



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

Scales of Reckoning and Reference

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Invocations of spiritual dimensions articulate and actualize alternative scales of reference. These exceed the nation-state, and even the local-global nested hierarchy: worlds beyond the worldwide. McCutcheon (2013) describes the Nation of Islam’s work to acquire and cultivate a farm for community food security, but also to forge a “promised land” of paradise on earth. The spiritual drive for agrarian justice movements encompasses religious theology as well as indigenous cosmology and worldviews, such as Andean cosmovision. Andean cosmological principles such as *Pachamama* and *sumaq kawsay* have permeated ecological and land justice mobilizations across Ecuador (Acosta 2012), Peru (De la Cadena 2015; Graddy 2013; Walshe and Argumedo 2016), and Bolivia. Across these examples, communities are positing scales of reference that deliberately transgress dominant geopolitical units of nation-states or global institutions. They are invoking and recentering, for instance, ancestral dimensions as reference points – as scales, of reckoning.

As a scholar raised and schooled in whiteness – and working to extricate from and dismantle layers of white supremacy and white blindness – these are not my stories to tell. But as someone who personally identifies as religious/spiritual, and who academically entered critical

social science from religious studies disciplines, perhaps I am in a position to help make room for these dialogues and exchanges. Anthropologists are grappling with how to dialogue with theologians (Meneses et al. 2014), even as geographers trace the “unstable signifier” of “religion” (Ivakhiv 2006) and the very categories of sacred (Gergan 2015). Indigenous studies scholars question the utility of the term “sacred” (Keller 2014). Acknowledging the pivotal, unignorable role of spiritual worldview in agrarian justice movements is the first step in preventing further sidelining of it as unintellectual, apolitical, ideological, a-ecological, or peripheral. Furthermore, acknowledging the ways racism intersects with secularism discloses how axes of bias compound and confound.

Political geographers have turned to study postsecularism amidst resurgences of religiosity (Kong 2010). These studies attempt to situate Habermas’ (2008) argument for studying the role of religion in the public sphere, by attending more closely to the lived realities of people navigating the complexities of religious politics (Gökarıksel 2009). Tse (2014: 202) calls on geographers to “reveal spaces, places, and networks as constituted by *grounded theologies*, performative practices of place-making informed by understandings of the transcendent”. Yet, if post-secularist scholarship stagnates as liberal tolerance of multiculturalist pluralism, “we will unfortunately miss out on the more radical potential that inheres in our current conjuncture to break down the ideological wall between religion and secularism ... discourses of tolerance may do more to maintain structures of exclusion and oppression than to advance the more radical project of rethinking the secular/religious dichotomy” (Gökarıksel and Secor 2015: 23). More recently Doshi (2018), following the leads of Walker (1983) and hooks (2010), engages the liberationist potential of anti-racist Buddhism, once decolonized from New Age whiteness.

How to make room for analysis that engages spiritual influence not just as object of study, but as source of theory and analysis in its own right? In particular, what are ways geographic theory can learn from ontologies that view the physical as carrying metaphysical significance? Back to scale.

Within scale debates, critical geographers have launched an important critique of dominant conceptions of scalar hierarchies, wherein the meek and passive *local* stays nested within the graded layers of governmental scales, which all fall under the overarching, all-powerful *global*. A horizontal ontology has been proposed – in lieu of scale-talk – so as to allow for egalitarian spatial imaginaries. Yet, such networked flatness does not exactly describe the dynamics of agrarian politics.

