**Interrogating White Normativity for Environmental Justice**  
Religious Educators Call for Action

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Abstract. *White normativity and white privilege form the roots of the environmental crisis as well as those of systemic racism. Domination and devaluation of land and bodies are enmeshed oppressions manifested in racial and cultural patterns of environmental exploitation. Three religious education scholars/practitioners who have been working on environmental issues are interviewed, asking how each addresses environmental racism and racialized capitalism. It concludes with audience discussion of strategic actions to create brave spaces that make a difference for environmental justice.*

Moving beyond white normativity requires dismantling white privilege, and confronting racism is a critical focus of that urgent need for action. At the same time, recent scholarship and activism is also highlighting a need for brave spaces to illumine the role white normativity has played in global environmental devastation. It would be a grave mistake to limit the culpability of white-centrism to a single strand of enmeshed oppressions, as crucial as our mandate is to demolish racism. Therefore, it behooves the Religious Education Association to address our environmental crisis as another siren’s call for creating brave spaces.

Environmental racism, the unequal impacts of environmental pollution due to racial inequality, is one way of looking at how cultural patterns of environmental exploitation correlate with exploitation of vulnerable humans. White empire building through colonization that appropriates land for economic advantage regardless of the impact on disempowered people manifests the presumption of white normativity and privilege. As William Barber of the Poor People’s Campaign, ecowomanist Melanie Harris, Christian ethicist Willis Jenkins, and many others have argued, “the evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, and ecological devastation…are enmeshed evils that know no boundaries.”¹

This collaborative session is an interview of three scholars and practitioners who are doing important work in the area of environmental justice.

Kendyl Crawley Crawford directs Interfaith Power & Light for Virginia, a nonprofit environmental advocacy organization. She is at the forefront of congregational organizing efforts taking place in Virginia around the issue of climate change and toxic pollution.

Faith Harris is a Womanist theo-ethicist, practical theologian, grassroots organizer, and faith leader living out her call in the public sphere. She teaches theology, creation care, and grassroots organizing at Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology. She also advocates through numerous

¹ [https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org](https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org), May 12, 2018
organizations for all Virginians to have access to clean air, drinking water, access to healthy food, and an unpolluted natural environment.

For an example of Faith’s and Kendyl’s grassroots work on environmental justice, see the March 2018 article in Grist on their protest of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

Sally Naylor Johnston is an instructor at Yale Divinity School who has made presentations at REA and elsewhere on ecological models of religious education. Active in local churches and Presbyteries, her teaching introduces congregations to issues of environmental justice.

The three speakers will give a short precis of their work-to-date and then respond to questions posed by Lucinda Huffaker and those attending to explore how the lens of white normativity changes or illumines their individual work around the ecological crisis. Audience discussion will conclude with brainstorming and individual commitment to concrete action to dismantle the interlocking oppressions of environmental exploitation and exploitation of vulnerable humans.

The aim of the proposed dialogue is to create a brave space to press the cutting edge of our understanding of white normativity, with its insidious and tenacious impact on a systemic web of injustice. We aim to challenge ourselves and our field to identify places of our complicity in white normativity as it degrades our environment, to resist obfuscation of how privilege shapes human use of the environment, and to engender creative responses on the part of religious educators to foster care for the earth in our faith communities.

Bibliography
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