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## How Does It Feel to be an Environmental Problem?

### Studying Religion and Ecology in the African Diaspora<sup>1</sup>

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African Americans developed what in modern terms might be regarded an environmental ethos long before the environmental justice movement, before the civil rights movement, and before they were emancipated and had citizenship rights conferred upon them.

—**Mart A. Stewart**<sup>2</sup>

We inherit colonial habits along with degraded habitats . . . Again and again, catastrophe generates public demands for protection and renovation, followed by a new cycle of oblivion and ruthless exploitation.

—**David Lowenthal**<sup>3</sup>

1. The author would like to thank her parents, Rhonda L. Smith, Joseph L. Smith, and Melvin Clay, along with Jennifer Baldwin, and the editors for their assistance and feedback.

2. Stewart, in *To Love the Wind and the Rain*, 17.

3. Lowenthal, "Empires and Ecologies: Reflections," 232.

“Do we have any reason to believe that the culture most responsible for the ecological crisis will also provide the moral and intellectual resources for the earth’s liberation? . . . I have a deep suspicion about the theological and ethical values of white culture and religion.”

—James Cone<sup>4</sup>

“We have wanted all our lives to know that Earth, who has somehow obtained human beings as her custodians, was also capable of creating humans who could minister to her needs, and the needs of her creation.

*We are the ones.*”

—Alice Walker<sup>5</sup>

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois posits that the unasked question directed towards blacks during the post-emancipation era was “How does it feel to be a problem?” DuBois continues to be renowned for his description of practices and ideas about race that result in the maintenance of hierarchical social ordering and asymmetrical power relations among human groups as “the problem of the color-line.”<sup>6</sup> Philosopher and Du Bois scholar Nahum Chandler notes, “The problem of the negro in America was long understood within the African American intellectual community in the United States as a fundamental part of the question of colonialism and its aftermath.”<sup>7</sup> This chapter posits the question, “How does it feel to be an environmental problem?” in order to investigate current postcolonial, post-industrial contexts and the implications of their aftermath—ecologically and socially—as well as to challenge thinking that reproduces constructions of race and environmental degradation solely as a problem for people of color. Throughout this essay, I question how and why black bodies become a problem in the discourse of Religion and Ecology. Put another way, how did the phrase “environmental racism” become a signifier and substitute for people of African descent as religious and environmental agents in much of Religion and Ecology literature?

4. Cone, “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” 31.

5. Walker, *We Are the Ones*.

6. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 37, 34.

7. Chandler, “W. E. B. Du Bois as a Problem for Thought,” 44.

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The study of African diasporic religious traditions<sup>8</sup> in the United States and their ecological perspectives has long been connected to the historical beginnings of the environmental justice movement in the early 1980's. Yet to limit the discussion of religious and environmental themes among African Diaspora peoples to environmental racism and justice oversimplifies the complex cultural and communal contexts in which Blacks experience nature and live out their environmental ethos. My aim is to explore theoretical and methodological issues related to the study of Religion and Ecology in the African Diaspora. By breaking with some thematic and conceptual limitations of previous scholarship and building upon the legacies of environmental justice, religious studies, Religion and Ecology/Nature, and ecocriticism, I hope to open up new directions for future research.

I begin by reviewing popular anthologies, journals, and encyclopedias in Religion and Ecology/Religion and Nature, noting that this field tends to conflate the African Diaspora with the category of environmental racism and that the actual religions of the African Diaspora religions are only marginally incorporated into the religious and environmental histories of the Americas. As a response and corrective, I assert that a 'world religions' approach to the African Diaspora is inadequate and suggest that the broader interdisciplinary framework of religion and globalization is better suited to analyze diasporic religions.

My next task is to contextualize and historicize the study of the African Diaspora religions by arguing that our historic horizons begin not with environmental racism and activism, but with the analytical concept of diaspora and the Black Atlantic diaspora to the Americas.

