

Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

Tina B. Spencer-Smith

Date

African American Environmental Ethics: A Theological Response

By

Tina B. Spencer-Smith
Master of Divinity

Candler School of Theology

Kyle Lambelet, PhD
Committee Chair

Nichole Renée Phillips, PhD
Committee Member

Degree: Master of Divinity

Committee Chair or Thesis Advisor: Kyle Lambelet, PhD, Committee Chair

Committee Members: Kyle Lambelet, PhD and Nichole Renée Phillips, PhD

African American Environmental Ethics: A Theological Response

By

Tina B. Spencer-Smith

Bachelor of Science
Georgia Southern University
1986

Master of Applied Science in Environmental Policy and Management
University of Denver
2014

Thesis Committee Chair: Kyle Lambelet, PhD

An abstract of
A thesis (or dissertation) submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Divinity
2020

Previous academic degree: B.S., Georgia Southern University, 1986; M.A.Sc., University of Denver, 2014

Thesis/Dissertation Committee Chair: Kyle Lambelet, PhD

Committee Member: Nichole Renée Phillips, PhD

Degree: Master of Divinity

Year: 2020

Abstract

African American Environmental Ethics: A Theological Response

By Tina B. Spencer-Smith

Anthropogenic activity due to capitalism has contributed greatly to climate change over the past several decades, resulting in rising sea levels, increased storm frequency, extreme cold or hot weather, sustained droughts, and flooding. Consequently, these adverse effects to our natural and human systems leave the earth and its populations vulnerable and at risk. While these risks and concerns associated with environmental degradation due to human-induced activity affect all of creation, African Americans and communities of color are more negatively impacted than any other groups of people in the United States, making them disproportionately the victims of environmental injustices causing African Americans and other people of color—health, economic and social suffering. As a result of systemic and structural racism in this country, particularly in the South, African Americans not only are unknowingly harmed but also contribute unknowingly and knowingly to unfavorable environmental activity. As African American Christians find themselves the victims of such racist environmental oppression while simultaneously unknowingly engaging in environmental harm, this thesis analyzes this thought-provoking paradox and explores a theological response. Examining the ethics of such an oppressed-oppressor relationship with Nature, this thesis positions stewardship, justice and love as theological values necessary to modify behavior and encourage positive environmental action to mitigate harm in the African American community. With a focus on air abuse in communities of color, brought on by a local landfill fire and the manufacturing of the single-use plastic water bottle, this research demonstrates the qualitative results of an ethnographical study conducted at a local African American church. Findings will show that a theological response of stewardship, justice and love is necessary for African American Christians to reconcile such a paradox with Nature, thereby, contributing to the flourishing of all of humankind.

African American Environmental Ethics: A Theological Response

By

Tina B. Spencer-Smith

B.S., Georgia Southern University, 1986

M.A.Sc., University of Denver, 2014

Emory University

2020

Thesis Committee Chair: Kyle Lambelet, PhD

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Divinity
2020

Emory University

Acknowledgements

What better time and place than within the context of completing my thesis research to acknowledge the encouragement and support of those who have helped me to move through this challenging and extraordinary journey over the past few years. The encouraging words both within the classroom and personal conversations with Dr. Kyle Lambelet, my thesis advisor, and Dr. Nichole Renée Phillips, my thesis second reader and Theological Ethnography for Congregation and Community instructor, were foundational to my direction and leading me to the appropriate resources to support my research efforts. I appreciate the insight and guidance provided by my academic advisor, Dr. Jennifer Ayres. I would also like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Bounds, my Ethics instructor, and Dr. Khalia J. Williams, my Feminist/Womanist Spirituality in Worship instructor.

I offer special gratitude to Mrs. Naeema Gilyard for her encouragement and environmental advocacy work in the City of South Fulton. My family of faith at Zion Hill Baptist Church in the City of South Fulton/Atlanta, Georgia was key in helping me to recognize certain norms and behaviors that were critical in the analytical process of my ethnography. I sincerely appreciate the guidance, support, words of encouragement and wisdom provided by my Pastor, Reverend Dr. Aaron L. Parker. My deepest and sincerest gratitude is extended to my committed circle of family and friends.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The City of South Fulton	2
Approach: A Paradox of Oppression	6
Anthropogenic Climate Change	7
Environmental Injustice and a Long History of Oppression	10
Air Pollution	13
Case 1: Landfills	15
Case 2: Single Use Plastic Water Bottle	18
Invisible Shift: Oppressed to Oppressor	22
Zion Hill Baptist Church: An Ethnographic Study in Environmental Stewardship	26
The Beauty	32
Theological Inspiration	34
Stewardship.....	39
Justice	40
Love	41
Conclusion	49
Bibliography	52
References	54

Introduction

The fresh air crisply hit my face as I walked out of Zion Hill Baptist Church one late fall (October) Sunday in 2018 and I smiled as I reflected on the encouraging and spiritually up-lifting message from my pastor. It was another soul-stirring sermon that would strengthen my journey for the week. After greeting my fellow church members and bidding them good wishes until we would meet again, I entered my car and exited the church property making a right onto Campbellton Road in the City of South Fulton, Georgia. As I drove home towards my Tyrone residence, the clear blue skies hovered overhead as I was lost in my thoughts.

During my drive, I decided to change my route and make a detour through a less-traveled area of South Fulton for me, to see if I could glimpse a long-burning landfill that Nefertiti Jaquez, a local ABC channel 2 reporter at the time, had recently featured in an evening news story and caused me deep concern. Placing the address in my Global Positioning System (GPS), I followed a winding diverted pathway not knowing what to expect. With my navigation system indicating that I was getting closer, I was a bit surprised, as I was still travelling through a residential area and passing modest relatively new neighborhoods with tree-lined streets and sidewalks. The computer mapping system must be incorrect, I thought, as a landfill would not be positioned in an area with family residences, nearby schools, and churches.

When I arrived at the landfill, which is more aptly described as a construction dump, I stopped my car on the curvy and very narrow roadway with a surrounding area of dense treetops. Behind a dilapidated wooden gate plastered with warning signs, billowing smoke from smoldering flames could be seen violating the clear air and blue

skies. Deciding to capture an image of this imposition upon Nature with my cell phone camera, I let down my window and was quickly and readily assaulted by a stench that would seep into my clothing and vehicle and later prove difficult to remove. My throat ached and eyes burned from the smell and it would take days for me to physically feel better. I recalled the visual of Nefertiti wearing a sturdy plastic face mask as she stood on the edge of the landfill amid the smoke, an experience I would later learn that kept her out of work for several days. I could not imagine living under such daily conditions or the negative health impacts that could potentially result from long-term exposure.

The City of South Fulton

Formed in April 2017, the City of South Fulton (COSF), nestled in the southwest corridor of Fulton County, has a population of approximately 100,000 residents and is led by Mayor William “Bill” Edwards, who is African American. COSF is a predominately African American family community with a median age of 35 and average income of \$70,258¹. The residential areas range from modest middle-class homes to low income housing. With rolling greens and some farmland, the small city is an area attractive for retirees and young families alike.

This highly publicized fire began on September 20, 2018 by B & B Construction Company, owned by Tandy Bullock, an African American entrepreneur. Public records indicate that Bullock has been incarcerated three times and fined more than a million dollars for failure to comply with clean-up and remediation orders. A half a million

¹ City of South Fulton. U.S. Demographic Data.
<https://www.cityofsouthfultonga.gov/DocumentCenter/View/245/City-Demographic-Profile-?bidId=>
Accessed April 10, 2020.

dollars approved by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources for clean-up was rescinded by the judge, further delaying relief for the people. This once legitimate construction disposal business is now an unlicensed dump, which is located within a mile of Bear Creek Middle School and Creekside High Schools and across from a church. Bear Creek, part of the local watershed, trickles nearby. While the local fire crew extinguished the visible fire initially, the fire alarmingly continues inconsistently as a slow burn in the ground and in the lives of people of the surrounding community.

To gain a better understanding of the impact the fire and smoke were having on the community, I visited the nearby elementary school to determine if the punitive odor was apparent in the school. Upon entry into the hallway of this predominately African American school, the smell had seemingly settled into the walls that the children pass through daily and violated their right to unencumbered clean air and learning environment. In further pondering this situation, the more facts I learned of the case, the more I became increasingly confused. I could simply not understand why no one was coming to the rescue of the community. Does this exemplify how God calls Christians to love another? Who is advocating for justice for the people?

Many aspects of this case were quite baffling, which led to the following questions: Why was this landfill permitted to be in such close proximity to homes? Does the potential punishment of incarceration multiplied by a million dollar fine fit the contractor's crime? Is such extreme punishment typical for this kind of legal infraction? Why would Tandy Ross Bullock allow his business to affect a community in such a harmful way—that is with air pollution and other potential watershed and/or soil hazards? Was preservation of the surrounding natural environment a consideration for unlicensed

dumping? Did this African American male entrepreneur know of the economic, social and environmental burden that unlicensed dumping would place on the community and upon the lives of the people who mostly looked like him? While it is evident to me that the community is suffering, I could not help but wonder if the owner was suffering as well. My intent is in no way to exonerate Tandy Bullock's reprehensible actions but open the window to view two potential sides of environmental injustice.

