

Symposium – “Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters”: The Role of Spirituality in African American Environmental Activism in the US South

Introduction:

Divinely Inspired Spaces and African American Environmentalism

Priscilla McCutcheon
Department of Geography
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY, USA
priscilla.mccutcheon@uky.edu

Ellen Kohl
Environmental Studies
St. Mary’s College of Maryland
St. Mary’s City, MD, USA
eakohl@smcm.edu

In April 2018, 12 women convened at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky at an Antipode Foundation-funded workshop titled ““Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters’: The Role of Spirituality in African American Environmental Activism in the US South”

(<https://racesprituallityenv.wixsite.com/conference>).¹ The purpose of the workshop was to critically engage with the connections between African Americans, spirituality/religion, and environmental activism by bringing together environmental activist, faith leaders and scholars to create a community where we could deeply engage with these important issues. Spirituality has always played a vital role in the radical activism of African Americans in the US South;

however, scholarship on environmental movements led by people of color often discounts spirituality as a central motivating factor. This lack of engagement with spirituality is even more pronounced when spiritual expressions are in the context of organized religion. At the workshop, we sought to address four critical questions: 1) How does spirituality influence African American involvement in environmental activism?; 2) What specific spiritual expressions do we see in African American environmentalism?; 3) How does African Americans' spiritual engagement with the environment help us to expand our definition of spirituality more broadly?; and 4) How does an engagement with spirituality expand our understanding of what activism is?

Questions of spirituality are particularly interesting to us in the context of the relationship between humans and the natural world. We define spirituality as the feeling that something else is out there beyond the materiality of the land. bell hooks (2011) talks about the connection between spirituality and nature as an "oppositional sensibility". She says that under a system of white supremacy (i.e. "this world") there is something bigger than white people's oppression over Black people, indicating that the cosmos operates in a powerful way, beyond the material world. Carolyn Finney (2014) argues that a sense of fear or haunting may exist in places of "natural" beauty, places where African Americans have historically been terrorized. Finney uses the forest as an example of a space where beautiful trees can also be accompanied by a feeling of terror in the context of horrific acts of violence like lynching that occurred in these spaces. The feeling that something else could be out there and the emotions that this invokes may not always be positive.

Spirituality and discussions of spirituality are deeply personal. We encouraged workshop participants to write pieces that were as true to themselves and their research participants as possible. For this to happen, we understood that storytelling, a political act, would be a vital part of the process. By storytelling we do not mean fictional narratives meant to entertain; instead, we refer to the narratives and testimonials that are used to understand the world. We wanted workshop participants to connect their individual experiences to broader systems of oppression. Stories are cathartic; they examine the past to move beyond oppression and terror and to learn



from the past (hooks 1989). At the same time, they can also provide hope and a vision for the future (Ross 2008). Since storytelling helps us make sense of the world, it is one way that people make sense of the environment and their relationship to it (Tagore 2009). Stories are tools to create a collective consciousness and inspire sociopolitical action, which is what we hoped to do in the space of the conference (Fosl 2008).

To begin the conference, we organized a public forum where a dynamic group of African American academics, activists, and faith-based leaders spoke about the role of faith in environmental activism. These included Ms. Cassia Herron, who was at that time was the associate director of the Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research at the University of Louisville. Herron is an urban planner and powerful activist in Louisville who is currently working to bring a community-run grocery store to Louisville's predominantly Black West End. Alongside her was Dr. Brandon McCormack, an Assistant Professor in Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville, who spoke about the ideology and theology that supported African American environmentalism, and how so much of it is tied to the thought and work of Black women. Beside him was Rev. Cassandra Henderson, a youth pastor at Breakthrough Fellowship in Atlanta, Georgia and a former associate pastor at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. She also spoke to the spiritual underpinnings of African American environmentalism that cannot be ignored. And last was Dr. Ihsan Bagby, an imam from Lexington, Kentucky and an Associate Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Kentucky, who discussed the importance of environmentalism to African American Islamic thought. This powerful forum provided a backdrop for what would be a transformative 48 hours.