8. For this essay, the phrases 'African diasporic religious traditions,' 'black religions' and 'African American religions' are used synonymously. Although the terms do not completely equate in light of popular and disciplinary usage, I see sufficient overlap in the terms to take this liberty. African diasporic religious traditions are also known as African-derived religions and New World African religions. I situate US North American black traditions within a hemispheric perspective of the Americas, although they are indisputably transcultural and have multiple forms and trajectories. African Americans are not limited to US-born black citizens, and the term as used here encompasses the entire American hemisphere, thus giving preference to an inclusive yet heterogeneous view of blacks from South, Central, and North America, the Caribbean, as well as more recent African immigrants to the United States. I use the terms 'black' and 'African American' interchangeably; however, the term 'black' may also reference peoples of African descent globally, including African and African Diaspora peoples such as Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Cubans, Haitians, Black British, Afro-Caribbeans, Dominicans, and Afro-Latin Americans or global peoples who self-identify politically as black.

The concept of transcultural ecological knowledge is offered to describe dynamic aspects of cultural contact and exchange, adaptive practices, and intergenerational transmissions of knowledge, taking into account the ecological interventions and unpredictable landscape transformations that result from these processes.

Throughout the chapter, three emergent themes for the study of the African Diaspora in Religion and Ecology are highlighted: the intersections of nature and race; the diversity of transatlantic Black identities and intra-diasporic religious pluralism;<sup>9</sup> and the possibilities and limitations of inheriting environmental racism as a proxy for the study of African American religions and ecology. Building on these themes, I conclude with recommendations for further study.

### Marginality and Conflation of African Diaspora Religions within Religion and Ecology

The relatively rare attention to the categories “black religions”, “African American religions”, or “African Diaspora religions” within popular anthologies and edited volumes on Religion and Ecology reflects what historian of religion Charles Long has described as the invisibility of black religion in American religious history. Long asserts that many of the approaches in the study of American religions and non-Christian religions have rendered the religious reality of non-Europeans to a state of invisibility or addenda because religion is defined either as revealed Christianity and its institutions or as civil religion; thus functioning to justify the history of European immigrants.<sup>10</sup> Gaps in teaching resources are also evident in the neglect of African diasporic religions or black environmental thought as viable topics in many Religion and Ecology and Environmental Ethics syllabi.<sup>11</sup>

9. Of course, this chapter itself does not fully escape the US-centrism that is common in the field of Religion and Ecology; however, I recognize the need to expand research agendas to reflect other global geographies of religion.

10. Long, *Significations*, 162.

11. This statement reflects syllabi on the Religion and Ecology and environmental ethics from four syllabi project websites: The *AAR Syllabus Project*—Religion and Ecology, The *Forum on Religion and Ecology* syllabi page, *Wabash Center Internet Guide to Religion: Religious Thought—Environmental Ethics—Religious Aspects*, and the *Environmental Ethics Syllabus Project*, edited by Robert Hood.

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When one reads the journals *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, *Ecotheology*, and *Journal of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, the phrase “African American” is notably rare, and little evidence can be found of research concerning the African Diaspora. “Racism” and “environmental justice” are far more common, but these are not adequate substitutes for the study of diasporic religions and their environmental praxis.<sup>12</sup>

One need only consider the titles and content of the ten volume Religions of the World and Ecology series, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim to illustrate this point further.<sup>13</sup> While African Indigenous religions are included in the volume on ‘Indigenous Traditions’ and African American religious thought is represented in the ‘Christianity and Ecology’ volume, there are no chapters devoted to Religion and Ecology in the African Diaspora as it is more broadly conceived. Contributors Williams and Miller-Travis focus on public policy concerns and environmental justice praxis respectively, while Kalu focuses on development, environmental degradation, and indigenous African worldviews. Similarly, in Tucker’s 2003 book *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter into Their Ecological Phase*, religious pluralism, diversity, and multiculturalism are celebrated, but diasporic religions are absent from the dialogue. In Tucker’s book, environmental racism is the only snapshot taken of Black life.