African American Christians are knowingly and unknowingly causing harm to the environment. Through environmental injustices, they have become contributors to environmental destruction. While African American Christians are not the key contributors to the ruination of Nature, the interlocking systemic oppression within the United States (U.S.) which targets marginalized groups, especially African Americans, positions them in places and spaces where their daily consumption and waste oppresses the environment. In this way, the oppressed becomes an oppressor. Generally, African Americans are not aware of the effect that their very own actions have on environmental degradation simply due to the problem of entrenched systemic environmental racism. Environmental degradation not only is directed against African Americans, but because of its systemic nature, it enlists African Americans to participate in activities that harm the earth and its inhabitants. Thus, while African Americans are targets of environmental injustice, they simultaneously become participants. The City of South Fulton case is a good illustration of this duality. This predominantly African American community with its picturesque surroundings is suffering due to the direct actions by unsuspecting homeowners. Their actions are further perpetuated by the indirect and structurally unjust

judicial and regulatory system, precluding relief and mitigation from harm to the environment and the people.

African Americans are keenly aware of racism in America set in place from the onset of slavery that plagued this country for close to two hundred fifty years and noted, although arguably, as beginning in the early seventeenth century. White racism was cruel and “denied the humanity of black people, with even theologians debating whether blacks had souls.”² Today, structural racism is not as overt but has shifted to a deeply embedded and covert way of American life, such that disregard for black bodies, in many ways, continues to be made manifest through environmental abuses to which African Americans are often blind. Environmental racism is described as “inequality in which people of color not only have less access to environmental amenities . . . but also are exposed to higher rates of environmental toxins.”³ This compounded complexity of injustice challenges how African American Christians should react.

The relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor is not new to African Americans within the U.S., particularly in the southern states. Black people have long experienced entrenched forms of racism and oppression at the hands of patriarchy and white supremacy. Therefore, the mismanagement of Nature and abuse of natural resources by white Americans that adversely impacts African Americans is not surprising, especially in the South.

Black people are overwhelmingly Christian in the South and because of the religious strength of Christianity throughout the South, those who live geographically

² James H. Cone, “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?,” *Cross Currents* 50, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2000): 37, accessed March 30, 2020, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/cone.htm>.

³ Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), 4.

outside of the South tend to erroneously equate the entire region to the Bible Belt – a broad swath of land identified as such because of socially and theologically conservative, religion and politics. The Bible Belt also refers to the history of Christian governance that influenced and influences public policy in southern states. As a result, Christians in the South have long benefited from political power and influence that affects the nation.

Because blacks have a keen awareness and understanding of the power and influence of southern Christianity, they go about wisely negotiating and creatively navigating within certain systems of oppression. Even with such familiarity, they are unaware of how much they might contribute to the abuse yet also exercise the power to liberate God’s creation (i.e., Nature) from destruction. This research seeks to examine the dual positions of being oppressed and unconsciously being an oppressor by analyzing the impacts of structural and systemic environmental racism that preclude African American Christians from consistently responding favorably to the destruction of Nature. I argue for a theological response to African American Christians ability to liberate Nature from oppression and destruction through environmental stewardship, love, and justice.

Approach: A Paradox of Oppression

In this thesis, I develop an argument about the paradox of oppression by introducing an environmental case that can be examined from two perspectives—that is, from the lens of African American Christians being victimized by environmental injustice to them being irresponsible stewards over God’s creation. I proceed by exploring the historical underpinnings of environmental acts that when perpetrated upon black people (and other people of color) reveal racist infrastructures reinforcing the

oppression of blacks. I then highlight the shifting position of African Americans from oppressed to unknowing oppressor –not due to complicity but rather complacency, easily attributable to the implicit design and nature of systemic racism.

Central to this analysis on environmental degradation and injustice is a previously conducted ethnographic research study performed at a predominantly African American congregation based in South Fulton County and located near the burning landfill. The ethnography draws particular attention to air pollution and its impact upon this and other affected communities. Other natural elements such as water and soil are exploited by humans, making systems of injustice apparent; yet air is most vital to physical and spiritual existence. Using air, God breathed life into humankind making them living souls (Genesis 2:7) and this air also became the substance out of which Jesus “breathed” the Holy Spirit upon His disciples during a Resurrection appearance (John 20:22). After considering all of this, I close by offering a theological response requiring black Christians to act favorably towards the earth by mitigating behaviors harmful to their neighbors.

Anthropogenic Climate Change

Capitalism advances the economic position of its participants without regard or consideration for the environmental expense that inflicts harm upon humanity and the natural environment. In our drive to obtain wealth through a capitalist and market system, not only is there a widening gap between those who have and have not, but also industries involved in resource extraction while extremely profitable contribute to accelerating climate change and environmental crisis. The world around us and its

landscape are changing at a rapid rate daily, due to climate change, which has a widespread adverse impact upon human and natural systems. “Mess too much with the composition of finely tuned greenhouse gases and watch interlocking dynamics of warmer temperatures, changed growing seasons, different patterns of rain- and snow-fall, rising seas, altered ocean currents, dying coral reefs and interrupted food chains.”⁴ Glaciers are melting, sea levels are rising and shorelines are disappearing. Storm intensities are increasing while storm frequencies accelerating. Air pollution is increasing, and clean air is decreasing. Waste is accumulating and uncontaminated soil is shrinking. Polluted water is rising while the amount of available potable water is reducing.

While some may argue about the causes of climate change, writers of the scientifically-based 2014 Climate Change Synthesis Report are unwavering about the “human influence on the climate system [being] clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) [at] the highest in history.”⁵ Scientists specifically attribute the main drivers of anthropogenic GHG emissions to population size, economic activity, lifestyle, energy use, land use patterns, technology and climate policy.⁶

Anthropogenic activity has been proven to greatly contribute over time to climate change, which has led to the degradation of the quality of our world’s natural environment. Such environmentally debasing human activities in which many of us are contributors include our everyday life-engaging routines such as work commute, leisure

⁴Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. (New York: Orbis Book, 1996), 100.

⁵ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report, by Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (2014), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

travel, shopping, heating and cooling our homes. These seemingly normal activities are the habits of life of a capitalistic society in which the profit model excludes environmental cost from the equation, resulting in increased consumption and materialism as well as potential profits. Given these normal everyday living activities, it is difficult and more likely impossible for anyone to be excluded and virtually everyone to be named a participant on some level in environmental abuse. Just as environmental cost goes overlooked, so does the widespread complicity in environmentally destructive behavior.

Even though participation in environmental destruction is widespread, not all people are impacted by that destruction in the same ways. It is well-documented that some racial and economic classes of people, namely people of color and African Americans, poor and marginalized, are disproportionately and adversely affected by these environmental changes. “Climate change will amplify existing risks and create new risks for natural and human systems. Risks are unevenly distributed and are generally greater for disadvantaged people and communities in countries at all levels of development.”⁷ Not many people are excluded from contributing to climate change yet those who are disinherited and disenfranchised are the most vulnerable. This perpetuation of injustice is a continuation of a long history of oppression that is indiscriminate against people of color.

⁷ IPCC, 13.

Environmental Injustice and a Long History of Oppression

“The oppression of black youth, women, and men is both a fact of history and a contemporary reality.”⁸ Environmental injustices in relation to the maltreatment of blacks in America has evolved over time. Fueled by capitalism, environmental injustice has its roots in a history of structural racism. For instance, black liberation theologian James Cone writes: “Racism is profoundly interrelated with other evils, including the degradation of the earth.”⁹ In *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, Melanie Harris further notes: “the legacy of white supremacy woven through the law of racial discrimination during the Jim and Jane Crow era and the problem of the color line are all aspects of African American environmental history.”¹⁰ Harris draws on Kimberly Ruffin to explain the dynamics. Ruffin brings into coexistence the paradoxical relationship that blacks have with the environment. Harris extends Ruffin’s contention yet translates paradox to one of transformation.

The dichotomous relationship of African Americans and Nature, Kimberly N. Ruffin describes as paradoxical. Hence, the relationship of African Americans to land, she characterizes as “ecological burden-and-beauty.”¹¹ Ruffin speaks not only to how African Americans regard their connection to the earth as positive but also explains the continued mistreatment of African Americans reflected by a history of subservience and displayed by a slave mentality that remains anchored and rooted in policies and decision-

⁸ M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2018), xviii.

⁹ James H. Cone, “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?,” *Cross Currents* 50, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2000): 38, accessed March 30, 2020, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/cone.htm>.

¹⁰ Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 41.

¹¹ Kimberly N. Ruffin, “Animal Nature: Finding Ecotheology.” *In Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*, 88-110. Athens; London: University of Georgia Press, 2010. Accessed April 17, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46nkg7.7.

making that impact African American lives today. Linking the legacy of racism in this country to “individual and collective memories of racial hatred and brutality,”¹² Ruffin explains:

the ecological paradox further, [by] saying it pinpoints the dynamic influence of the natural and social order on African American experience and outlook. For instance, an ecological burden is placed on those who are racialized negatively, and they therefore suffer economically and environmentally because of their degraded status. Simultaneously, the experience of ecological beauty results from individual and collective attitudes toward nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils.¹³

The paradoxical relationship that Ruffin describes is a struggle that African Americans face. The land is a source of connection and consolation, even as it is the site of brutality and violence. Even though the land has been a site of burden, it is also a space for beauty that sensitizes African Americans to their connection to the earth and makes them hesitant about knowingly inflicting harm upon the land and the rest of creation.

Melanie Harris captures this beauty by the example she gives in the person of Mrs. Walker, the mother of Alice Walker, who was “one bound and connected to the earth [and] in divine relationship with the sacred earth.”¹⁴ Harris points out the complexity of Mrs. Walker relationship with the land. For in being “bound and connected,” this implies that where historical hostility might exist, honor exists as well. Harris, who is addressing specifically African American women, emphasizes that reflection or “eco-memory” is influential and empowering in African American’s relationship with and regard for the earth, making room for a “a spiritual, and perhaps

¹² Harris, 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

¹⁴ Harris, 40.

theological base.”¹⁵ In the next section, I focus on the “ecological burden” that black Americans face.

