is happening and people are moving back into urban spaces and creating these green housing circumstances so that they get to be the heroic figures in the climate change narrative. And the Black people who are fighting against gentrification and not wanting to be displaced, they get portrayed as the villains.

And so what my lecture ends with is Martin Luther King's admonition. We can either live together as brothers and sisters, or we can perish together as fools. Well, the climate change moment strikes me as being a moment where we really need to think about that. Because historically White people have served themselves and Black people got served with what the drags were or they were completely left out. So if you look at the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, people just abandoned that community and that community, we shouldn't be surprised at what happened in the Ninth Ward, it was already a community under duress. And so I have a former student who's in New Orleans and he keeps me up to date on what's going on, the Ninth Ward is being gentrified. So all of those people that lived there who might've wanted to come back, they can't return to the Ninth Ward because it's slowly being gentrified. And so White people are moving in, all of these bars and boutiques and coffee shops are popping up and stores that people who are working class, working poor folk can't afford to patronize.

So when you think about it, gentrification and climate change go hand in hand. And I wanted to make sure in my lecture that people understood that, that we can't make the climate change narrative a narrative that is not sensitive to racial difference and racial injustice.

Lucy:

I'm Lucy, and here in Philly, you can smell climate change, exploding sewers, flooding sinkholes, and a rapidly multiplying mosquito population show how my city's infrastructure will collapse under increased rainfall and extreme heat.

Grace:

I'm Grace from South Africa, last year I tried to wash my hands in Cape Town, but all the taps produced was a mist. Cape Town cannot keep up with severe drought and intense population.

Alex Schein:

Those were the voices of students sharing their contribution to the, my climate story project, an ongoing effort to capture how individuals are experiencing climate change in their own lives. This project is an initiative of the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities, or PPEH, a program that involves students in a variety of interactive and community projects to encourage thoughtful engagement on environmental challenges. We spoke with one of the program students Tsemone Ogbemi, about her ideas on environmental justice, as they have evolved through her work with PPEH and Bethany Wiggin the program's founder and an associate professor of dramatic languages and literatures.

Tsemone Ogbemi:

So my name is Tsemone Ogbemi and I'm a senior now and majoring in English. I think environmental justice is the way in which environmental harm is multiplied based on who you are basically, inequalities that already exist in a certain society. Communities of color are way more likely to be fence line communities, in other words, to be living in places where they're at risk of being subject to these kinds of toxic emissions and as a result, getting sick. And there's all this evidence related to it in Philadelphia, the asthma rate being much higher than the national rate in the city. So that's a huge environmental justice issue that I think of in Philadelphia.

Alex Schein:

As Tsemone sees it, climate change is a big problem that is difficult for people to grasp, and it doesn't lend itself to one big solution, but she's become interested in what she describes as tiny solutions that may not change the world, but can address the needs of specific communities. She launched a newsletter called Imagination Machine to talk about these solutions.

Tsemone Ogbemi:

So much of what we see around climate in the news or whatever kind of media we're consuming, gives us an emotional reaction that's really a determining factor, I guess, in how we decide to engage with climate, or if we decide to engage with climate at all. And my thinking around that was really a big reason why I decided to start this newsletter called Imagination Machine while we were in, beyond the lab, because I was finding out that there were people who were doing projects around climate that were more science-related or that were more art-related or that were more activism related, that didn't have an approach of doom and disaster necessarily, but that also didn't have an approach of, okay, here's the solution. Here's how we fix everything. And here is the answer.

They were projects that were just rooted in being able to sit with the reality of climate change in different ways. How difficult that is emotionally or what opportunities it creates for creativity or on the scientific sides, what are some tiny, small, social or local solutions that we can think of that are not going to save the world, but are going to address the needs of the specific community and different things like that. So I started Imagination Machine to share those projects because I felt like people were reading that at least as I was reading it, it was like, I don't feel any more, I have to put this intense pressure on myself to know what the solution is or to be working on the solution because climate change isn't that kind of problem.