The edited volumes *This Sacred Earth*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb; *Worldviews, Religion, and Ecology*, edited by Richard C. Foltz; and *Eco-spirit* edited by Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller include US African American scholars and address issues of environmental racism and ecological justice; however, these books do not delve deeply into the implications of the colonial origins of the analytical category of ‘religion’ and

12. Sadly, African American religions are not the only traditions treated marginally in Religion and Ecology. Mexican and Latin American religious traditions, for example, are also frequently missed in the Western/Indigenous and North/South geographical dichotomies. Although geographers like Toledo and Bartera-Bassols have contributed extensive research on ethnoecological practices, cosmological frameworks, and biodiversity among indigenous rural communities in Mexico, very little research has been done on what is happening to Mesoamerican ethnoecology and religious practices in the midst of contemporary labor migrations to the United States; estimated to represent over eleven million immigrants (Bartera-Bassols and Toledo, “Ethnoecology of the Yucatec Maya,” 9–41).

13. See the Religions of the World and Ecology series edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim.

the imperial practices of power that were part and parcel of the study of indigenous and diasporic African peoples. Other anthologies, such as *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African American Environmental History* edited by Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll; and *Restoring the Connection to the Natural World: Essays on the African American Environmental Imagination*, edited by Sylvia Mayer, do an excellent job of excavating African American environmental history and deconstructing social constructions of nature and race. In these cases, however, religion is ancillary to the main historical emphasis of these books and the study of African American religions is limited to the historical role of black Protestants in environmental activism. Lastly, encyclopedias and overviews of Religion and Ecology, such as Bron Taylor's *Encyclopedia of Religion, Nature, and Culture*; and Roger S. Gottlieb's *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* include essays on African diasporic religions, yet there are few cross-references between African Indigenous and African Diaspora religions.<sup>14</sup>

The limited attention to African diasporic religions and their confluences with environmental racism reveal unresolved interpretive issues, which primarily take two forms. In the first form, environmental racism becomes that which represents all black experiences and knowledge of the environment. In the second form, U.S. black churches become that which represents all expressions of African diasporic religiosities. Race becomes the silent partner for both of these confluences, as social constructions of race and the collective actions and conditions of racialized peoples are key components of American understandings of religions, environments, and nature. These confluences are predicated on a short-sighted view of environmental history, religious history in the Americas, and the legacies of complex, often contradictory race relations; resulting in the reduction of black histories and social spaces to recent social movements or ecosystems of victimization and violence.

Several correctives are available to future research. One is to redirect research by asking: "How do race, religion, and environmentalism intersect currently and historically? How do religions respond to racial oppression and structural racism and mobilize for sustainability in politically progressive ways?" This calls for scholars to interrogate the meanings and political dynamics of racism in a globalized, 'colorblind,'

14. See Jenkins, "Religion and Ecology: A Review Essay," 7.

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post-civil rights era.<sup>15</sup> Another corrective is to recognize environmental degradation as one of several forms of environmental injustice.<sup>16</sup> Geographer Laura Pulido, based on data from her research on urban development in Southern California, draws the conclusion that the historical processes of suburbanization and decentralization as means of securing white privilege are less obvious forms of racism.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, environmentalist and Islamic scholar Asghar Ali recognizes differential exposure to environmental racism among racial/ethnic groups, yet advocates shared responsibility to dismantle environmental injustice. Ali further explains, “Justice means that racism should not be conflated with other categories and thus made obscure and invisible but that it should be openly discussed with the full participation of all.”<sup>18</sup>

Religion and Ecology needs to maintain caution against overdependence on outmoded epistemic foundations deeply rooted in nineteenth century evolutionist studies for the academic study of Indigenous cultures (formerly described as ‘primitive’ and ‘emotional’) and African Diasporic cultures (formerly described as ‘deviant and inferior’ or ‘innately religious’). Religious scholars Talal Asad, Sam Gill, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Russell T. McCutcheon have each discussed the history and politics of the analytical categories ‘religion’ and ‘world religion’ in relation to the imposed emic perspectives, power relations, and social hierarchies implicitly contained within Western religious classification systems. Many African Diasporic religions, because of their unique social forms, may not demonstrate the universalized comparative features of social movements designated as ‘world religions’ and so often become marginalized or ignored within religious scholarship.