African Americans have a complicated relationship with the land as exemplified by Ruffin’s “burden-and-beauty paradox.” One way the “burden” manifests is in the form of the oppression of actors in the following scenario. Let us take for example the South Fulton landfill owner who on numerous occasions was tossed into jail. As a matter of fact, he was jailed three times and charged a fine of more than one million dollars for his environmental crimes. At the heart of the following questions is his “race.” If the owner had the financial resources to remediate the site in order to relieve the suffering people, how would he be able to do so behind bars? Is incarceration multiple times and the assessment of a large fine standard punishment for such infractions? Or, was his punishment exacerbated because of his race? The burden Ruffin stresses is found in: “a criminal justice system that routinely minimizes or dismisses crimes perpetrated by whites and either falsely accuses blacks or inflates and unduly punishes black wrongdoing.”¹⁶ Here, I am not attempting to devalue of the lives of the residents of the community. Rather, I am doing quite the opposite by pressing the question of monetizing life. Can anyone place monetary value on human lives? Nevertheless, what cannot be dismissed is the unequal scales that might have been used against this black contractor for committing a crime that in many respects is commonplace in construction.

Additionally, acts of marginalization include the exclusion of people of color from the environmental movement as well as the conservation versus preservation divide. The concepts that frame African American discourse on environmental issues are absent

¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶ Ruffin, 1-2.

from “the mainstream environmental discourse developed primarily by free, White males, who were free to develop capitalist enterprises.”¹⁷ While engagement in discourse has improved in recent years, such acts of exclusion are covert forms of oppression with racist undertones. Another way in which African Americans are subject to marginalization is through harmful acts to the environment, resulting from intrinsic racism that disrupts justice for people of color and the underserved and overlooked population. Environmental racism is deeply embedded in white privilege and supremacist attitudes and behaviors. In his article, “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?,” black liberation theologian James Cone emphatically states, “The 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.”¹⁸ James Cone’s logic refers to efforts to advance “the development and defense of white world supremacy.”¹⁹ This advancement of whiteness at the expense of nature and communities of color is motivated by capitalistic gain.

In the following three sections I explore how air pollution contributes to environmental racism, highlighting two cases - landfills and single use plastic water bottles. Single use plastic water bottles are part of landfills and they contribute to the toxicity of landfills and air pollution.

Air Pollution

Life would not exist without inhaling and exhaling – air. Despite its intrinsic value, clean air is disrupted by the injustice of air pollution which adversely affects

¹⁷ Harris, 48.

¹⁸ Cone, 36.

¹⁹ Cone, 36.

populations that inhale polluted air. Air pollution is simply mistreatment and abuse of God's invisible yet necessary natural resource that results in harmful effects on those exposed to poor air quality.

Air pollution negatively impacts communities, particularly communities of color. "EPA's National Center for Environmental Assessment found that black Americans were exposed to significantly more of the small pollution particles known as (Particulate Matter) PM_{2.5}, which have been associated with lung disease, heart disease, and premature death." A recent Ohio State University study, published last year in *Science Daily*, reveals that "disease-causing air pollution remains high in pockets of America—particularly those where many low-income and African-American people live." Not only is the health of the community members adversely impacted, their economic status makes the struggle even greater, as lack of access to financial resources can exacerbate the situation. These negative impacts of polluted air upon the communities of color are simply oppressive.

The pain and suffering caused by air pollution can show up in not so obvious ways for African American Christians, particularly as they strive to live out God's love for one another. Air pollution does not just have lingering physical effects but can carry an emotional burden, as well. Let us consider the impact on African American women. Polluted air can negatively affect and inflame black women's underlying medical conditions or the conditions of those to whom they are serving as caregivers. Because of this, I pose the following questions respecting black women's health and their caregiving in relationship to the black community: What are some life-threatening diseases that black women and family members suffer from? Are black women caring for an ailing

family member or friend? and How does air pollution impact her emotional and physical health? What does this all mean for a theological response to air pollution? Air pollution impacts climate change and black women's health as well as the health of those they are caring for, which can result from the manufacturing of the single use plastic water bottle or toxic emissions from a landfill. In the following second section highlighting the single use plastic water bottle case study, I treat the life-threatening nature the ubiquitous single use plastic water bottle has on the environment. While the use of single-use plastic water bottles negatively affects all people and many living creatures, the presence of these bottles in communities of color magnify environmental injustices towards people of color, and particularly in the South. Let us begin with landfills as we explore the two case studies.

Case 1: Landfills

Oppression takes on specific forms in our ground, air, and water. Landfills are ideal examples of intentional diversion of toxic waste dumps away from white or more affluent neighborhoods and into those geographical areas inhabited by people of color, to avoid adverse home value impact or some other socio-economic or health related issue, on their neighborhoods. As such, the City of South Fulton landfill fire is just one example of the environmental degradation showing the ill-treatment of African Americans.²⁰ A January 2020 Air and Potable Water Sample Report, based on a study by Sandy Springs, Georgia Environmental Planning Specialist (EPS), revealed that "multiple volatile organic compound constituents were detected" in the landfill.²¹ Such emissions result in

²⁰ Unlike common use landfills, the property in the City of South Fulton became an unlicensed construction landfill.

²¹ Environmental Planning Specialist (EPS), "Air and Potable Water Sampling Results Bishop Road Landfill," Sandy Springs, Georgia: 2020, ii.

air pollution leaving harmful impacts on those who are exposed. In an article in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* on March 29, 2019, Ben Brasch highlights the testing conducted by The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that resulted in findings of “worrisome levels of six chemicals, including benzene, formaldehyde and the industrial product phosgene.”²² According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), phosgene was used in World War I combat as a “choking agent.”²³ While the CDC notes that most people will recover from exposure to phosgene, some lasting effects are known to include chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

This desecration of precious environmental resources in the communities of people of color is common. In 1982, the construction of a toxic landfill of polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) drew protests from African Americans in Warren County, North Carolina with the intent to stop its construction. PCB, a man-made toxic chemical, was manufactured in the U.S. for fifty years before being banned in 1979. According to the EPA, PCB was an attractive ingredient for products such as plastics due to its lack of flammability and chemical stability and other properties.²⁴ The fight wasn’t just a protest; it involved “African American women [who] mixed prayer and supplication with activism in a rural Baptist church.”²⁵ Even though the Warren County landfill protest efforts failed, all was not lost. As a result of the demonstration, a study was

²² Ben Brasch, “Burning landfill owner gets more time from Fulton judge,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (AJC), March 29, 2019., accessed March 29, 2019, <https://www.ajc.com/news/local-govt-politics/owner-burning-landfill-gets-more-time/Mp2yw8wTdGnv5qMaii80xK/?fbclid=IwAR3EM-TcDoNSvLYwcbJFJGLfLj24RVDOQCpaOZUORK0vRiffLWiiQHk146I>.

²³ The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2020. “Facts About Phosgene.” Emergency Preparedness and Response. Accessed April 6, 2020. <https://emergency.cdc.gov/agent/phosgene/basics/facts.asp>.

²⁴ Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). “Learn about Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs).” Accessed April 6, 2020. <https://www.epa.gov/pcbs/learn-about-polychlorinated-biphenyls-pcbs>.

²⁵ Glave, 133.

commissioned by the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) that “provided empirical support for the claims of environmental racism.”²⁶ The study “which used 1980 Census data, documented that three out of four hazardous waste landfills examined were located in communities where African Americans made up at least twenty-six percent of the population, and whose family incomes were below the poverty level.”²⁷ The GAO report was pivotal in spurring the organized efforts of environmental justice. “People of color and the poor have long suffered in the United States as a result of the government and corporations dumping toxins and garbage into marginalized neighborhoods.”²⁸

Landfills with toxic content pollute water, soil and air.

Five years later, a Toxic Waste and Race study, commissioned by the United Church of Christ (UCC) Commission examined the relationship between decisions to place waste locations in minority communities and thus the association between waste locations and race.²⁹ The study “found that over 15 million African Americans, 8 million Hispanics, and half of all Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans resided in communities with at least one abandoned or uncontrolled toxic waste sites.”³⁰ Moreover, study findings would reveal that “race was the most significant factor in siting hazardous waste facilities, and that three out of every five African Americans and Hispanics live in a community housing toxic waste sites.”³¹

²⁶ EPA, accessed April 6, 2020.

²⁷ EPA. 2020. “Environmental Justice Timeline.” Environmental Justice. Accessed April 6, 2020. <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/environmental-justice-timeline>.

²⁸ Glave, 128.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The Department of Energy. 2020. “Environmental Justice History.” Office of Legacy Management. Accessed March 30, 2020. <https://www.energy.gov/lm/services/environmental-justice/environmental-justice-history>.

