

*Connecting racism with the degradation of the earth is a necessity for the African American community.*

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## Whose Earth Is It Anyway?

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
The world, and those who live in it.

—Psalm 24:1 (NRSV)

We say the earth is our mother —  
we cannot own her; she owns us.<sup>1</sup>

—Pacific peoples

**T**he logic that led to slavery and segregation in the Americas, colonization and Apartheid in Africa, and the rule of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature. It is a mechanistic and instrumental logic that defines everything and everybody in terms of their contribution to the development and defense of white world supremacy. People who fight against white racism but fail to connect it to the degradation of the earth are anti-ecological — whether they know it or not. People who struggle against environmental degradation but do not incorporate in it a disciplined and sustained fight against white supremacy are racists — whether they acknowledge it or not. The fight for justice cannot be segregated but must be integrated with the fight for life in all its forms.

Until recently, the ecological crisis has not been a major theme in the liberation movements in the African American community. “Blacks don’t care about the environment” is a typical comment by white ecologists. Racial and economic justice has been at best only a marginal concern in the mainstream environmental movement. “White people care more

about the endangered whale and the spotted owl than they do about the survival of young blacks in our nation's cities" is a well-founded belief in the African American community. Justice fighters for blacks and the defenders of the earth have tended to ignore each other in their public discourse and practice. Their separation from each other is unfortunate because they are fighting the same enemy — human beings' domination of each other and nature.

The leaders in the mainstream environmental movement are mostly middle- and upper-class whites who are unprepared culturally and intellectually to dialogue with angry blacks. The leaders in the African American community are leery of talking about anything with whites that will distract from the menacing reality of racism. What both groups fail to realize is how much they need each other in the struggle for "justice, peace and the integrity of creation."<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I want to challenge the black freedom movement to take a critical look at itself through the lens of the ecological movement and also challenge the ecological movement to critique itself through a radical and ongoing engagement of racism in American history and culture. Hopefully, we can break the silence and promote genuine solidarity between the two groups and thereby enhance the quality of life for the whole inhabited earth — humankind and otherkind.

### **Expanding the Race Critique**

No threat has been more deadly and persistent for black and Indigenous peoples than the rule of white supremacy in the modern world. For over five hundred years, through the wedding of science and technology, white people have been exploiting nature and killing people of color in every nook and cranny of the planet in the name of God and democracy. According to the English historian Basil Davidson, the Atlantic slave trade "cost Africa fifty million souls."<sup>3</sup> Author Eduardo Galeano claims that 150 years of Spanish and Portuguese colonization in Central and South America reduced the Indigenous population from 90 million to 3.5 million.<sup>4</sup> During the twenty-three-year reign of terror of King Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo (1885–1908), scholarly estimates suggest that approximately 10 million Congolese met unnatural deaths — "fully half the territory's population."<sup>5</sup> The tentacles of white supremacy have stretched around the globe. No people of color have been able to escape its cultural, political and economic domination.

Blacks in the U.S. have been the most visible and articulate op-

ponents of white racism. From Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth to Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Fannie Lou Hamer, African Americans have waged a persistent fight against white racism in all its overt and covert manifestations. White racism denied the humanity of black people, with even theologians debating whether blacks had souls. Some said blacks were subhuman “beasts.”<sup>6</sup> Other more progressive theologians, like Union Seminary’s Reinhold Niebuhr, hoped that the inferiority of the Negro was not “biological” but was due instead to “cultural backwardness,” which could gradually with education be overcome.<sup>7</sup>

Enslaved for 244 years, lynched and segregated another 100, blacks, with militant words and action, fought back in every way they could — defending their humanity against all who had the nerve to question it. Malcolm X, perhaps the most fierce and uncompromising public defender of black humanity, expressed the raw feelings of most blacks: “We declare our right on this earth . . . to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.”<sup>8</sup>

Whites bristled when they heard Malcolm talk like that. They not only knew Malcolm meant what he said but feared that most blacks agreed with him — though they seldom said so publicly. Whites also knew that if they were black, they too would say a resounding “amen!” to Malcolm’s blunt truth. “If you want to know what I’ll do,” Malcolm told whites, “figure out what you’ll do.”<sup>9</sup>