Alex Schein:

Tsemone believes that imagination is the key to finding solutions for climate change and moving towards environmental justice. And she finds science fiction to be an inspiration for the process of imagining what a safer world might look like.

Tsemone Ogbemi:

I mean, I definitely think that there's just a strong link between fiction or making art in general and activism because the two kinds of work have imagination in common. Someone actually brought to my attention recently because the science fiction writer, Octavia Butler is a huge, I think, inspiration for me and a lot of people when thinking about imagining safer futures and safer worlds, there's this collection of stories edited by Adrienne Marie Brown and Walidah Imarisha, that's called *Octavia's Brood*, that's working in Octavia Butler's legacy of trying to imagine these alternative expensive, safer futures for people. And Walidah Imarisha's introduction to this collection, there's a line where they say all organizing is science fiction, which is so amazing to me. The idea being that whenever we try and organize for a world that's better, that's more just than the one we live in now, we're reaching towards something that doesn't exist yet.

And we're having to imagine it and use all the tools that we have at our disposal to bring it into being. And how that's very similar to what you're doing when you are writing a science fiction story, it's bringing an alternative world into being. And so I would say that that kind of writing or that kind of art making is really important to me for that reason. There's an important step that comes when you're trying to move toward, I don't know, the future or move toward justice or move toward anything like that. And that's imagining, imagining what it would be like to live in a different way.

Alex Schein:

The search for a radically different approach to the interconnected problems of climate change and environmental justice in the US has moved from imagination to active policy debate in the past year with the Green New Deal. We spoke with Daniel Aldana Cohen, a sociologist who led research for the Green New Deal for Public Housing Act that was introduced into Congress by representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. He shared with us his sense of urgency surrounding climate change.

Daniel Aldana Cohen:

When I really got to understand climate science in my early twenties, I was really emotionally to take on board just how serious this problem was. I mean, fundamentally if the climate scientists are right, then we are not just moving very gradually down a slope towards a slightly worse situation, but we're skidding down a mountain side with the danger of falling off of a cliff.

Alex Schein:

While climate change is a matter of science, Professor Cohen says that its impacts on individuals and communities are connected to the same factors that drive so many forms of injustice, disparities in wealth, political influence and opportunity.

Daniel Aldana Cohen:

Climate change comes really from a combination of deforestation and basically the modern economy powered by fossil fuels, including fertilizers, which are produced usually using fossil fuels. So then how

does this relate to inequality? Well, in a few ways that are really important, first of all, to a wildly disproportionate extent, the richest people cause the largest share of emissions simply because wealthier people consume more. Another piece of it is that the people who are at least wealthy are disproportionately exposed to the harms of climate change. This takes many forms, but I think the easiest, most intuitive way to think about it is that people with less money and less political power are simply less able to shield themselves from the consequences of climate change. So for example, in the United States, about one third of families can't afford their utility bills. They really struggle to make their utility payments or they get their utilities disconnected.

This has a major racial justice or injustice component. In Philadelphia, about half of Black families can't afford their utility bills. And what that then means is that when you have things like heat waves, communities of color, low-income communities, really struggle to do things as simple as keeping the AC on or even have access to air conditioning. And this is one of the main reasons why communities of color suffer disproportionately in terms of health and even death rates during extreme weather events, like heat waves. Folks with less money and fewer resources just can't handle the impacts of climate change as much. And then there's a second set of inequalities we could think about which have to do with where, even just where people are located. So we talked a bit before about environmental injustice, the fact that communities of color are disproportionately located near polluting facilities. And we talked about the fact that wealthier people consume more than communities of color.

So there's a study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States journal and it's called PNAS, that quantifies who is getting the pollution that results from the consumption of others. And it finds it on average non-Hispanic Whites, so Whites who are not of Latino origin, they experience 17% less air pollution than is caused by their consumption. And on the contrary, Blacks and Latino Americans on average bear a pollution burden, 56% and 63% excess exposure respectively, relative to what they consume. So in other words, in the United States, White families are consuming more, that is causing more pollution, but that pollution is being experienced physically in Black and Brown communities disproportionately rather than in White communities. And I bring up those statistics just to point out that the inequality and climate change is all interconnected that you have on the one hand, more privileged and more affluent people whose consumption and way of life is causing greenhouse gas emissions and causing pollution.