While race was proven to be the key factor in location of landfills in the US, nearly two decades later a scientific study by Tessum et al., revealed capitalistic behavior causing harm to the environment had disparaging effects on communities of color.³² Tessum et al. researched the relationship between racial ethnic groups and air pollution [in relationship to toxic waste sites], confirming intrinsic systemic injustices placed upon marginalized communities. Their disturbing scientific finding should not be at all surprising. Published in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, the research reveals “[particulate matter] PM_{2.5} exposure is disproportionately caused by consumption of goods and services mainly by the non-Hispanic white majority, but disproportionately inhaled by black and Hispanic minorities.”³³ The largest environmental health risk factor in the United States is fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) air pollution exposure, responsible for 63 percent of environmentally-related deaths and three percent of all deaths.³⁴ An estimate of a pollution inequity of 56 percent for blacks, researchers concluded that non-Hispanic whites experience what they call “pollution advantage.”³⁵ The research team defines pollution inequity as “the difference between the environmental health damage caused by a racial–ethnic group and the damage that group experience.”³⁶ Liberation theologian James Cone pointed out two decades ago this imbalanced consequence of environmental degradation, by asserting: “With fewer resources to cope with the dire consequences of

³² Christopher W. Tessum et al., “Inequity in consumption of goods and services adds to racial-ethnic disparities in air pollution exposure.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* vol. 116,13 (March 11, 2019): 6001, Accessed January 20, 2020, doi:10.1073/pnas.1818859116.

³³Tessum et al., 6001.

³⁴Ibid., 6001.

³⁵Ibid., 6001.

³⁶ Ibid., 6001.

pollution, the poor bear an unequal burden for technological development while the rich reap most of the benefits.”³⁷ Quantifiable information supporting disparity between consumption and pollution had been previously unavailable. However, Tessum et al. have generated measurable data demonstrating that black Americans and other people of color are disproportionately affected by climate change and environmental degradation impacts, and specifically air pollution. Landfills contain many discarded items and one of them is single-use plastic water bottles, which contribute to air pollution.

Case 2: Single Use Plastic Water Bottle

The single-use plastic water bottles (SPWB) touches the lives of just about everyone. Whether it is a personal purchase or grabbed during a local event or church function, a single-use PWB is used by many people daily, whether intentionally or accidentally. Very few people are excluded from having quenched their thirst with a single-use plastic water bottle. “Around the world, one million plastic drinking bottles are purchased every minute.”³⁸ The convenience of using a SPWB or perceived safety of bottled water contributes to usage. In a five-year span from 2011 to 2016, the plastic water bottling industry experienced a 39% increase by volume.³⁹ In 2016, sales of bottled water outpaced soft drinks for the first time in U.S. history.⁴⁰ While the usage

³⁷ Cone, 40.

³⁸ UN Environment. “Our Planet is Drowning in Plastic Pollution.” Accessed October 3, 2019. <https://www.unenvironment.org/interactive/beat-plastic-pollution/>.

³⁹ Food and Water Watch. “Take Back the Tap: The Big Business Hustle of Bottled Water.” Accessed October 3, 2019. <https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/insight/take-back-tap-big-business-hustle-bottled-water>, 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

rate is climbing, the negative impacts due to production and throughout the bottles' life cycle are perpetuated.⁴¹

Single-use Plastic Water Bottle Life-Cycle Impact

The life of the SPWB from manufacturing to back-end disposition clutter can have damaging effects on the life of just about everything the SPWB encounters, including humans and elements of the natural environment.⁴² In 2016, four billion pounds of plastic were used in U.S. bottled water production. The production process emits carcinogenic toxins into the air. Under certain ambient conditions, harmful chemicals in the plastic of the bottle are known to seep into its contained water. More bottles are disposed rather than recycled and, thus, end up on our lands and in our waterways, only to be consumed by wild or marine life. The widespread utilization of plastic water bottles yields a punitive impact on our precious eco-system. The levels of air toxicity and pollutants generated from production result in negative health and social conditions for people living in communities in close proximity to manufacturing facilities, who usually are poor and non-white.

Production located in the South: Plastics Manufacturing Negative Impacts

Anchored heavily in the southern U.S., the plastics manufacturing is a vital part of their economy. "America's petrochemical hub has historically been the Gulf Coast of

⁴¹ The life cycle of plastic water bottle is referring to the pathway of the plastic bottle from raw material manufacturing to its disposal to eventually reach a landfill, often referred to as cradle to grave, or raw manufacturing to recycling, often referred to as cradle to cradle.

⁴² Ibid., 2.

Texas and Louisiana.”⁴³ In “The Plastics Pipeline: A Surge of New Production Is on the Way,” journalist Beth Gardiner emphasizes the economic impact of the multi-billion dollar industry that is projected to increase in spite of environmental and health issues associated with production. Health issues are so prevalent that a stretch of the Mississippi River has been characterized as “Cancer Alley.”

The Environmental Integrity Project (EIP) Report, *Plastic Pollution on the Rise*, highlights the areas in Houston subjected to the negative impacts of these production facilities. Plastic is derived from fossil fuel, making the oil and gas rich Texas area the popular home of 90 plastics manufacturing facilities. “The plastics-related facilities contributed 34 percent (19,846 out of 58,383 tons) of the region’s reported NOx, a ground-level ozone (smog) precursor, and 30 percent (13,317 of 43,980 tons) of the region’s reported Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs), which can result into short-term and long-term health effects.”⁴⁴ Many of these plastics manufacturing facilities, which accounted for 22 percent of Houston’s reported industrial air pollution emissions in 2017, are located in low-wealth, working class and minority communities lacking the resources to confront industry and defend themselves against unhealthy emissions and avoidable accidents.”⁴⁵ The Center for Public Integrity’s *America’s Super Polluters* report indicates that 59 percent of the households located within three miles of one of the world’s largest plastics facility, Exxon-Mobil’s Baytown, Texas plant, have an annual

⁴³ Beth Gardiner, “The Plastics Pipeline: A Surge of New Production Is on the Way.” *Yale Environment 360*, December 19, 2019, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/the-plastics-pipeline-a-surge-of-new-production-is-on-the-way>.

⁴⁴ Ari Phillips, “Plastics Pollution on the Rise Report: Growth of Houston-Area Plastics Industry Threatens Air Quality and Public Safety.” The Environmental Integrity Project, September 5, 2019, Accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.environmentalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Plastics-Pollution-on-the-Rise-report-final.pdf>, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

income of less than \$50,000 and 76 percent of those residents are Non-White, Hispanic or Latino.⁴⁶ Not only are these marginalized people subjected to the adverse health impacts linked to adverse environmental conditions, their socio-economic status impacts their ability to improve their conditions. This Texas area is just another example of people of color and families in low income brackets most affected by the manufacturing.

To place these geographical locations in perspective of a historical context the Census of 1860 reflects that South Carolina, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas had some of the highest percentage of slaves of the Southern states with 57.2 percent, 55.1 percent, 47.0 percent and 30 percent, respectively.⁴⁷ Racism is entrenched in systemic and structural bureaucracy as evidenced by the case example of the PCB landfill in South Carolina and plastics manufacturing.

Invisible Shift: Oppressed to Oppressor

Then, how do African American Christians become a part of the system of oppression, given the harmful impacts that environmental degradation and climate change have on the population? Generally, African Americans are not aware of the effect that their very own actions have on environmental degradation simply due to the problem of entrenched systemic environmental racism. While the City of South Fulton landfill fire directly impacts African Americans, the owner who is African American, maybe unwittingly complicit in the production of environmental degradation. Furthermore,

⁴⁶ Jamie Smith Hopkins, "America's Super Polluters." The Center for Public Integrity, September 29, 2016, accessed October 5, 2019, <https://publicintegrity.org/environment/americas-super-polluters/>.

⁴⁷ "Distribution of Slaves in 1860," United States Census Bureau, last modified December 17, 2019, accessed January 17, 2020. https://www.census.gov/history/www/reference/maps/distribution_of_slaves_in_1860.html.

while African Americans are victims of the pollution produced by SPWB, they also purchase and utilize them. How are we to reconcile this contradiction? From a Christian perspective, is this consistent with the love of God towards our sisters and brothers in Christ?

Environmental degradation not only is directed against African Americans, but because of its systemic nature, it enlists African Americans to participate in activities that harm the earth and its inhabitants. This leads me to ask: Was an affordable landfill site available to the African American entrepreneur other than the South Fulton location in the African American neighborhood? Why do the manufacturers of SPWB strategically and selectively target their marketing towards African Americans and other vulnerable populations with deceptive techniques, resulting in increased purchase levels in these communities?

While African Americans and other disenfranchised groups are most adversely impacted, their contribution to and the harmful consequences resulting from punitive environmental actions are invisible to them. This invisibility in some ways coincides with how Iris Marion Young designates oppression : “the disadvantage and injustice of some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.”⁴⁸ While Young was not specifically addressing the paradoxical oppression of African Americans, her terminology is fitting when it comes to the environment injustices that this group experiences and simultaneously unwittingly perpetrates. Young further notes, “these oppressions are structurally reproduced and concealed in major cultural, social, and religious institutions

⁴⁸ Copeland, xxi.

as well as in electoral and legislative procedures and dissenting processes.”⁴⁹ Not only is systemic and structural oppression invisible it is difficult to alleviate.

Copeland defines *social oppression* as “intentional and unintentional, socio-culturally reproduced choices, decisions and actions that unjustly and selectively inflict harm on human persons.”⁵⁰ Shawn Copeland explains, “the grotesque invisibility of social oppression requires the complicity – intentional and unintentional – of human persons, members of the society in question.”⁵¹ Informed by Young’s and Copeland’s thinking, I contend that with respect to environmental harm black America’s role as the oppressed and oppressor are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are bound together in a seamless manner such that the oppressed unknowingly becomes participant to unjust systems. African American’s role as both oppressed and oppressor have been made quite evident in the cases of the COSF landfill and the single use plastic water bottle manufacturing.