White theologians thanked God for being “truly longsuffering, ‘slow to anger and plenteous in mercy’ (Ps. 103:8),” as Reinhold Niebuhr put it, quoting the Hebrew Scriptures. Niebuhr knew that white people did not have a leg to stand on before the bar of God’s justice regarding their treatment of people of color. “If,” Niebuhr wrote, “the white man were to expiate his sins committed against the darker races, few would have the right to live.”<sup>10</sup>

Black liberation theology is a product of a fighting spirituality derived from nearly four hundred years of black resistance. As one who encountered racism first as a child in Bearden, Arkansas, no day in my life has passed in which I did not have to deal with the open and hidden violence of white supremacy. Whether in the society or the churches, at Adrian College or Union Seminary, racism was always there — often smiling and sometimes angry. Since writing my first essay on racism in the white church and its theology thirty years ago, I decided that I would never be silent about white supremacy and would oppose it with my whole being.

While white racism must be opposed at all cost, our opposition will not be effective unless we expand our vision. Racism is profoundly interrelated with other evils, including the degradation of the earth. It is important for black people, therefore, to make the connection between the struggle against racism and other struggles for life. A few black leaders recognized this need and joined the nineteenth century abolitionist movement with the Suffragist movement and the 1960s civil rights movement with the second wave of the women's movement. Similar links were made with the justice struggles of other U.S. minorities, gay rights struggles, and poor peoples' fight for freedom around the world. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s idea of the "beloved community" is a potent symbol for people struggling to build one world community where life in all its forms is respected. "All life is interrelated," King said. "Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. . . . There is an interrelated structure of reality."

Connecting racism with the degradation of the earth is a much-needed work in the African American community, especially in black liberation theology and the black churches. Womanist theologians have already begun this important intellectual work. Delores Williams explores a "parallel between defilement of black women's bodies" and the exploitation of nature. Emilie Townes views "toxic waste landfills in African American communities" as "contemporary versions of lynching a whole people." Karen Baker-Fletcher, using prose and poetry, appropriates the biblical and literary metaphors of dust and spirit to speak about the embodiment of God in creation. "Our task," she writes, "is to grow large hearts, large minds, reconnecting with earth, Spirit, and one another. Black religion must grow ever deeper in the heart."<sup>11</sup>

The leadership of African American churches turned its much-needed attention toward ecological issues in the early 1990s. The catalyst, as usual in the African American community, was a group of black churchwomen in Warren County, North Carolina, who in 1982 lay their bodies down on a road before dump trucks carrying soil contaminated with highly toxic PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyl) to block their progress. In two weeks, more than four hundred protesters were arrested, "the first time anyone in the United States had been jailed trying to halt a toxic waste landfill."<sup>12</sup> Although local residents were not successful in stopping the landfill construction, that incident sparked the attention of civil rights and black church leaders and initiated the national environmental justice movement. In 1987 the United Church of Christ Commission of Racial Justice issued its groundbreaking "Report on Race and Toxic Wastes in the

United States.” This study found that “among a variety of indicators race was the best predictor of the location of hazardous waste facilities in the U.S.”<sup>13</sup> Forty percent of the nation’s commercial hazardous waste landfill capacity was in three predominately African American and Hispanic communities. The largest landfill in the nation is found in Sumter County, Alabama, where nearly 70 percent of its seventeen thousand residents are black and 96 percent are poor.

In October 1991 the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit was convened in Washington, D.C. More than 650 grassroots and national leaders from fifty states, the District of Columbia, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Marshall Islands participated. They represented more than three hundred environmental groups of color. They all agreed that “If this nation is to achieve environmental justice, the environment in urban ghettos, barrios, reservations, and rural poverty pockets must be given the same protection as that provided to the suburbs.”<sup>14</sup>

The knowledge that people of color are disproportionately affected by environmental pollution angered the black church community and fired up its leadership to take a more active role in fighting against “environmental racism,” a phrase that was coined by Benjamin Chavis who was then the Director of the UCC Commission on Racial Justice.<sup>15</sup> Bunyan Bryant, a professor in the in the School of Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan and a participant in the environmental justice movement, defines environmental racism as “an extension of racism.”