Thus, the ‘world religions’ approach to Religion and Ecology leaves much to be desired for the study of the African Diaspora. Approaches that assume cultural variations and encompass an understanding of complexity related to religious traditions practiced in different geographical contexts are more helpful for the study of diasporic religions, transnational identities and belongings, and multiple heritages. These approaches are characterized by caution and limitation; as anthropologist Steven

15. Winant, “Teaching Race and Racism in the Twenty-First Century,” 14–22.

16. Bullard, “Environmental Justice Challenges,” 34–35.

17. Pulido, “Rethinking Environmental Racism,” 12–40.

18. Ali, “Conceptual Framework for Environmental Justice,” 51–52.

Vertovec reminds us, no one framework can completely address our endeavors to examine, interpret, and re-imagine religion and diaspora.<sup>19</sup>

### Diaspora, Ecology, and Africans in the Making of the Americas

One of the first questions concerning African American religions and ecology should be: “What happens to ecological knowledge and religious practices in migrations and diasporas?” The theoretical framework of diaspora has been employed for several decades to describe the dispersal and displacement of diverse African populations from Africa during the four centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. The word diaspora itself, traditionally associated with Jewish dispersions, is defined as “the means to scatter over or spread.”<sup>20</sup>

In the forced migrations of Africans from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Africans became involuntary migrant populations to the Americas and the Caribbean. As migrants, African populations adapted their ecological practices to their new local biodiversity by revising their understanding of nature through (a) transported landscapes<sup>21</sup> (b) their own exploration and observation of the climate and environment and application of prior ecological knowledge, (c) their interactions and exchanges (including alliances, conflicts, intermarriages, and sexual violence) with indigenous Amerindian peoples and Europeans, (d) new knowledge they acquired as enslaved or indentured persons while doing coerced agrarian labor on plantations for the production of cash crops, and (e) their negotiation and survival of dominant, often anti-African social structures. Because of the dangerous risks these forced immigrants faced in trying to preserve their indigenous knowledge, many practices were covertly disguised or practiced “underground” in order to avoid violent persecution from slave owners or government officers.<sup>22</sup>

19. Vertovec, “Religion and Diaspora,” 275–304.

20. Cohen’s *Global Diaspora*; and Evans and Braziel’s *Theorizing Diaspora* offer deeper analyses of diaspora as a theoretical framework.

21. Transported landscapes refer to those local forms of plant and animal life or local methods that were transported to different places by native peoples; or specimens transported by colonists, missionaries, scientists, and others back to European countries and to Britain. See Blair, “Transported Landscapes,” 85–112.

22. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 92, 169.

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While the history of settler impact on the ecologies of the Americas, India, Australia, and Africa have been well researched, the substantial impact of diasporic Africans on the environments of the 'New World' has been largely ignored. As descendants of the African Diaspora, blacks have inherited sociopolitical situations as well as cultural and oral traditions that often inform their current ecological attitudes and practices. Similar to indigenous Amerindian peoples, much of what was known by indigenous African peoples was transmitted inter-generationally through oral tradition and religious practices such as initiation rituals, seasonal celebrations, nature-based livelihoods, plant knowledge, and folk medicine. That knowledge has undergone innumerable transformations due to chattel slavery, ecological imperialism, anti-African and Afro-phobic attitudes of European settlers, industrialization, and urbanization.

It is important to recognize that the settler colonies of the New World were not just landscapes of domination; they were also landscapes of resistance and survival. The landscape legacies of Africans in the Americas have only recently been researched in ways that challenge inaccurate historical narratives. Recent research from cultural geographers Judith Carney and Robert A. Voeks reveals that diasporic Africans transformed the landscapes of the Americas not only for plantation agrarian economy, but also for self-sufficiency, survival, resistance, and identity.<sup>23</sup> European settlers often did not possess the agricultural knowledge to successfully cultivate and harvest crops such as rice and other staples. African migrants' prior sophisticated knowledge of rice cultivation gave them the capacity to contribute far more than brawn to the development of plantation societies in the Americas.<sup>24</sup> Transformed landscapes provided subsistence and resulted in the continuation of many of the foodways among Africans in the Americas.<sup>25</sup> Crops of African origin, such as peanuts (originally from Brazil and Peru and transported again during the Diaspora), coffee, okra, yams, black-eyed peas, pumpkins, sesame, watermelon, cucumbers, eggplant, and many others traveled with enslaved Africans over the Atlantic and have become foods that

23. Carney and Voeks, "Landscape Legacies of the African Diaspora," 139–52.

24. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves*, 80.