Without an intention to support or defend the minority owner of the long-burning and unlicensed landfill, I consider the purchase of the landfill space by the owner as perhaps a business opportunity, albeit in a location very close to a residential district. Yet, in further review of the case, even after the owner is unable to engage in remediation efforts in a timely manner because of a lack of financial resources, state funds that are made available to extinguish the fire and provide the community some relief are approved by the Georgia Board of Natural Resources but then rescinded by the judge. Funded by tire disposal fees and created specifically for these types of necessary

⁴⁹ Copeland, xxii.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

environmental relief efforts, the Georgia Solid Waste Trust Fund release was halted by the judicial system. The landfill situation exemplifies the fact that African Americans and people of color are the target of persuasive advertising encouraging consumeristic behavior in their communities that can make them privy to undertaking business enterprises that will unintentionally shift them from their positions as being oppressed to one of being an oppressor.

The single-use water bottle is another example exemplifying what researchers found regarding: “Latino and African-American parents [who] were more likely to buy bottled water than white parents, and [who] are dishing out more money on bottled water primarily because of perceived health benefits.” The researchers further concluded that these buying patterns “may produce adverse health effects and exacerbate economic disparities.”⁵² To compound this invisible plight, the manufacturing of the plastic water bottle also has negative impacts on the black and Hispanic communities. Research indicates that “adults that consume large volumes of bottled water are more likely than average to be African American, and Latinos.”⁵³ The sentiments of a Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services member rings with this truth: “I think the general public has a misunderstanding of the full breadth of plastic impacts, especially regarding human health.”⁵⁴ With continued purchases of single use bottled water, the “general public” unknowingly participates and contributes to harmful activity.

⁵² Food and Water Watch, 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁴ Gardiner, “The Plastics Pipeline: A Surge of New Production Is On The Way.”

Zion Hill Baptist Church: An Ethnographic Study in Environmental Stewardship⁵⁵

To understand this oppressed-oppressor paradox more fully, however, we need more than case studies and theoretical analysis. To understand how African Americans can simultaneously be harmed by a system while participating in that system, I now turn to analysis of one community and their meaning-making around environmental injustice.

I constructed and conducted an ethnographic research study focused on African American church-goers and their perspective on the relationship between their faith and the environment. As a result of my research study, I aimed to gain an understanding of the motivations and concepts that enable or preclude environmental care in the context of lived faith and to utilize this knowledge to modify behavior and to increase creation care activities with black parishioners. This research study is vital to my thesis in a number of ways: 1) the ethnography site is of an African American Christian community; 2) the study reveals how “beauty” operates in Ruffin’s paradox; 3) the research gives evidence of the invisibility of environmental harm and injustice caused by seemingly ordinary actions demonstrating the oppressed-oppressor paradox; and 4) black Christians connecting faith and the environment is paramount to engaging in a theological response to the oppressed-oppressor paradox. Let us examine the highlights of the study, analysis of key data points, and conclusion.

Research Results

The spring 2019 research study was conducted at Zion Hill Baptist Church, a nearly 148-year old historic Baptist congregation situated in the South Fulton corridor.

⁵⁵ Tina Spencer-Smith, “Study of How African-American Church Goers Connect Their Faith and Creation Care.” (Theological Ethnography for Ministry in Church and Community Final Class Project, Emory University, 2019), 1-15.

Reverend Aaron L. Parker, PhD, a long-time distinguished Morehouse College Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy, has pastored the church for the past twenty-five years. Under his leadership the church has grown to nearly five thousand members, primarily African American. With a keen focus on witnessing to and meeting the needs of the less fortunate, Dr. Parker stresses the importance of Christian outreach, noting it comes from “the countless voices of those who have serious human needs,” and “an inner voice that emerges from and is controlled by the Sacred Spirit of Compassion (the Holy Spirit) that cannot bear to see brothers and sisters made in God’s image and likeness suffer under the cruelties of life.”⁵⁶

Research Tools

Research information included a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data and was captured utilizing a host of instruments including a written survey, one-on-one (person centered) interviews, small focus groups, review of current and archived artifacts, and participant observation.

The Survey Data

There were 206 surveys collected during the eight-week research period between March 30, 2019 and Wednesday, May 1, 2019. The survey findings are based on fifty electronically randomly selected participant responses. Therefore, all references to responses and participants are related to the fifty random surveys only. All participants are African American.

Of the surveyed participants, 82% are female and 18% are male. The respondents are highly educated with most of the respondents of college education level or higher.

⁵⁶Aaron L. Parker. Zion Hill Baptist Church Outreach Ministry Day 2017, page 3.

More than half of the respondents are older and fall into the age category of 62 and beyond. The fewest number of participants are in the youngest age group of 17-29. The age category of 62 and beyond is quite relevant, as it relates to historical experience of African Americans and their relationship to land as well as the reflection capacity of the older generation for segregation and overt racist laws. During the study, it was found that this generation had a keen appreciation for the land, the beauty, and engaged in environmental stewardship activities beyond basic recycling. For example, one participant used a rain barrel to capture water for gardening needs to reduce personal consumption of potable water. When questioned about negative perspectives towards the land because of working the land, many of the respondents in this age group rejected this notion and insisted on focusing on the beauty of the land and spiritual connection.

Most of the respondents, 88%, indicated that they do engage in activities to protect the earth and conserve natural resources such as recycling, saving water, reducing air and water pollution or conserving energy. More than half of these people engage in these activities in their homes and are not coerced by corporate or work policies or pressure. One-third of these respondents are even more committed and engage in these activities in both the home and workplace. Only 12% noted that they do not engage in activities that care for the earth. Engaging in activities that protect the earth may imply an appreciation for the natural environment and the desire to preserve its beauty. With such high level of engagement with environmental care activities, one may be tempted to think that the implication is to avoid or counter the harm brought to African Americans by eliminating contributing factors to environmental degradation. However, that is not the case. We will later learn through the ethnographic research study that the lack of

knowledge of the environmental plight of the African American community inhibits the possibility of such a meaningful intent.

Not one respondent indicated that they do not believe in climate change. Just three respondents noted that they are not sure if they believe in climate change with the remaining 47 or 94% indicating they believe in climate change. The three participants who are unsure about climate change are all college educated and 62 years old or older. Given the adverse environmental, economic, and social impacts of climate change, understanding the implications is crucial. However, understanding that African Americans are at the greatest risk due to impacts of climate change is even more critical, yet is not something that we find in this study. It is imperative for African American Christians to understand they are a population at-risk for climate change in order to make an earnest effort to alleviate the oppressed-oppressor paradox.

Most of the respondents are not familiar and only somewhat familiar with environmental justice. Only 22% indicate that they are familiar with the phrase. This data reveal that the participants do not view caring for the earth from a social justice perspective, but some participants do view caring for the earth with a stewardship lens. This point is striking since “environmental justice campaigns focus on minorities, and especially African American communities, as the most immediate victims of environmental problems.”⁵⁷ The lack of familiarity with environmental justice by 78% of the participants is critical to my thesis. This absence of awareness and knowledge about environmental justice supports my supposition that African Americans and other people of color do not recognize the harm they might cause the environment because such issues

⁵⁷ Amanda J. Baugh, *God and the Green Divide: Religious Environmentalism in Black and White*. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 86.

lack visibility in their communities. If African American Christians lack the knowledge of the environmental, social and economic impact of their actions, what will motivate them to demonstrate consistent environmental care?

Of the 50 respondents, nearly all the people indicate that they link faith and their spiritual beliefs to the environment. Only four people noted that they do not link their faith and the environment, but these four respondents do engage in activities that care for the earth. African American Christians must connect faith and the environment to frame a theological response to the oppressed-oppressor paradox. Connecting faith and the environment will yield understanding about the importance of a response and solution focused on Christian principles.

Regarding terminology, most respondents selected more than one term that they use to represent caring for the earth. In reviewing the data, environmental care and environmental stewardship were the two most popular phrases used by participants. Terms and phrases were used interchangeably, with the most used words or phrases containing the word “environmental.” Environmental bears no explanation.

“Sustainability” was one of the least used terms, which could be related to when the word was introduced into the general public’s vocabulary. “Sustainability first emerged as an explicit social, environmental, and economic ideal in the late 1970s and 1980s.”⁵⁸ Caradonna goes on to note that not one published English book included “sustainability” or “sustainable” in its title prior to 1976. “Creation care,” which carries theological implications, was also not one of the popular phrases. While it may seem that semantics is insignificant in such a study, that is not the case. Language and terminology

⁵⁸ Jeremy L. Caradonna, *Sustainability: A History*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014.), 1, accessed May 3, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

and related meanings are important, given we noted earlier that some words and topics at the start of the environmental movement were limited in scope and represented a form of oppression that excluded African Americans from the dialogue about the environmental movement. While those issues expanded beyond language, the difference in the terminology is important, particularly for that which has a theological connotation.

Interview Highlights

The interviews were conducted primarily among leadership. All participants who were interviewed indicated that they engage in activities that care for the earth. Once participants began to share the types of home environmental activities they participate in, it was evident that some of these leaders were seriously concerned about the condition of the earth because they operated on a level slightly above the average recycler. Overall, Zion Hill's environmental stewardship activities include recycling paper, cardboard and culinary oil, elimination of Styrofoam products and energy conservation practices. However, survey participants believed more could be done, including increased teaching and preaching on environmentally focused topics.

Social justice considerations were not present, which is revealing since African Americans are disproportionately impacted by environmental injustices. A smaller percentage of the participants familiarity with environmental injustices could be an indication that social justice awareness is lost. Two decades ago, James Cone noted, "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."⁵⁹ This subset of data may reveal raising awareness within this population

⁵⁹ Cone, 39.

remains necessary. Additionally, based on the terms that respondents related to the most, my project title should have included the term “environmental” and not “creation care.”