It refers to those institutional rules, regulations, and policies or government or corporate decisions that deliberately target certain communities for least desirable land uses, resulting in the disproportionate exposure of toxic and hazardous waste on communities based upon certain prescribed biological characteristics. Environmental racism is the unequal protection against toxic and hazardous waste exposure and the systematic exclusion of people of color from environmental decisions affecting their communities.<sup>16</sup>

The more blacks found out about the racist policies of the government and corporations the more determined they became in their opposition to environmental injustice. In December 1993, under the sponsorship of the National Council of Churches, leaders of mainline black churches held a historic two-day summit meeting on the environment in Washington, D.C. They linked environmental issues with civil rights and economic justice. They did not talk much about the ozone layer, global warming,

the endangered whale, or the spotted owl. They focused primarily on the urgent concerns of their communities: toxic and hazardous wastes, lead poisoning, landfills and incinerators. "We have been living next to the train tracks, trash dumps, coal plants and insect-infested swamps for many decades," Bishop Frederick C. James of the A.M.E. Church said. "We in the Black community have been disproportionately affected by toxic dumping, disproportionately affected by lead paint at home, disproportionately affected by dangerous chemicals in the workplace." Black clergy also linked local problems with global issues. "If toxic waste is not safe enough to be dumped in the United States, it is not safe enough to be dumped in Ghana, Liberia, Somalia nor anywhere else in the world," proclaimed Charles G. Adams, pastor of Hartford Memorial Baptist Church in Detroit. "If hazardous materials are not fit to be disposed in the suburbs, they are certainly not fit to be disposed of in the cities."<sup>17</sup>

Like black church leaders, African American politicians also are connecting social justice issues with ecology. According to the League of Conservation Voters, the Congressional Black Caucus has "the best environmental record of any voting bloc in Congress."<sup>18</sup> "Working for clean air, clean water, and a clean planet," declared Rep. John Lewis of Georgia, "is just as important, if not more important, than anything I have ever worked on, including civil rights."<sup>19</sup>

Black and other poor people in all racial groups receive much less than their fair share of everything good in the world and a disproportionate amount of the bad. Middle class and elite white environmentalists have been very effective in implementing the slogan "Not In My Backyard" (NIMBY). As a result, corporations and the government merely turned to the backyards of the poor to deposit their toxic waste. The poor live in the least desirable areas of our cities and rural communities. They work in the most polluted and physically dangerous workplaces. Decent health care hardly exists. With fewer resources to cope with the dire consequences of pollution, the poor bear an unequal burden for technological development while the rich reap most of the benefits. This makes racism and poverty ecological issues. If blacks and other hard-hit communities do not raise these ethical and political problems, they will continue to die a slow and silent death on the planet.

Ecology touches every sphere of human existence. It is not just an elitist or a white middle class issue. A clean safe environment is a human and civil rights issue that impacts the lives of poor blacks and other marginal groups. We therefore must not let the fear of distracting from racism

blind us to the urgency of the ecological crisis. What good is it to eliminate racism if we are not around to enjoy a racist free environment?

The survival of the earth, therefore, is a moral issue for everybody. If we do not save the earth from destructive human behavior, no one will survive. That fact alone ought to be enough to inspire people of all colors to join hands in the fight for a just and sustainable planet.

*Expanding the Ecological Critique.* We are indebted to ecologists in all fields and areas of human endeavor for sounding the alarm about the earth's distress. They have been so effective in raising ecological awareness that few people deny that our planet is in deep trouble. For the first time in history, humankind has the knowledge and power to destroy all life—either with a nuclear bang or a gradual poisoning of the land, air, and sea.