There was something about that space that was created during the conference that remains difficult for us to make sense of and to articulate. Unbeknownst to us, all of the women present were searching for something different in a workshop space, and they brought their whole selves into the space. For us, it was important to find a space that was comfortable and safe, as many in the room were accustomed to traditional conference spaces that created a stiff and competitive environment where people cared more about bragging about their scholarship

and less about working through problems and forging solutions to create authentic change. Because of this, we reserved a conference room space at the Waterfront Development Corporation, a beautiful glassed room that overlooks the Ohio River. This was not accidental, as we understood the comfort and deep symbolism of water in African American spirituality and religiosity as demonstrated through Negro spirituals like “Wade in the Water”. However, due to an unforeseen flood in Louisville, the space became unavailable at the last minute and we moved our gathering to a conference room in the Pan-African Studies Department at the University of Louisville. We were inspired by this space, the welcoming faculty in it, and the powerful representations of Blackness that surrounded us.

The symposium that follows is based on six of the pieces that workshop participants submitted in preparation for the conference. The first piece included in the intervention is by Reverend Cassandra Henderson, who spoke about the term justice and how it is spiritually divine and connected to environmental activism. While we initially did not put too much thought into participants reading their pieces, we realized through Reverend Henderson’s sermon that there was something in hearing the words through individual voices. Her piece evoked awe, silence, and deep meditation among everyone in the room. We are not all spiritually or religiously inclined, but we felt something from hearing her piece that is perhaps unexplainable, but important. After Rev. Henderson, the first group of presenters read their papers. Garret Grady-Lovelace and Priscilla McCutcheon discuss the agrarian landscape from two distinct approaches. Grady-Lovelace dives theoretically into the politics of scale, its connection and often limitations to understanding spiritual motivations in agrarian movements. She challenges us to use these debates as a tool to consider spirituality and religion, not only as an object of study, but as a source of theory and analysis. McCutcheon writes specifically about a spiritual rejuvenation and awakening that happened during her fieldwork at Beulah Land Farms. She goes to a vulnerable place to interrogate silence on the landscape, how silence is significant to understanding environmentalism, and why it should not be overlooked in fieldwork. Next, Ellen Kohl writes about the importance of considering spirituality in environmental justice research, especially

among research participants with explicitly spiritual practices. She also questions why it is so easy to write spirituality out of critical research. Emma DeVries writes a nuanced intervention on the importance of considering the role of spirituality and religion in both the creation of environmental injustices and as an emancipatory tool. She explores how “theopolitical work” can fight back against environmental injustices. And finally, Reverend Marjorie Dele beautifully discusses communion and balance in nature, and the importance of us reconnecting with our own spirits in justice work.

Essentially, this symposium is a call (and for many a challenge) to take seriously the seen and unseen in environmental activism. As a group, we were intentionally vulnerable. This allowed some of us not just to make a scholarly intervention, but a personal intervention by taking stock of our subjectivities in our research process and how many of them were based on discomfort and outright denial of spiritual motivations. For others of us, we tapped into what we were never shy about and brought theology, spirituality, and religiosity to the group in meaningful and powerful ways. And then there were those of us who tapped into spiritual places that we did not even realize that we were suppressing and carefully connected it to our research. Our hope is that in reading this, everyone takes stock of how they can consider spirituality and religion in environmental and social justice research, but more importantly, what are our personal and scholarly roadblocks against doing so.

Endnote

1. We were awarded an Antipode Foundation International Workshop Award in 2017:
<https://antipodefoundation.org/international-workshop-awards/201617-recipients/iwas-1617-kohl/>

References

- Finney C (2014) *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press
- Fosl C (2008) Annie Braden, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rigoberta Menchu: Using personal narrative to build activist movements. In R Solinger, M Fox and K Irani (eds) *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims* (pp217-226). New York: Routledge
- hooks b (1989) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press
- hooks b (2011) earthbound: on solid ground. In A H Deming and L E Savoy (eds) *Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity and the Natural World* (pp184-187). Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions
- Ross L J (2008) Storytelling in SisterSong and the Voices of Feminism Project. In R Solinger, M Fox, K Irani (eds) *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims* (pp65-71). New York: Routledge
- Tagore P (2009) *The Shapes of Silence: Writing by Women of Colour and the Politics of Testimony*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press