

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

The Spiritual Foundations of Environmental (In)Justice

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Despite the seminal document on environmental justice emerging from a church denomination (UCC 1987), critical geographies of environmental justice have engaged very little with faith-based environmental organizing. And even where geographers have considered faith-based organizing, they have focused on faith as a motivator and site of organization for political action, or as one of many identity-based coalitions. As of yet, spirituality and religious practice itself remains an understudied component of environmental activism. To take full account of its significance, I begin from the premise that religion has played a key role in forming and upholding the contemporary racial/colonial environment. This follows recent works in theological studies which trace the role of Euro-American Christianity (and its permutations into secularity) in shaping the modern racial order and concurrently shaping ecological relations of dominion to the land (Carter 2008; Jennings 2010). I contend that by addressing these dynamics at their (religious) roots, spiritual environmental justice work has profound political potential to speak back to this racial/colonial order and enact environmental justice accordingly. This essay asks, in what ways does African American spiritual environmental activism intervene in the religious foundations of racial and environmental injustice?

To think about racialization as a theological-ecological system, I turn to theologian Willie Jennings, who in his 2010 work, *The Christian Imagination*, traces the theological underpinnings

of the first wave of colonialism and the slave trade. He argues that the theological frameworks which established racial subjectivities are the same as those which degraded land and human relationships to relations of property and exploitation. In order to do the work of conversion successfully, missionary colonizers had to claim exclusive possession of the terms and conditions of salvation, setting their religion above and apart from the spiritualities of indigenous peoples. Three key transformations emerge from this process. Firstly, through demonizing and dismissing indigenous spiritualities, the missionary gaze yielded a racial typology that could discern varying degrees of “the demonic” in the indigenous population. This salvific schema underwrote a racial hierarchy from saved to sinner, which aligned “saved” with whiteness, and the demonic (i.e. “unsaved”) with blackness. The second result comes from ascribing the demonic to indigenous spiritual knowledge of and relationship with the land. Humanity was to be *over* the land, not in deep relation with it. Thus, the racial subjectivity of black and unsaved also aligned with the quality of closeness to the earth. One can see the roots of harmful ecological ethics here, and how these ecological constructs link up with the racialized salvation subjectivities too. Thirdly, by demonizing that connection with the land and the spirit which is so central to many indigenous and Afro-diasporic spiritualities, colonizers could justify displacement from those places. This framework of displaced identity magnified the intensity of individual identifications with race, because what displacement leaves is an aspatial body, floating above the land, disconnected from their identity that had been formed through relationships to animals, landscape, and other peoples. Thus, the moment the body is imagined as no longer connected to land, both the land and the body are disposable. What once was a container for a sense of sacredness, on losing that sacredness, is just dirt and a black man or woman. What happens here is a reversal of the breathing of life into dirt that occurs at creation. Crucially, the colonizers in power were Christians, and the theologically linked devaluation of humans and land in this colonial moment set the groundwork for racial and ecological formations in the centuries ahead.

Jennings’ work shows that there is a theological scaffolding for racism and colonialism, which is also a geographic formation, and ecological project. I argue that this theological racial and ecological framework signifies a key locus of potential intervention by spiritual

environmental justice activism. Again, I want to push beyond simply the environmental work that faith groups do to suggest that their religious and spiritual work *itself*, as it is intertwined with their activism – i.e. the liberative theologies they imagine, the radical ecclesiologies they live out – are doing the theo-political work to take down that racial, colonial, ecological scaffolding. For example, Soil and Souls, an interfaith initiative which draws on Afro-diasporic and indigenous land-based spirituality to anchor climate activism and promote permaculture practices in faith communities of color in the U.S. south, incorporates spiritual direction into their organizing work. Spiritual direction is a process that allows participants to attend to the inner transformations they experience as they do the work of transforming and liberating their politics and theologies. Transforming one’s faith to an earth-honoring one is a process that requires significant uprooting of the weeds inherited by Western Christian ideas of “man” as set apart and above the rest of creation, as one who lords over and even dominates the creation for his own use. As such, by attending to the “soil” in which their souls are growing, activists become more grounded in their practice and are better equipped to attend to the soil in which their permaculture crops, and by extension their food sovereignty (etc.) activism and organizing grow as well. In remembering and reclaiming indigenous cultural practices, participants are finding a more authentic interpretation of the agrarian roots of first century Christianity.

Secondly, I want to consider how we might position theological work as not just some aside to the real politics, but in fact as central to the political work itself. By “theological work”, I mean much more than just academic theology, but rather a more expansive notion of “God talk” and all things that pertain to it – from these liberative ecclesial actions to the way the spiritual enlivens everyday struggles. To illumine this I turn to J. Kameron Carter’s conceptualization of theopoetics, wherein he constructs the possibility of locating *theological agency* as a form of historical agency. Reading Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Carter (2007) frames her narration of overcoming social death as a supremely theological moment. In her escape to the garret to avoid her master’s sexual advances, she suffered massively, and still Jacobs locates the beginning of her seven-year self-imposed incarceration as the beginning of her own resurrection, her Easter moment – the price she paid for the redemption of her children. In recapitulating the cross onto her own experience, she narrates a theopoetics of

Christ's passion which imagines a new political economy of salvation, in which black flesh is the iteration of Christ's Jewish flesh. Black female flesh is made an icon of the wounded flesh of Christ – and in the resurrection of Christ's already-always-wounded flesh she establishes a counter-narrative to the triumphalist resurrection narrative of white evangelicalism. And in that work, through this counter-performance, the necropolitics of enslaved Africans' adoption of the masters' religion (the very same religion used to enslave them) is overcome. Carter's reading of Jacobs reveals that in enacting her own theological agency, she establishes a theological subjectivity that counter-performs religious and social – and, I would add, spatial – death. Carter locates an agency in Jacobs' work that is not purely useful for the construction of doctrine, but is in fact deeply relevant to people of color's survival and spatial agency in a racialized world. It is this sort of theo poetic reading that I want to bring to our articulation of environmental activism.

Finally, I want to suggest that because of those theological scaffoldings of racial modernity that I described, we might see spiritual environmental justice work (e.g. cultivating spiritual connections with land) as working not only to mitigate the damage of settler colonial, racialized environmental degradation, but also as resisting those death-dealing systems at their (religious/theological) roots. For instance, at Soil and Souls' mission conference, along with training in permaculture and clean energy techniques, attendees sang spirituals while walking to the riverside. A minister reflected on the sacredness of water for healing the body and reminded participants of historical river baptisms that transformed the spirit. Participants poured out libations to honor their ancestors who guided them in this work. These rituals acknowledge and respond to the wounds of displacement and ecological degradation that colonialism has wrought to the land and to the bodies and spirits alike of people of color. Ecological and spiritual healing, they insist, are intimately wound together.

What I have suggested in this essay is that the spiritual in faith-rooted EJ work is well-poised to intervene in the environmental injustices of today – indeed, it is already doing so. The theological work in these movements is deeply political – and following Carter, we can read these movements theo poetically to imagine otherwise possibilities of theo poetic counter-performances to environmental injustice. My hope is that in the future we might better see,

articulate, and contribute to the pressures and resistance this work places on the religious and theological constitution of the modern racial ecological world.

References

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