Scientists have warned us of the dire consequences of what human beings are doing to the environment. Theologians and ethicists have raised the moral and religious issues. Grassroots activists in many communities are organizing to stop the killing of nature and its creatures. Politicians are paying attention to people's concern for a clean, safe environment. "It is not so much a question of whether the lion will one day lie down with the lamb," writes Alice Walker, "but whether human beings will ever be able to lie down with any creature or being at all."<sup>20</sup>

What is absent from much of the talk about the environment in First World countries is a truly radical critique of the culture most responsible for the ecological crisis. This is especially true among white ethicists and theologians in the U.S. In most of the essays and books I have read, there is hardly a hint that perhaps whites could learn something of how we got into this ecological mess from those who have been the victims of white world supremacy. White ethicists and theologians sometimes refer to the disproportionate impact of hazardous waste on blacks and other people of color in the U.S. and Third World and even cite an author or two, here and there throughout the development of their discourse on ecology. They often include a token black or Indian in anthologies on ecotheology, ecojustice, and ecofeminism. It is "political correct" to demonstrate a knowledge of and concern for people of color in progressive theological circles. But people of color are not treated *seriously*, that is, as if they have something *essential* to contribute to the conversation. Environmental justice concerns of poor people of color hardly ever merit serious attention, not to mention organized resistance. How can we create a genuinely mutual ecological dialogue between whites and people of color if one party acts as if they have all the power and knowledge?

Since Earth Day in 1970, the environmental movement has grown into a formidable force in American society and ecological reflections on the earth have become a dominant voice in religion, influencing all disciplines. It is important to ask, however, whose problems define the priorities of the environmental movement? Whose suffering claims its attention? "Do environmentalists care about poor people?"<sup>21</sup> Environmentalists usually respond something like Rafe Pomerance puts it: "A substantial element of our agenda has related to improving the environment for everybody."<sup>22</sup> Others tell a different story. Former Assistant Secretary of Interior James Joseph says that "environmentalists tend to focus on those issues that provide recreative outlets instead of issues that focus on equity." Black activist Cliff Boxley speaks even more bluntly, labeling the priorities of environmentalists as "green bigotry." "Conservationists are more interested in saving the habitats of birds than in the construction of low-income housing."<sup>23</sup>

Do we have any reason to believe that the culture most responsible for the ecological crisis will also provide the moral and intellectual resources for the earth's liberation? White ethicists and theologians apparently think so, since so much of their discourse about theology and the earth is just talk among themselves. But I have a deep suspicion about the theological and ethical values of white culture and religion. For five hundred years whites have acted as if they owned the world's resources and have forced people of color to accept their scientific and ethical values. People of color have studied dominant theologies and ethics because our physical and spiritual survival partly depended on it. Now that humanity has reached the possibility of extinction, one would think that a critical assessment of how we got to where we are would be the next step for sensitive and caring theologians of the earth. While there is some radical questioning along these lines, it has not been persistent or challenging enough to compel whites to look outside of their dominating culture for ethical and cultural resources for the earth's salvation. One can still earn a doctorate degree in ethics and theology at American seminaries, even at Union Seminary in New York, and not seriously engage racism in this society and the world. If we save the planet and have a society of inequality, we wouldn't have saved much.

According to Audre Lorde, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>24</sup> They are too narrow and thus assume that people of color have nothing to say about race, gender, sexuality, and the earth—all of which are interconnected. We need theologians and ethicists who



are interested in mutual dialogue, honest conversation about justice for the earth and all of its inhabitants. We need whites who are eager to know something about the communities of people of color — our values, hopes, and dreams. Whites know so little about our churches and communities that it is often too frustrating to even talk to them about anything that matters. Dialogue requires respect and knowledge of the other — their history, culture and religion. No one racial or national group has all the answers but all groups have something to contribute to the earth's healing.

Many ecologists speak often of the need for humility and mutual dialogue. They tell us that we are all interrelated and interdependent, including human and otherkind. The earth is not a machine. It is an organism in which all things are a part of each other. "Every entity in the universe," writes Catherine Keller, "can be described as a process of interconnection with every other being."<sup>25</sup> If white ecologists really believe that, why do most still live in segregated communities? Why are their essays and books about the endangered earth so monological — that is, a conversation of a dominant group talking to itself? Why is there so much talk of love, humility, interrelatedness, and interdependence, and yet so little of these values reflected in white people's dealings with people of color?