A key outcome of the study found that African American parishioners link faith and the environment but limit their theological positions to stewardship, that while excluding social justice, minimizes their opportunity to have a greater impact on marginalized communities. Environmental injustices are not consistent with how Christians are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. When we are aware of the injustices that contribute to the adverse health conditions that disproportionately affect African American communities, we can increase our efforts to fight against pollution. Yet, the question remains: Is increased awareness enough to motivate the oppressed to substantially shift their thinking and modify behavior patterns to favorably react to environmental needs when oppression, suffering, and other systemic injustices endure? Before I turn away from the burden of oppression to the theological inspiration and response to these injustices, let us circle back to address the “beauty” of Ruffin’s beauty-and-burden paradox. I do so at this point because of the spiritual connection that I believe Ruffin and Walker imply and which is also raised in my ethnographic research.

The Beauty

As we recall, Kimberly Ruffin offers a metaphor of an ecological burden-and-beauty paradox to characterize African American’s relationship to the earth. While we have sufficiently addressed the burden aspect including my own metaphor of oppressed-oppressor paradox when it comes to environmental injustices, I believe it is important to recognize the beauty perspective that Ruffin highlights. She emphasizes the uncovering

of the beauty with environmental justice activism that not only gives voice to underserved communities but is also meant to change perspectives on how African Americans are viewed in relation to their involvement in environmentally related activities. Ruffin keenly focuses on creativity, artistic talent and literature as a means of shifting the dialogue to “undercut” the negativity of burden in her paradox. As a model of this, she describes verbal art below.

Verbal art is crucial to understanding the ways in which African Americans have engaged ecology because it has been an imaginative tool that allowed African Americans to insist on sophisticated relationships with human and nonhuman nature despite the social scripts that have denied their authority to do so.⁶⁰

Ruffin insists that to transform the traditional and (negative) depiction of African Americans and their relationship to the earth, the landscape must be expanded to yield a much more imaginative one, utilizing tools from literature and the like. Ruffin is almost envisioning a reclaiming and amplifying of a positive outlook or “beauty” that has somehow been distorted by colonization, injustices, and racism.

The beauty of the earth resonated with the upper tier age group in my ethnographic study. In fact, the 62-year-old and above age group did not openly admit to the burden aspect of Ruffin’s paradox but readily identified with the beauty concept, even if they would not have employed literature and art to describe the earth’s beauty. As noted earlier, the older respondent group associated the beauty of the earth to spirituality, as they referenced various scriptures to support their understanding of the connection.

⁶⁰ Kimberly N. Ruffin, 12.

Like the elders I have just mentioned, Harris returns to Mrs. Walker to highlight her spiritual connection to the earth as she recalls Walker describes “restoration from the ‘healing breeze’ of the earth,”⁶¹ which implies recovery or the progressive transformation of nature. Beauty is retrieved from the “ecomemory” or reflection on what makes the earth inviting and lovely. Nature is empowering according to Mrs. Walker and the elders in my study. Empowerment lies in the recollection and sharing of stories about their spiritual connection with the earth. Empowerment undergirded by spirituality bestows agency to the oppressed thereby contributing to transformative behavior. The earth is inviting when the beauty and power of nature are combined. We will revisit the empowering aspects of Nature as theological responses to environmental injustices in the next section.

Theological Inspiration

In our day-to-day lives we are faced with a multitude of concerns and dilemmas for which the decisions we make can impact others as well as ourselves. Some responses to complex situations may come with ease and others, particularly moral and ethical ones - that are not so straight forward, may leave us completely unaware of the impact of our actions. A host of factors including experience and religion can influence our reactions and responses. Christians are not immune to thought-twisting moral and ethical dilemmas; they often desire to react with reassuring, responsible, sound, practical and livable responses that contribute to the flourishing of all of humanity.

⁶¹ Harris, 40.

Environmental degradations come about by a system of unjust practices inherently rooted in our American culture that renders disproportionate harm to Nature, African Americans, and other people of color. African Americans have unintentionally become both oppressed and oppressor when it comes to environmental injustices, which has led me to suggest an oppressed-oppressor paradox. This paradox has been evidenced in several ways throughout this thesis and namely in two case studies, the COSF landfill fire and the production of plastic water bottles designed for single use. The City of South Fulton landfill fire harmed a minority community, an oppressive situation created unknowingly by the African American owner of the landfill. Even if absent of punitive smoke and fire, landfills contribute pollutants to the air and other natural resources thereby harming nature and neighboring communities. Further, in the COSF landfill case, some remediation efforts have been hampered perhaps due to racist maneuvering and manipulation of a judicial system denying nature, the community and, possibly, the owner liberation from oppression. Again, I am not exonerating the owner or condoning his despicable actions against a community but highlighting what can be invisible layers of injustice.

Another explicit example of oppressed-oppressor paradox is the manufacturing of the SPWB with layered oppression against minority communities. African Americans, who are disproportionately adversely impacted by such manufacturing, contribute to sales for non-emergency use, unaware of the punitive impacts on communities of color. Both examples are perplexing and present complex problems. To solve these problems, Is raising awareness enough? Raising awareness is just one aspect of the equation. Further, How do African Americans in such a predicament prevent anger from turning into rage or

revenge because of the environmental injustices? I believe for black Christians to liberate themselves from the suffering precipitated by environmental injustices, which also implicates them as oppressors, a theological response via environmental stewardship, love, and justice—is in order. While my ethnographic study revealed the presence of stewardship as a value held by the church community, I maintain that the trio of stewardship, love and justice align black Christians with a God who resists injustice of any kind and who brokers love and justice.

Relevance of Religion and Sacredness of Spirituality

Spirituality and religion are important to African Americans. Africans were strong spiritual beings long before being brought without permission to this country and, as an oppressed and tormented people, they found solace in spirituality. “The enslaved people faced their suffering and oppression through nourishing their interior lives in prayer.”⁶² Copeland emphasizes the source of strength that Jesus provided for the oppressed:⁶³

Caught within the labyrinth of the social oppression of slavery, black people fixed their eyes on Jesus and his cross as they grappled with the absurdity of enslavement. They took Jesus to themselves as one of them; the innocence, agony and cruelty of his suffering as so very like their own. The enslaved people met Jesus’s compassion with compassion, his love with love, his care with care.

Today, black Christians must also turn to Christian disciplines, principles and values of stewardship (care), love, and justice (compassion) to face the oppressed-oppressor realities of today.

⁶² Copeland, 31.

⁶³ Ibid, 226.

Christians move towards the biblical text for guidance on our thoughts, actions, and behaviors. However, even with the reassurance of scripture, complex issues abound exposing human frailty and faults that can leave us searching for answers. As black Christians gain an understanding of the impact of environmental degradation on their own communities, this knowledge should transform behavior, alleviating some of the oppression which must be confronted.

While African Americans and communities of color are harmed the most by unjust actions, air is a shared natural resource. How are an oppressed people to exercise an ethic that transforms behavior and that favors the oppressed *and* oppressor? The most logical behavior in response to illogical circumstances faced by the oppressed rests on a theologically framed answer. Black people must act to increase favorable environmental impacts, which can be accomplished through their practice of spirituality.

Care for the Creation

We are all connected. The earth and all its elements work together, synergistically and systemically. Paying attention to the earth with a keen sensitivity, the earth provides us instructions on how to handle it. While all of earth's elements operate dynamically, Rasmussen keenly points out that the integrity of creation calls for "recognition and response for—boundaries and integrated patterns."⁶⁴ These boundaries are critical to the well-being of life as well as example-setting for humanity. Setting boundaries results in treating the earth with more regard. It requires pausing as well as carefully and lovingly attending to others outside of ourselves. Caring for the earth's environment is an expression of love of and justice for the earth and its inhabitants.

⁶⁴ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 100.

Taking consistent intentional and conscientious steps towards environmental care contributes to the flourishing of humanity and is a selfless act that expresses love for others, despite suffering. To overcome an oppressed-oppressor paradox requires “a demonstration of love of God and neighbor in which the deed of Christ is reduplicated.”⁶⁵ Expanding on this realization in Christ, I apply the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who stated it is a “summons to concrete practices of self-sacrificial love for enemy and neighbor.”⁶⁶

God charges humanity in Genesis to care for the earth and its inhabitants. Our Creator goes even deeper in the Levitical laws (19:18b) with a call to love thy neighbor, which is further supported by the Lukan writer in the Gospels (10:27). God bestows upon humanity a compelling charge of love and justice for all of creatures.

Recognition of and response to the divine directives within today’s scope and context of these environmental dynamics is challenging. Willis Jenkins points out in *The Future of Ethics* that when the practice of Christianity escapes reality and, if viewed as a confrontation by God, who continues to call persons into relations of love and justice, Christians have extraordinary pressure to expand the competency of love and justice.⁶⁷ Scholar Rob Nixon further asserts: “One of the most pressing challenges of our age is how to adjust our rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice.”⁶⁸ Exposing maltreatment of the earth and educating disengaged communities and groups on how to mitigate harmful actions against the earth is an expression of love

⁶⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Theologian of Public Life*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 176-183.

⁶⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963).

⁶⁷ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 23.

⁶⁸ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 2011), 8.

that could result in liberating actions by African American Christians towards the earth and thus healing the land. Next, we will explore the spirituality of environmental stewardship.