25. The degree to which European settler societies relied on the agricultural expertise of forced African immigrants for the cultivation of cash crops such as rice and indigo indicates that African peoples with advanced agricultural knowledge and skills were highly sought.

many Americans now eat and enjoy.<sup>26</sup> Knowledge of the medicinal and ritual value of plants was also an important aspect of continuing African Indigenous religious practices.

For the most part, consideration of non-Western ecological knowledge is placed into the category of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), which implies a systematic approach to understanding and interacting with one's environment based on cultural and practical applications built up over time and generations. TEK is often interrelated with indigenous traditions (spirituality, cosmology, and ethical principles), lifeways, and livelihoods. Activities such as land management, cultural understandings of landscapes and habitats, uses of natural resources, the transfer of intergenerational knowledge orally or through apprenticeship, medicinal uses of plants, and skills related to agriculture, horticulture, fishing, and wildlife are all associated with TEK. This approach to interacting with nature has been of particular interests in recent years to scholars because of its contributions to sustainable development and insights into natural processes and ecosystems. While once romanticized as the solution to Western disregard for and exploitation of nature, TEK has in more recent years received a more nuanced and multilayered treatment by researchers.

Studies of TEK tend to assume that indigenous populations have not been displaced or migrated to other continents in thousands of years, while they do recognize that indigenous peoples have experienced major changes due to processes of globalization, such as colonialism and modernization. Of course, not all peoples are so stable, and the insights of a diasporic culture do not fit neatly into the category of TEK. So, I offer the concept 'transcultural ecological knowledge' as a means to describe the interweaving of transposed adaptive practices that occur in the midst of migrations, diasporas, and flows of human-nature interactions. Transcultural ecological knowledge or TCEK, is the cumulative potential and practical knowledge of groups that currently or historically have been dispersed from an original homeland, displaced from one geographic area to another, or deterritorialized and have adapted and acquired additional knowledge that is then applied to alter or understand their secondary environment.

My use of the term "transcultural" relates the complexities of cultural plurality and exchange, including the power dynamics of such an

26. Harris, "Same Boat, Different Stops," 169–82.

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exchange. Transculturation, a term introduced by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz speaks to the experiences of migrants as one that reflects not only a one-way conversion and deculturation, but as a multidirectional process of cultural adaptation. Some aspects of the second culture are only partially adopted, strategically performed in certain situations, or even resisted. Meant to counter the term “acculturation” as introduced by Polish anthropologist Malinowski, transculturation denotes not the replacement of one culture by another, but the creation of a third distinct culture, one in which traces of the two previous cultures (the newly evolving and the displaced primary) are maintained.<sup>27</sup> For Ortiz, the term transculturation was essential to understanding the history of Cuba and the Americas.

Analyzing the African Diaspora to the Americas with an attention to transculturation and power reveals that there is an active, not passive, contestation of culture, meaning and identity among peoples subjected to forced migration, slavery, coerced conversion, colonization, and ecological imperialism. Transcultural ecological knowledges are subjugated environmental epistemologies that merit serious attention from scholars of religion and environmental practitioners because they occupy and negotiate the spaces in-between indigenous and Western in Religion and Ecology discourse. Their presence reminds us that ecological perspectives and religious practices are not always respecters of nation-state boundaries or neat taxonomies.

The question of what happened to traditional African ecological knowledge during and after the African Diaspora to the Americas resulting from the trans-Atlantic slave trade has far reaching implications for traditional cultures and sustainable practices today, in part because global diasporas due to labor and economic shifts, wars, ecological degradation, and other reasons are on the rise. The complexities of displacement, migration, deterritorialization, transnational identities, and hybridity are an ongoing and recurring theoretical and practical challenge for Religion and Ecology.