Blacks and other minorities are often asked why they are not involved in the mainstream ecological movement. To white theologians and ethicists I ask, why are you not involved in the dialogue on race? I am not referring primarily to President Clinton's failed initiative, but to the initiative started by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and black liberation theology more than forty years ago. How do we account for the conspicuous white silence on racism, not only in the society and world but especially in theology, ethics, and ecology? I have yet to read a white theologian or ethicist who has incorporated a sustained, radical critique of white supremacy in their theological discourse similar to their engagement of Anti-Semitism, class contradictions, and patriarchy.

To be sure, a few concerned white theologians have written about their opposition to white racism but not because race critique was essential to their theological identity. It is usually just a gesture of support for people of color when solidarity across differences is in vogue. As soon as it is not longer socially and intellectually acceptable to talk about race, white theologians revert back to their silence. But as Elie Wiesel said in his Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, "we must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."<sup>26</sup> Only when white theologians realize

that a fight against racism is a fight for *their* humanity will we be able to create a coalition of blacks, whites and other people of color in the struggle to save the earth.

Today ecology is in vogue and many people are talking about our endangered planet. I want to urge us to deepen our conversation by linking the earth's crisis with the crisis in the human family. If it is important to save the habitats of birds and other species, then it is at least equally important to save black lives in the ghettos and prisons of America. As Gandhi said, "the earth is sufficient for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed."<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

1. Cited in Samuel Rayan, "The Earth is the Lord's," in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 142.

2. See *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*, papers and Bible studies ed. James W. van Hoeven for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Assembly, Seoul, Korea, August 1989; and Preman Niles, *Resisting the Threats to Life: Covenanting for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989).

3. Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade: Precolonial History 1450-1850* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 80.

4. Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 50.

5. See Adam Hochschild, "Hearts of Darkness: Adventures in the Slave Trade," *San Francisco Examiner Magazine*, August 16, 1998, 13. This essay is an excerpt from his book, *King Leopold's Ghosts: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998). Louis Turner suggests that five to eight million were killed in the Congo. See his *Multinational Companies and the Third World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1973), 27.

6. See Chas. Carroll, *The Negro a Beast* (St. Louis: American Book and Bible House, 1900).

7. See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Justice to the American Negro from State, Community and Church" in his *Pious and Secular America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 81.

8. Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 56.

9. *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 197-98.

10. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Assurance of Grace" in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. and introduced by Robert M. Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 65.

11. See Delores Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin" in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 145-47; and her "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 24-29; Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as*

*Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 55; and Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 93.

12. Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), 31.

13. Cited in Bunyan Bryant and Paul Mohai, eds., *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992),

2. See also "African American Denominational Leaders Pledge Their Support to the Struggle against Environmental Racism," *The A.M.E. Christian Recorder*, May 18, 1998, 8, 11.

14. Cited in Robert D. Bullard, ed., *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994), 20.

15. Benjamin Chavis is now known as Benjamin Chavis Muhammad and is currently serving as the National Minister in Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam.

16. Bunyan Bryant, "Introduction" in his edited work, *Environmental Justice: Issues, Policies, and Solutions* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1995), 5. Benjamin Chavis defined environmental racism as "racial discrimination in environmental policymaking. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And, it is racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decisionmaking boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies" ("Foreword" in Robert Bullard, ed., *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* [Boston: South End Press, 1993], 3.)

17. *National Black Church Environmental and Economic Justice Summit*, Washington, D.C., December 1 and 2, 1993, The National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., Prophetic Justice Unit. This is a booklet with all the speeches of the meeting, including the one by Vice President Gore.

18. See Ronald A. Taylor, "Do Environmentalists Care about Poor People?" *U.S. News and World Report*, April 2, 1984, 51.

19. John Lewis's quotation is cited in Deohn and David Hahn-Baker, "Environmentalists and Environmental Justice Policy" in Bunyan Bryant, ed., *Environmental Justice*, 68.

20. Alice Walker, *Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 173.

21. See Ronald A. Taylor, "Do Environmentalists Care about Poor People?"

22. *Ibid.*, 51.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), 110.

25. Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, Self* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), 5.

26. See Eli Wiesel, "Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech," <<http://home.sol.no/~solhanse/wiesel.htm>>, December 10, 1986.

27. Cited in Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997), 2.