Stewardship

When considering Christian sources for environmental care, it can be difficult to assess the meaning of God entrusting humanity in Genesis 1:28 with “dominion over.” There has been extensive debate over the implications of this phrase, with some interpreters pointing to a meaning of superiority and others arguing for a meaning of stewardship. Lynn White supports the former interpretation when he argues for the “mandate given to humanity to ‘rule’ the animals and ‘subdue’ the earth (1:26:28) may be seen as the key biblical text undergirding the kind of damaging anthropocentrism.”⁶⁹ On the other hand, some ancient text “reinterpret the notion of human dominion in terms of a model of stewardship, an approach that highlights the use of kingly language and interprets it within the broader treatment of kingship in the Old Testament.”⁷⁰ Biblical scholar Westermann argues that kingly rule was not about dominion and exploitation but more focused on the king’s personal “responsibility for the well-being and prosperity of those he rules.”⁷¹ Hence, the interpretation of human responsibility for the earth predominates interpreting humans as holding ruling positions over the earth.

“Till it and Keep it”

I argue for the latter interpretation as further supported by God’s command in the second creation story to “till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15), which calls all humanity to

⁶⁹ David G. Horrell, *The Bible and The Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology* (Oakville, CT: DBBC, 2010), 26.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

stewardship and care for every creature. While “till,” עָבַד, in Hebrew means to work or serve⁷² and “keep” can be interpreted as maintenance, preservation and protection, the phrase is a charge of care. Recognizing this command for care, Pope Francis asserts “the destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement.”⁷³

Efforts towards intentional environmental care can be characterized as acts of love and justice for humanity and all of creation. But even with the call for earthly stewardship and care for and by all of humanity, we can further examine this care from a race perspective to spiritually deal with an oppressed-oppressor paradox. African Americans and other people of color bear the unbalanced burden of the absence of environmental care and invisible systemic and structural racist practices.

Justice

Because of the absence of environmental care, many are led to seek justice to right this wrong. Justice enhances care and compassion. Environmental justice eradicates environmental injustice. African American Christians have long advocated for justice for those on the margins and based on class, gender, religion, color, and socioeconomics. Environmental situations are no different. In fact, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s fight for civil rights of the sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968 included his “vision for improving the living conditions of poor African Americans, [which] was inherently environmental.”⁷⁴ How does justice help one who finds themselves in the twisted

⁷² “Blue Letter Bible,” accessed December 13, 2019, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/Lexicon/Lexicon.cfm?strongs=H5647&t=KJV>.

⁷³ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home, 5.

⁷⁴ Glave, 132.

paradox of double oppression? Christians have long leaned to Jesus as a source of hope and comfort. As noted earlier, there were a few examples of the oppressed seeking environmental justice through spiritual connection. You may recall the African American women in the Warren County landfill case who “mixed prayer and supplication” in their fight for justice as an example of this.

Shawn Copeland reminds us of the strength Jesus provided for the enslaved Africans. Copeland asserts that “Jesus identified with and preached the gospel to those who were poor and afflicted, oppressed and dispossessed.”⁷⁵ Enslaved blacks believed that Jesus “would help them to negotiate this world with righteous anger and dignity.”⁷⁶ Is righteous indignation representative of how black Christians should feel in any one of the oppressive environmental situations described in this research? A relationship with God through Jesus Christ helps one to fight for justice in such scenarios. Justice strengthens love and treats the paradox of being the oppressor while simultaneously being oppressed.

Love

An outward expression of care and justice is a demonstration of love for all that is adversely impacted by negative acts towards the environment. Because all the components of the earth work together in a synergistic, symbiotic, and synthesized natural systemic manner, resulting in a degree of interconnectedness, love is able to dismantle the oppressed-oppressor paradox. Theologically, we are called to love one another. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus makes clear the significance of love in His response to the scribes, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with

⁷⁵ Copeland, 25.

⁷⁶ Copeland, 26.

all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (12:30-31). In this Markan text, Jesus emphasizes love captured in the Hebrew scriptures and, in the Lukan account of loving thy neighbor, the writer presents a keen example of love for those who are oppressed.

Love Thy Neighbor

In this familiar New Testament pericope found in Luke 10:25-38, like Mark’s version, Jesus relies on the Old Testament law of love to explain how one should treat others. Love cannot be excluded when examining the question of inflicting harm as a result of a burning landfill fire or use of disposable plastic water bottle by African Americans. Taking conscientious steps to avoid environmental harm such as air pollution described in the case studies takes into consideration the health and well-being of others, contributes to the flourishing of human existence and is a selfless act that expresses love for others.

However, is love enough to propel a race of people to take provocative action towards change that does not render immediate visible results, particularly when not doing so seems more beneficial? Closely examining the impact of the landfill fire and SPWB production reveals environmental injustices towards people of color and those living in lower income neighbor[hoods]. God’s call for neighborly love obliges Christians act responsibly towards such neighbors.

A theological response in the form of love can manifest itself in different ways. Given the eco-womanist perspective of Melanie Harris, Alice Walker, and other African American environmentalists, let us turn our attention to how love can look in African

American worship. If we do so, we must consider the following: How can an African American Christian mother in an oppressive environmental injustice situation find liberation? What does a theological response relating to air pollution look like? How should black mothers living near a Houston plastic manufacturing facility respond if their child suffers from asthma yet the bottled water from the neighboring production facility is exacerbating the asthmatic condition of their child which then negatively affects their school performance? While there are numerous community and civic activist actions that can be taken into account, let us look more closely at an eco-womanist perspective, specifically targeting air pollution for further insight into how black Christians can respond, lovingly.

Eco-womanist Perspective

An eco-womanist perspective extends the focus from environmental justice to “the connections between black women’s health, spiritualities, and ecological concerns.”⁷⁷ Breathing deeply and softly inhaling air is one of the few physical acts that is on-going throughout worship; in womanist spirituality, it is a time of “deep kneading of humanity and divinity into one breath.”⁷⁸ Thinking more deeply about breathing with respect to the environment, one can see how the use and abuse of air as a natural resource is related to the oppression of black women. Diana Hayes reminds us that “for 450 years, black women have struggled, fought, and climbed...carrying their children.”⁷⁹ Rhythmic

⁷⁷ Harris, 1-60.

⁷⁸ Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville; Abington Press, 1995), 11.

⁷⁹ Diana L. Hayes. *No Crystal Stair: Womanist Spirituality*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), xi.

breathing and “breaths of life” helped them to overcome oppression, mistreatment, and invisibility while also reinforcing they were created in the image of God.

Yet simultaneously, the social, economic and health impacts of air pollution upon black women and other the marginalized populations have adversely impacted their economic status making their struggles for justice even more challenging and greater. Womanist spirituality in worship can lead to healing and transformation in dealing with perilous life challenges. The prophet Isaiah 41:1 says, “Keep silence before me, O islands; and let the people renew their strength.” It starts with entering the worship moment of silence with an attitude of sacredness and using the time, introspectively.

Pondering

When we (as black women and the community) engage in self-introspection, we are reaching into the crevices of our memory banks and recalling our lived experiences. Copeland and Harris both found agency in recalling memories. At these times of pondering, we are able to scrutinize the past, present and the future. Thoughts of family, friends, our life-sustaining work, and church life allow us to have powerful encounters with our historical selves, our present situations and anticipation of the future. These experiences and expectations can range from cares and concerns for our own well-being or that of a loved one to joy and contentment. As we ponder and contemplate about life, how we approach sacred space in the moments of the worship is where we can find liberation and healing.

As I observe the parishioners during worship at my Baptist congregation of Zion Hill in the metro Atlanta area, there is a range of experiences and emotions exhibited. Some black women and men can be seen quietly consuming the moment with peace.

Others are smiling exuding joy. Yet, others can be seen expanding their sacred space with whispers of soft chatter to their immediate neighbors. Then, there are some who can be witnessed with tears flowing, streaming down their faces and hands cupped underneath their chins or hands covering their faces, perhaps, to hide their pain, as they ponder. Pondering transforms space of silence into theological reflection about our daily lived experiences, allowing us to lean more into Jesus.

Lynne Westfield reminds us that because Jesus stood on the side of the oppressed and sufferers, “Jesus identifies with, understands, and embraces the struggle of African American women”⁸⁰ and in “the everydayness of their lives, African American women understand the profound notion that the empathy and compassion of Jesus exists for them, then and now.”⁸¹ Thus, approaching worship as an opportunity to commune with Jesus is liberating and can “transform our nothingness into love.”⁸² We reimage this quiet time as one that is ritualistic and sacred.

Prayer

Westfield challenges us to expand our thinking about ritual and sacraments, as “any profound experience that puts us in touch with the very mystery of life, thus putting us in touch with God.”⁸³ Prayer during a time of silence permits a time to place all of the experiences evoked through pondering at the throne of our Almighty God. “Silence has a long and honored place in all religious traditions as a means of communication with the

⁸⁰ Lynne N. Westfield. *Dear Sister: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality*. (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 79.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸³ Westfield, 81.

One who is beyond all names and all human language.”⁸⁴ Westfield agrees that healing occurs in how we approach the space. Consistent with Westfield’s theology, calling God into conversation in such spaces, “makes available the enfleshment of Jesus. The dominion of Jesus becomes a ‘now’ experience with—bodies for healing, strength, nourishment, self-affirmation, and power.”⁸⁵

Releasing our challenging circumstances and salty situations to God relieves us of these seemingly boundless burdens. In this prayer time, black women call on the Lord on behalf of ourselves and our neighbors and those who are oppressed. It is in these precious moments that we can whisper to God about the family member, who may be suffering from diseases related to air pollution or the child who has increased asthma related to polluted air. Not only can we lift the sufferers in prayer, but we can lift a word of prayer in this sacred time on behalf of the air that we breathe.