How, then, should Religion and Ecology/Nature conceptualize and work with cultural traditions? Transcultural ecological knowledges bring to the fore the challenges and paradoxes real-world cultural and social practices pose for the field’s idealist presuppositions, a point that has been poignantly argued by Sponsel (2005), Taylor (2005), and Kalland

27. Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar*, 96–97.

(2005). Religion is more than beliefs and values, transcendence and essence; religion is also embodied knowledge that is situated in networks of 'relations, practices, and space/place'—both external and internal to religions.<sup>28</sup> Anthropologist and conservationist Michele Cocks has argued that culture "must be understood as a dynamic process of trans-cultural exchange with constant re-articulations of tradition resulting in the persistence of certain cultural practices amongst any group of people."<sup>29</sup> Persistent patterns of human practices are far more resilient than we'd like to admit; often involving destructive, constructive, and ambiguous performances of power, survival, and resistance. Potential solutions to the ecological crisis are therefore not solely dependent on moral and spiritual reform; solutions are also dependent on social and cross-cultural relationships. This somber reality accentuates the need for scholars and practitioners to exercise reflexivity within their research and community work.

### Transatlantic Black Religious and Cultural Identities

The diversity of transatlantic Black religious traditions and the heterogeneity of black populations living within and traveling back and forth between various homelands and host lands creates 'persistent tensions between the global and the local' and brings our attention to the spatiality of religion in addition to the multiple geographical contexts of religions.<sup>30</sup> In light of the complexity and contradictions of multiple and mixed historical diasporic encounters, a broadly inclusive and non-essentialist approach to black culture and religion is necessary. African diasporic religions require a nuanced research methodology that takes intra-diasporic religious pluralism and cultural difference, past and present degrees of translocalism, and conflicts and distinctions internal to transatlantic Black communities into consideration.

Black religion should not simply be conflated with black Christianity or even institutional religious forms. Furthermore, the functions and meanings that ritual, material culture, folk religion, popular religion, sacred space, divination or conjure, modes of religious expression such as dance, music, and new media play in the religiosity of African Americans,

28. Ivakhiv, "Religion, Nature and Culture: Theorizing the Field," 47–57.

29. Cocks, "Biocultural Diversity," 195.

30. Stump, *Geography of Religion*.

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whether or not they are institutionally affiliated, reveals levels of diverse practices and locations of religion. Transnational Black immigrants living in the United States usually create their own sacred spaces to maintain a sense of shared culture, although some choose to express their religiosity with US racial/ethnic religious communities or join multicultural ones. Religious community itself can be an essential means by which immigrants navigate racial and cultural boundaries in the United States, especially as immigrants begin to encounter the combination of geographies of race and belonging and racializing processes expressed in different U.S. regions.<sup>31</sup>

The religious landscape of black communities is vast and multilayered. Although many diasporic Africans self-identify as Christian, there are also persons that identify with a variety of other faiths, including but not limited to Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, the Yoruba-Orisha tradition, Candomblé, Vodou, Santeria, and non-institutional forms such as black folk religion, nature-based spirituality, metaphysical traditions, civil religion, and postmodern religiosities. Changes in the transcontinental and transatlantic religious landscapes are also bringing about intensified global encounters *between* transatlantic Black religious and racial/ethnic groups. The United States, as a site of converging and overlapping diasporas and migrations, is the dwelling place of African diasporic communities from Europe, Canada, Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean as well as U.S. born African American communities. Not to be neglected is the growing presence of African-born immigrants within the United States or Africans of the New Diaspora. The interactions between African Indigenous and African Diaspora religions are not fixed or stuck in the past; diasporas are created by their homelands as much as they are creators of their homelands.<sup>32</sup>

Diasporic foodways, organic farming, and food access are a priority for several African diasporic religious groups.<sup>33</sup> Muslim African Americans, Black Hebrew Israelites, and Rastafari have dietary laws that have led them to choose alternative food supply sources—including food co-ops, cooperative agriculture and faith-based organic farming—in order to avoid the genetically modified and processed foods sold in

31. Johnson, *Diaspora Conversions*, 2007.

32. Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion*, 16.

