

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

**Writing Religion Out:
Faith and Environmental Justice in Critical Geographies**

Ellen Kohl

Environmental Studies

St. Mary’s College of Maryland

St. Mary’s City, MD, USA

eakohl@smcm.edu

Every meeting of the Newtown Florist Club (NFC) opens with a prayer. The women, sitting around a dark mahogany table, bow their heads and most close their eyes. One woman raises to lead the prayer. She recounts the blessings of those in the room and asks God for strength and guidance as they work towards their tasks. The other women interject “amens” and “umhuhs” as the prayer unfolds. As the prayer comes to a close everyone sits in quiet meditation before getting down to the business of the day, fighting the injustices plaguing the Newtown community in Gainesville, Georgia.

For many, if not all, of the women of the NFC, their Christian belief inspires and sustains their activism. Ms. Faye Bush, who was executive director of the NFC until January 2015, evoked her Christian beliefs when asked why she continued her work with the NFC:

I think it's a mission, um, it has to be the work of the Lord for me to still be a part of it. 'Cause I believe in trying to help people and doing what I can do for 'em ... I think, uh, sometimes it's not what you choose, it's what God chose you to do.

Their spiritual beliefs are integrated into their motivation, tactics, and aims. Their faith is intertwined in their everyday resistance.

Their everyday resistance is intertwined with the story of the Newtown community. A story written onto the landscape. You experience the physical landscape with all your senses. To enter the neighborhood, you pass the silos and billowing smoke stacks of Cargill's vast industrial complex. The smells of fermenting soybeans from Cargill, grain from Ralston Purina, and chicken refuse from Fieldale Farms mix together and overwhelm your sense of smell when the wind is right, or, rather, wrong. You might hear and feel the pounding and crushing of scrap metal being torn apart, broken down, and loaded into trucks for transport at the junkyard; the droning of industrial processing at Cargill and Ralston Purina; or the deep rumbling and screeching whistle of a train running along the CSX railroad line. You also pass three churches. The sounds, sights, tastes, and smells reflect what the Newtown community has come to understand – a landscape dominated by industrial carnage and faith in a renewed future.

In my academic writing, the environment weighs heavy, but I have not fully engaged with the role of spirituality and religion in everyday resistance. At times, I give it a passing mention to contextualize the women of the NFC's activism. In other instances, I use it as a vignette to animate their experiences. In this essay, I explore the inconsistency between my commitment to community-based intersectional research and the exclusion of spirituality. I grapple with the processes that make writing religion and spirituality out a "logical" choice. I explore how "kitchen-table" reflexivity can serve as an antidote (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015). Finally, I conclude with thoughts on how writing out religion limits my academic work and how collaborations between academics, spiritual leaders, and activists can bridge this gap.

My own spirituality is complicated – I was raised by a secular Jew and a lapsed Irish Catholic. Growing up, our spiritual practices were based in culture and food. While we never followed a specific religious doctrine, we were taught to respect all religions, to believe we were part of something bigger, and to determine for ourselves how we would practice our spirituality. For me, spirituality is messy and a deeply personal journey that occurs in the private sphere. It is not something I often talk about openly. While I do believe that it guides my daily life, I do not intentionally reflect on it.

Within critical geographies, religion and spirituality is not a central theme of study (for exceptions see Eaves 2014, 2017; Hossler 2012; McCutcheon 2011, 2013, 2015). Religion and spirituality are rarely discussed in geography classes. As I was developing my research questions around issues of race, gender, and environmental governance, it did not cross my mind to directly engage with religion or spirituality. As my project progressed, religion and spirituality emerged as an important theme, but I did not know how to critically engage with it. I feared my lack of knowledge and understanding would unintentionally belittle or minimize something these women held so dear. I also did not know how other academics would interpret an engagement with religion and spirituality. Would I further marginalize the women of the NFC by talking about the importance of religion in their activism? Finally, to me religion and spirituality was invisible. I, like many others, can choose when to disclose my religious and spiritual beliefs; it is not something externally read, like gender and race. This is not true for everyone; some people's religious doctrine requires an external expression of faith, but for me spirituality and religion occurs in the private sphere. Even though many of the women of the NFC brought their religiousness and spirituality into the public sphere, I was not ready to join them in their journey. If I did, would I offend them? Would I misrepresent them? Was this something they wanted to keep private? Instead of having the hard conversations with my research participants, I let what was invisible stay invisible. Through omission, I chose to write out religion. As I continue my work, I wonder, what am I losing by writing out spirituality? How would my analysis change if I

write spirituality into my research? What tools do I need to effectively do this in a meaningful way?

As academic researchers, we make decisions to emphasize certain aspects of identity and write out other aspects. As we write out components of people's lived experiences, we lose part of their story. As I have begun to think more deeply about the role of spirituality in critical geographies, two questions arise: [i] why are we hesitant to actively engage with spirituality?; and [ii] what, if anything, are we missing by not actively engaging with spirituality? This does not mean that everyone has to, nor should, critically engage with spirituality and religion. Moreover, it is not possible to engage with all axes of difference in a single research project, but when as a discipline we systematically write out one axis of difference, then we need to stop and reflect on what we are missing.

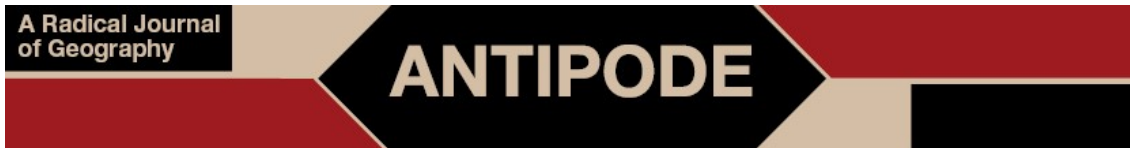
One way I work through my own tensions of the role of spirituality and religion in my work is through kitchen table reflexivity. Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) use the concept of the kitchen table to argue that critical engagement in research necessitates self-reflexivity *and* intentional and casual conversations with friends, colleagues, loved ones, and family. It was through conversations with good friends who were deeply spiritual and religious that I found a safe place to ask questions, to reflect on experiences, and to talk through the role of spirituality in my research. These conversations highlighted the complexity of integrating an engagement with spirituality. Even so, these conversations did not translate into my writing. I recognize there needs to be another step.

As I continue to reflect on intersectional environmental justice research, I have begun to reflect on this next step. The importance of self-reflection and challenging our preconceived notions is essential. As a discipline and individually, we have to learn to sit with discomfort. By accepting discomfort, we can push ourselves to engage with those axes of difference we do not fully understand. One part of this process is the analytical potential of collaborations between activists, spiritual leaders, and academics across disciplines to develop creative solutions to

integrate spirituality into critical geographies. This is not to say that we should rely solely on partnerships, we have to do our own work as well, but by breaking down the silos within the academy and the walls of the ivory tower, we create opportunities to engage with topics that make us feel uncomfortable. This has to be done carefully. It has to be done in a way that does not put an undue burden on our collaborators and it has to be done in a way that is mutually beneficial to all parties involved. Spirituality does not have to, nor should it be, a central part of all research projects. Sometimes questions are asked in a way that spirituality is not part of the answer. Regardless, self-reflection, both as a discipline and as individual researchers, is always important because if we are writing spirituality out, what else are we writing out?

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