And then you have other communities, disproportionately communities of color and low-income communities, that are bearing the brunt of that increased pollution, in the form of climate impacts, in the form of direct physical pollution and in the form of lesser ability to withstand the shocks from extreme weather events. So there is really no disentangling, the problem of climate change from the problem of inequality. And I, and many others working on this are showing advocates of policies that would reduce the consumption of the affluent, they would tax the affluent more, to pay for clean energy transition. And they would make disproportionate investments in communities of color and other communities that are suffering so much from pollution to lift them up and to ensure that the communities that have suffered the most from pollution so far, has suffered the most from climate change so far, will benefit first and most from a new era of green investment.

Alex Schein:

With the consumption by affluent White communities, driving pollution and climate change that is disproportionately harmful to poor communities of color, Professor Cohen says that it's impossible to have a conversation about climate that doesn't recognize environmental racism.

Daniel Aldana Cohen:

Fundamentally, environmental inequalities that communities of color experience are inextricably connected to economic inequalities that communities of color are experiencing. And those are inextricably connected to inequalities in political power. Communities of color are simply having less capability in American politics right now to get their interests met because of unequal power relations. And so the point there is to say that sometimes folks want to confine a discussion of environmental racism or environmental inequality to simply a discussion of the environment, or simply a discussion of climate change. But I think we need a much more holistic vision to understand that there's ultimately no real separation between environmental racism and racism in general, between climate inequality and inequality overall.

Alex Schein:

Professor Coleman's work extends beyond research and includes advocacy for change. He says his experiences as a researcher gave him a more nuanced understanding of the challenges people face in meeting their basic needs and how any solutions geared towards sustainability must address these daily challenges.

Daniel Aldana Cohen:

So I've been involved in a fair amount of policy work in the last two or three years. And everything that I'm doing in terms of advocating for a Green New Deal advocating for Green New Deal for Housing you name, is really informed by the experience of almost 10 years of ethnographic research on housing movements and housing inequalities and the politics of climate change in San Paulo, in Brazil and also in New York City. And what I took away from that experience was that when you have people who are fighting to get a roof over their head, who are fighting so that they're able to make rent every month, fighting to make sure that they are not forced to live two or three hours each way from their job, in horrible congestion.

When you have those groups fighting just basically for the right to live well in a city and for the right to decent affordable housing, those struggles are virtually every single time, totally consistent with the best possible version of a low-carbon city. Which is a city where people live close to where they work with full access to public transit, with short commutes. And in affordable housing, that is sustainable, that is energy efficient, that is healthy.

Alex Schein:

The proposals that are part of the Green New Deal for Public Housing Act reflect what Professor Cohen describes as approaching the problem from the inside out, delivering on environmental justice, by starting first with a focus on people's everyday lives.

Daniel Aldana Cohen:

No one that I've talked to in New York Public Housing. I mean, they want a climate change emergency to end, they want to live in a stable climate, but they wake up in the morning and they are living in apartments in appalling conditions of public neglect. And what I've learned from doing research with people who are in housing movements and just in situations where people have very bad housing. Is I think I've learned something about communicating and getting feedback from people in those situations on climate policy. I've come understand that in New York Public Housing, the conversation doesn't start with, how many carbon emissions are coming out of the building, it starts with, what is the state of disrepair in your apartment? How could we make it better? Do you even have access to air conditioning? Which in New York Public Housing, very often the answer is no.