33. The data presented in this paragraph is the result of the author's participant observation and informal interviews at several sites within US African American communities in Chicago, Illinois, and Atlanta, Georgia.

many grocery stores. The fruits and vegetables grown on their farms are sometimes made available to non-members in urban communities at a low cost as a way to foster good community relations and offset the negative impact of living in urban areas referred to as “food deserts.” Muslim African Americans groups in particular have been very outspoken in their rejection of cloned meats and genetically modified foods, and have actively supported black farmers in their land right struggles. With a more entrepreneurial response to desires for healthy living that focuses on vegetarian prepared “soul food,” the Black Hebrew Israelites have established restaurants in several U.S. cities with large black populations. Broadly speaking, many African Americans have nutrition and wellness concerns that come out of a cultural view that health and disease are directly related to environmental factors and food intake.

The interrelationship between U.S. African American religious and civic environmentalism also becomes more apparent at the local level. For example, grassroots environmental justice organizations such as the Chicago-based non-profits Blacks In Green, Growing Home, and Faith In Place often count a ‘faith base’ of religious persons as active members. These advocates and activists participate in diverse faiths. Some religious groups have a long history of local involvement in environmental justice, for example Black Catholics and the Knights of Peter Claver<sup>34</sup> and the Nation of Islam.<sup>35</sup> Concurrently, environmental organizations like Green For All, GreenFaith, and Sustainable South Bronx also partner with other faith-based organizations to address local, regional, national, and global environmental concerns. Interorganizational cooperation and cross-institutional volunteerism for the purpose of mobilization for environmental activism are often overlooked in discussions on African American religious environmentalism.

### The Limitations and Possibilities of Inheriting Environmental Racism for the Study of African Diasporic Religions

“How can we inherit that which did not belong to our ancestors?”  
—Olabiyi B. Yai<sup>36</sup>

34. Washington, “We’ve Come This Far by Faith,” 195–208.

35. Akom, “Cities as Battlefields,” 711–30.

36. Yai, “African Diasporan Concepts and Practice,” 253.

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Many Religion and Ecology scholars from various racial, ethnic and class backgrounds have built the foundation for the study of black religions and ecology on the themes of environmental racism and ecological justice. This has opened up spaces in the academy and in the public sphere upon which environmental abuses and concerns could be confronted, research could be conducted, and solutions sought in blighted and exploited communities through environmental activism. Themes of liberation and acts of ecological justice have enabled Africans in the Americas and people of many faiths and cultures to re-imagine their relationships to nature, humans, and animals; empowering many to work towards a just and sustainable future. However, this foundation has created other factors that narrow and essentialize what it means to be black and marginalize some forms and traditions of black religious practice. It has left blacks from multiple locales with a religious diversity and vitality that has been mediated through the lenses of dominant Western culture, nineteenth century evolutionist or romanticist theories of religion, and US Black Protestantism.

On the one hand, environmental racism and the struggle for ecological justice are imposed inheritances. They are the result of centuries of patterned exploitation of land, natural resources, and human labor as well as the result of Christian complicity with slavery and racism, ecological imperialism, and government-sanctioned expropriation of lands inhabited by cultural and racial/ethnic "Others." On the other hand, because of the deep history of slavery and segregation, specifically in the United States, environmental injustice has been a historic factor in the shaping of black environmental attitudes and values that are both sustainable and non-sustainable. Environmental racism remains a structural and existential component of black life. Racism is not, however, the totalizing defining cornerstone of African diasporic religious practices or cultural engagements with nature.