The term itself derives its hierarchical connotations from its Latin predecessor *scala*, meaning “ladder”. The medieval cosmo-geographical *Scala Naturae*, or “Great Chain of Being”, attempted to order the universe according to degree of divine animation – its hierarchy (from Greek *hiera* “sacred,” *archo* “rule”) ranking closeness to the divine. This etymology contextualizes the much-maligned vestiges of hierarchical ordering within problematic modern conceptions of scale, as well as to note that in this ancient scalar configuration, the value of “higher” consisted of its property of nearness (to the Source, “Prime Mover”). Whereas present-day paradigmatic scalar frameworks endow the power of the most powerful scale it can conceive of – the “global economy” – with its properties of distance, the original Western European scalar theory ranked power according to the property of proximity. Granted, this power consisted of intimacy with the transcendent. Contemporary currents of geography retain secularism, but vestigial religious connotations remain, and have been exploited to reify the world market. Many geography theorists have noted that the “global scale” of economy and economic governance accrues its power from such attributes as being universal, comprehensive, total; in short, the omnipotence, omniscience, and inevitability previously and elsewhere ascribed to the “Prime Mover” or divine realm is credited to the “scale of reality” (Taylor 1982): the global economy.

Over the past decade, feminist spatial thinkers took these reforms one step further; launching a deathblow critique of any scalar hierarchies that nestled meek, quaint local economies below the virile, mobile global market – each scale gendered and racialized accordingly. Marston et al. (2005:416) expunge the whole concept of scale, and in its place “offer a different ontology, one that so flattens scale as to render the concept unnecessary”. Any

modifications of the original hierarchical notions of scale still resort to hierarchical languages of moving “upward” and “downward”, such concepts remain axiomatic and unhelpful; hence “the need to expose and denaturalize scale’s discursive power” (Marston et al. 2005:420). Here, Marston and colleagues quote Haraway (1991:195) – “Only the god-trick is forbidden” – implying that to conceive of the body as “down” a scale would mean an out-of-body experience, or a divine objectivity. To relegate the home to a lower rung on the ladder of power denies its primary influence and eventual primacy, particularly with regards to economy and ecology.

A flat ontology, it was argued, would at least allow for egalitarian spatial imaginaries. Yet, such networked flatness needs revisiting. First, scalar invocations continue to drive political-ecological advocacy in complex and efficacious ways, thereby meriting scholarly analysis of/on their own terms. Scales are not ontologically fixed. But they refer to ontologies. They are the *means* of referring to ontologies. Yet, flatness neither accounts for the vast diversity nor the nature of scalar invocations. Rather, scalar invocations draw upon conceptions of justice and accountability, which are necessarily hierarchical, with differing levels accounting for diverse leverage capacity. Hierarchical scalar references do not necessarily mean – do not correlate with – hierarchical social structures. Egalitarian networks can leverage one scale of reference over another. Scalar invocations involve explicit value judgments, alternative ethical frameworks, in short: a re-prioritization of certain scales of reference over others. Flatness gives way to a rugged terrain of higher and lesser scales of normative reckoning – some even oriented toward axes of cosmological or religious principles. But can verticality reach equity?

What if “scales” exist as concurrent, dialogic scales of reference, each in first person plural, each articulated around different axes of power and significance? What if scales of reference describe and proscribe scales of reckoning, each with their own measure of accounting, of collective and mutual responsibility? And what if these alternative scales of reference and reckoning counter, survive, and transcend the dehumanizations of racism and racialized land dispossession? What does such a spatial imaginary do, and how can it foster understanding of the influence of invocations of cosmological and spiritual traditions on agrarian justice politics?

This intervention addresses the secularist limits of otherwise rich and generative critical social theory, particularly in the discipline of Geography. Even critical scholarship, constrained by a myopic fixation on political economy's historical materialism, can sideline and delegitimize the supra-material dimensions of realms deemed "spiritual". How are scholars making room for engagement with spiritual, theological, and cosmological perspectives in their analyses of power, resistance, and liberation? Modernist secularism may be responding to aggressiveness of colonialist, evangelical, or extremist religiosity, but what if it carries its own coloniality or fundamentalism? The essay links the secularist impasse with the politics-of-scale ontology impasse in Human Geography. Among the many geographic lessons of cosmological and spiritual influences on agrarian movements is the leveraging of alternative scales of reference. And the wielding of these alternative scales of reference as alternative scales of reckoning, of accountability and justice.

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