As black women pray during worship, we convene with God, acknowledging the power of God and our reliance on God. Respecting God-talk, Diana Hayes says it this way: “I spoke to God in those brief interludes. I believe that God responded, not so much in words, but in a deep sense of commitment and love.”⁸⁶ When pouring out to God, we can pray as Hannah did—“Hannah was praying in her heart, silently. Her lips moved, but no sound was heard” (I Samuel 1:13). While the issue may not go away immediately, transferring our woes and sorrows to God transforms our lives and delivers a peace that deserves a powerful praise.

⁸⁴ Marjorie Proctor-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. (Marjorie Proctor-Smith, 2013), 102.

⁸⁵ Westfield, 86.

⁸⁶ Hayes, xix.

Praise

In worship, we can also praise God. “Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary,” the Psalmist exclaims in 150:1— “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” (Psalm 150:6). Praise is an exclamation of gratitude, proclamation of deliverance and expectation of hope. Our confidence in God’s ability to deliver rests in the power of the knowledge of God’s love for us. While we may readily think of vocal praise, inner praise in the depths of the soul is equally liberating.

Praising God during worship is to claim and declare victory and rejoice with a Hannah-like praise, a Hallelujah praise. Hannah proclaimed, “I’m bursting with God-news! I’m walking on air. I’m laughing at my rivals. I’m dancing my salvation” (I Samuel 2:1, MSG). When we approach the prelude with a keen sense of sacredness, as Westfield might describe as a sacrament, then praise will surely follow.

An ecowomanist response is just one expression of love in the context of a womanist spirituality that can be expressed on behalf of those who is suffering. Such acts of pondering, prayer and praise can lead to liberation and healing from oppressive situations. An ecowomanist perspective is bound by love, is essential to the theological response for provoking positive action with regard to environmental care. Love connects to care and is the catalyst for action on behalf of all people; working for justice strengthens the love and care demonstrated against oppression.

Worship when approached in a sacred and reverent manner can yield liberation and healing for not just the black woman but African American Christians who find themselves in oppressive environmental situations. When we locate ourselves in the sanctuary before worship, and during the silent time, we stand on edge of something new.

We open ourselves to the possibility of healing through intense pondering, prayer and praise, reminding us that “the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (Habakkuk 2:20, NRSV). African American Christians can relate to quiet time before worship, a sacred time essential to moving from oppression to liberation. How black Christians worship is just one example of the ways in which love is expressed on behalf of black people who may struggle with marginalization. However, this demonstration of love is representative of God’s love for us and is just one part of a trio including stewardship and justice, all of which are necessary for progressive action on environmental issues. This three-pronged approach is critical to carrying out a theological response to the oppressed-oppressor paradox made manifest when speaking of environmental injustices.

Conclusion

African American Christians knowingly and unknowingly contribute to environmental harm and destruction. Focused on the environmental degradation of air pollution from landfills and single use plastic water bottle manufacturing, I have illustrated how the oppressed can become an oppressor through racially structured systems, which disproportionately impact people of color. My previously conducted ethnographic study provided keen insight into this topic.

Kimberly Ruffin's burden-to-beauty paradox serves as a metaphor for the oppressed-oppressor paradox that emerges when talking about African American Christians and environmental injustice. A theological response to the paradox and to environmental degradation favors stewardship, justice, and love. I have explored and drawn attention to the oppressive and systemic racism that is revealed when environmental decisions are demanded of the black American and Christian communities. Capitalism is the culprit for insensitivity towards nature and the compromising of environmental integrity, which not only harms the natural environment but also disrupts justice for the marginalized and disenfranchised, namely African American people and other people of color. My goal was to explore this subject matter from the perspectives of what it means to be an African American Christian and wrestle with environmental degradation, making the argument that how we respond is based on how we commune with God.

There are several scholarly writings about environmental degradation. This thesis was not purposed to prove the degradation of the environment but to scrutinize and highlight the invisible systemic racism that unwittingly enlists the contributions of

African Americans as oppressed and oppressor. A theological response allows black and Christian folks to take meaningful spiritual action by not just eliminating environmental degradation but engaging in environmental care. Stewardship, love, and justice are key Christian values that I believe are necessary to find liberation for African American Christians, who find themselves twisted by such an illogical paradox. I also draw on ecowomanist scholarship and resources to supply examples of how womanist spirituality and worship can offer disentanglement from the oppressed position and for liberation for the oppressor.

Finally, given environmental injustices and the disproportionate impact on the health and welfare of African American and communities of color, I am concerned about the current COVID-19/Coronavirus pandemic. While it is still early, reports are indicating that African Americans are the most vulnerable population and most adversely affected. Such a global health crisis makes protecting our environment for the sake of the people even more important.

Let us return to the City of South Fulton landfill fire, which is where we began our story about the importance of stewarding the environment in communities of color, and particularly in the black community. To my knowledge, Tandy Ross Bullock is out of jail and some limited clean-up efforts have occurred. The fire continues to burn sporadically and remains a harmful nuisance to the community. At the time of this writing, the city was not permitted to keep the half a million-dollar relief fund for clean-up, so the community is at the mercy of the financial resources of the city. COSF Council Woman, Mrs. Naeema Gilyard, has initiated the development of an environmental justice group focused on issues related to the fire and she continues the fight alongside

community members. As the fight for justice continues, we turn to God for hope, human flourishing and a brighter day.

Bibliography

- Baugh, Amanda J. *God and the Green Divide: Religious Environmentalism in Black and White*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017.
- Cone, James H. "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?," *Cross Currents* 50, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2000): 36-46. <http://www.crosscurrents.org/cone.htm>.
- Copeland, M. Shawn. *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience*. New York: Orbis Books, 2018.
- Caradonna, Jeremy L. *Sustainability: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014. Accessed May 3, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home, Vatican Press, 2015.
- Glave, Dianne D. *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage*. Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2010.
- Harris, Melanie L. *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017.
- Hayes, Diane. *No Crystal Stair: Womanist Spirituality*. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2016.
- Horrell, David G. *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*. Oakville, CT: DBBC, 2010.
- Jenkins, Willis. *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Strength to Love*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Theologian of Public Life*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Proctor-Smith, Marjorie. *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. Marjorie Proctor-Smith, 2013.
- Rasmussen, Larry L. *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Ruffin, Kimberly N. *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*. Athens; London: University of Georgia Press, 2010. Accessed April 17, 2020.
www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46nkgt.7.
- Tessum, Christopher W et al. "Inequity in consumption of goods and services adds to racial-ethnic disparities in air pollution exposure." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* vol. 116,13 (2019): 6001-6006. doi:10.1073/pnas.1818859116.
- Townes, Emilie M. *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*, Nashville; Abington Press, 1995.
- Westfield, Lynne N. *Dear Sister: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001.

References

- Brasch, Ben. Atlanta Journal and Constitution (AJC). Burning landfill owner gets more time from Fulton judge. March 29, 2019. <https://www.ajc.com/news/local-govt--politics/owner-burning-landfill-gets-more-time/Mp2yw8wTdGnv5qMaii80xK/?fbclid=IwAR3EM-TcDoNSvLYwcbJFJGLfLj24RVDOQCpaOZUORK0vRIffLWiIQHk146I>.
- City of South Fulton. U.S. Demographic Data. <https://www.cityofsouthfultonga.gov/DocumentCenter/View/245/City-Demographic-Profile-?bidId=>. Accessed April 10, 2020.
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). <https://www.epa.gov/pcbs/learn-about-polychlorinated-biphenyls-pcbs>, accessed April 6, 2020.
- EPS, A Montrose Environmental Group Company. Air and Potable Water Sampling Results Bishop Road Landfill, Sandy Spring, Georgia: 2020, ii.
- Food and Water Watch. "Take Back the Tap: The Big Business Hustle of Bottled Water." Accessed October 3, 2019. <https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/insight/take-back-tap-big-business-hustle-bottled-water>.
- Gardiner. <https://e360.yale.edu/features/the-plastics-pipeline-a-surge-of-new-production-is-on-the-way>.
- Hopkins, Jamie Smith. "America's Super Polluters." The Center for Public Integrity, September 29, 2016. Accessed October 5, 2019. <https://publicintegrity.org/environment/americas-super-polluters/>.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2014: Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

McKenna, Phil. "EPA Finds Black Americans Face More Health-Threatening Air Pollution," Inside Climate News, March 2, 2018. Accessed December 3, 2019, <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/01032018/air-pollution-data-african-american-race-health-epa-research>.

Parker, Aaron L. Zion Hill Outreach Ministry Day, 2017.

Phillips, Ari. "Plastics Pollution on the Rise." *Environmental Integrity Project*, September 5, 2019. Accessed October 4, 2019. <https://www.environmentalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Plastics-Pollution-on-the-Rise-report-final.pdf>.

Spencer-Smith, Tina. 2019. "Study of How African-American Church Goers Connect Their Faith and Creation Care." Theological Ethnography for Ministry in Church and Community Final Class Project. Emory University.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Emergency Preparedness and Response. Facts About Phosgene, <https://emergency.cdc.gov/agent/phosgene/basics/facts.asp>, Accessed April 6, 2020.

The Department of Energy. Environmental Justice History. Office of Legacy Management. <https://www.energy.gov/lm/services/environmental-justice/environmental-justice-history>, March 30, 2020.

United States Department of Commerce. 2020. "Distribution of Slaves in 1860." United States Census Bureau. Last modified December 17, 2019. Accessed January 17, 2020. https://www.census.gov/history/www/reference/maps/distribution_of_slaves_in_1860.html.