

C O M M E N T

REFLECTIONS ON DR. LEE'S TURNING PARTICIPATION INTO POWER

by LaTricea Adams

LaTricea Adams is Co-Founder and CEO of Black Millennials 4 Flint.

Turning *Participation Into Power: A Water Justice Case Study*¹ presents a rich, conceptual framework with the Constituent Empowerment Model (CE Model) that mirrors the foundational work of Dr. Robert Bullard's Environmental Justice Framework² in its very community-centered perspective. The article also integrates the Jemez Principles³ as a practical approach to community oversight and accountability. Using Baltimore as a case study added much value to the topic, as the state of Maryland is known for more progressive legislation regarding environment; however, Prof. Jaime Lee spares no criticism of the need for more constituent-centered and community-led accountability and oversight of the implementation and ongoing life cycle of policy in practice.

Professor Lee calls out the recurrence of “performative inclusion” where decisionmakers attempt to appease the community by creating an *invisible table* or in the words of Dr. Lee, “cosmetic processes” where community voice is heard only for the purposes of show and not for substantive contributions to problem solving. Dr. Lee successfully dismantles the unspoken mantra “process over people” and flips it on its head where the people, the community, iden-

tify the problem, create the process, and utilize their democratic power to inform the actions of government agencies and policymakers alike. The CE Model also demonstrates the power of intersectional environmentalism,⁴ as it amplifies the need for equity in accessing power by addressing upfront the challenges often faced by communities experiencing economic distress and communities of color that are often met with racial bias and discrimination. Essentially, the CE Model completely refutes any and all forms of classism and racial bigotry as a prerequisite to engaging in the community-led process. The individuals who are most disproportionately impacted are respected as the true experts as they always should be.

Turning Participation Into Power: A Water Justice Case Study should be deemed as a civic engagement tool that is versatile beyond an environmental context, as its success can be replicated to best serve other topics of public policy at the local, state, and even federal levels. As the current federal administration is laser-focused on environmental justice, including the Justice40 initiative⁵ for example, this article is very timely.

1. Jaime Alison Lee, *Turning Participation Into Power: A Water Justice Case Study*, 28 GEO. MASON L. REV. 1003 (2022).
2. Robert D. Bullard, (2008) *Environmental Justice in the 21st Century*, 49 PHYLON 151 (2001), https://uwosh.edu/sirt/wp-content/uploads/sites/86/2017/08/Bullard_Environmental-Justice-in-the-21st-Century.pdf.
3. S.W. Network for Env't. and Econ. Just., *Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing* (1996) Jemez, New Mexico, <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf>.

4. LEAH THOMAS, *THE INTERSECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTALIST: HOW TO DISMANTLE SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION TO PROTECT PEOPLE + PLANET* (2022).
5. U.S. White House. (2021) *The Path to Achieving Justice40*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2021/07/20/the-path-to-achieving-justice40/>.