And we build out from there and say, "Well, what if all of your appliances were electric, energy efficient, cutting edge, electric induction stoves, no toxic gas in your kitchen?" People say, "It sounds good." And then people will say, "Well, you have to change the law though, because right now the government is only buying the lowest cost, worst quality appliances because of procurement rules. And you have gas stoves exploding in people's kitchens three years after they were bought because they're such low quality." And so that tells us, oh, okay. If we want to do policy that is intersectional, the tackles housing, racial injustice, tackles climate at the same time, then we have to adjust the way that we invest in our public housing. We have to do it in a slightly different way. We have to look around the world for examples of how to do it better.

So long story short, after going along on this long discussion of housing and climate policy, I think I've learned from my engagement with housing communities, with social movements in Brazil and in the United States, a way to tackle climate change from the inside out. From building out from the ordinary everyday problems that communities of color and working class communities are facing. And from those problems, find ways to link those to the low carbon agenda. And then you end up with a beautifully rounded, intersectional climate justice policy approach, which is yielding really important benefits in other countries around the world. And I think that with sufficient investment from the public sector in the United States, we could be seeing really beautiful results in terms of low carbon green housing. And then we could see something analogous with transportation, with energy, with agriculture, et cetera. There's a huge amount of possibility here. And it really does come from connecting the climate agenda to the needs and desires of ordinary people. And in particular people of color who suffer the most from disinvestment in this country so far.

Alex Schein:

Understanding the social roots of environmental racism and injustice, leads towards policy solutions that are not always immediately connected to environmental activism but Professor Cohen argues, they are critical to change.

Daniel Aldana Cohen:

To further environmental justice, I think we really need to do two things. One is to make sure that we get the right outcomes, that means that nobody is breathing in toxic air. That nobody's life is shortened because of asthma, nobody's life is shortened because of contamination from toxins, whether that's mercury or PFAs or asbestos or lead you name it. We have schools in Philadelphia right now where before the pandemic students were wearing masks because of the air quality, because of the scandalous neglect of those facilities. So to deliver environmental justice, we have to have our eyes on the

outcomes. We have to make sure that we know where we're going and that we get there and that we can measure our progress along the way.

The second thing that we need to do to deliver environmental justice is we have to intervene on the fundamental causes of environmental injustice. And that means that I think we have to go and look at the communities that are suffering the most and ask, why are they suffering so much? And if one of the reasons they're suffering is that there is a lack of income, a lack of political capability, then those are the things that we need public policy to provide. Unionizing workers and communities of color will provide those communities more money, more investment, ultimately, that will help them to fight for their own interests and ultimately have more control over what happens when investments land in their communities. Providing something like universal health care would make life cheaper, substantially cheaper for a large number of working class people of color in this country. And that would free them up, give them more time and more resources to go out and to have control over what goes on in their community. Investing in childcare support, investing in better education, you name it.

And so my point there is that again, when we see these things holistically, the problem is it looks harder to solve. We understand that environmental injustice is not just a question about smokestacks, but it's really a question about wealth and income inequality, which has a huge racial dimension in the United States.

Alex Schein:

In assessing the prospects of achieving environmental justice in the foreseeable future, Professor Cohen sees the current moment as a time of formidable challenge, but also of great opportunity.

Daniel Aldana Cohen:

I think this is in some ways, a very depressing time to be looking at politics and to see how bad the climate emergency is and to see how violent the racism in this country is. But on the flip side, I see a huge number of movements who are fighting to write a new future, that they're making a huge amount of political headway, making some economic headway. And I think we have a chance to see in the years ahead, some really dramatic changes in communities in this country and countries around the world. And I think we should all be so lucky to be a part of that change.

Alex Schein:

This concludes episode five, Environmental Justice and Race. Join us in two weeks for our sixth episode Repair. We'll hear from a graduating senior who research connections between Penn, slavery and the medical industry and a doctoral candidate in philosophy who specializes in moral philosophy, bioethics and philosophy of race.

In These Times is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to professors, Herman Beavers and Daniel Aldana Cohen and Tsemone Ogbemi. I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening.

To hear the full 1.5 Minute Climate Lectures mentioned in this episode, visit the series page on the Penn Arts and Sciences website, or click the link in this episode's description.

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