The "embodied embedded memory of slavery";<sup>37</sup> including the internal contradictions of white Christian complicity with slavery and segregation, ongoing racist practices, and the ethical disparities of daily intercultural encounters, have been a source of tension in racial relations and a catalyst for reimagining black life religiously, ideologically, and politically. When the weight of the entanglement of race, religion and imperialism became increasingly more urgent during the 1960's, as

37. Harding, "E a Senzala: Slavery, Women, and Embodied Knowledge," 12.

manifested in the rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the Black Arts movement, U.S. North American blacks chose a variety of responses. The continuum of responses to negotiations of transatlantic Black identities and belongings, what I call the intra-diasporic dilemma, has included re-interpretations of Christian thought that reject Eurocentrism; the re-Africanizing of collective community rituals and festivals; converting to other faiths such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism; practicing New World African religions; Black Humanism; cultivating cultural nationalism and Afrocentric thought, out of which emerged the popular ritual celebration Kwanzaa; relying on black folk traditions and creative arts; alternative spirituality; multiple belonging; new religious movements; civil religion; and participating in racial justice institutions that address economic, political, and social issues and affirm racial/ethnic identity. None of these responses are new; they are re-articulations and innovations that our ancestors imparted for survival, agency, wisdom, well-being, and joy. They are all positions of historical and potential politicization of environmental concerns.

Are there still grounds for optimism without the reduction of all black environmental experiences and knowledge to environmental racism? One way forward is to search for common ground somewhere between saving polar bears and struggles for clean air. This means creating a strategic middle ground between subaltern environmentalism (the environmental justice movement) and mainstream environmentalism.<sup>38</sup> Historic interests, such as conservation and nature preservation, need to be balanced with the inclusion of other interests, such as toxic work and living conditions, poverty, and urban environmental concerns. Progressive politics within religious environmentalism will require new patterns of cultural encounter and interaction based on inconvenient truths, respect, and reciprocity. Less hierarchical forms of organization could assist in creating spaces for democratic forms of decision-making that include groups which have been previously marginalized. Finally, by freeing ourselves from the fore-mentioned connotations and binaries, we may better confront both racism and exploitation and pursue more effective strategies for environmental sustainability and biocultural diversity.

The “greening” of our traditions also calls for a rethinking, re-reading, and re-embodiment of the ethics and politics of religious environmentalism. There are cultural barriers in the way of building sustainable

38. Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice*, 209.

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communities and cultivating interfaith environmental mobilization. The question of whether or not whites can betray their own color and class privilege in their daily dealings with people of color and genuinely incorporate anti-racism politics into their eco-theological and ethical identities is still unanswered. Some scholars have worked hard to meet this challenge while others have remained silent.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, the question of whether or not blacks will view the environmental crisis as solely a “white man’s burden,” as a strategy for whites to avoid racial difference and secure privilege, or as a mere distraction from the struggle against racial injustice is also still unanswered. Some blacks engage in the type of cross-cultural coalition building that can bring more cultural diversity to established predominately-white environmental organizations while others choose the increased autonomy of maintaining their own grass-roots organizations. The right to environmental self-determination and the pursuit of higher levels of interreligious and minority membership in already-established networks are not mutually exclusive strategies for environmental justice praxis.

### Recommendations for Further Study

#### Understudied Religious Traditions and Ecology

Essays concerning African diasporic traditions and ecology included in Religion and Ecology anthologies thus far have been sparse, mostly normative and constructive, and predominantly Protestant Christian. Questions of conceptual frameworks, strategies, and methodologies in the study of Religion and Ecology in the African Diaspora remain mostly underdeveloped. Representative essays from Black liberation theology and Womanist religious thought are commendable starting points; however, they are only part of the whole to be explored on the subject. Other Christian traditions (Catholic, Spiritualist, Evangelical, or Pentecostal) are ripe for further exploration. Moreover, other religions and forms of thought, such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, pragmatist philosophy, Black Humanism, and African diasporic religions also provide perspectives that take ecology and reciprocity and reverence of the Earth seriously. Spiritual practices among diasporic peoples, such as contemplation with

39. Cone, “Whose Earth Is It, Anyway?” 30. For a similar argument, see also Gottlieb, “Religions Environmentalism in Action,” 467–509.

nature, being in the moment, deep breathing, fishing, gardening, animal companionship, and prayer often reveal pragmatic environmental principles and sustainable practices. Not to be overlooked is the significance of music, religious visual culture, dance, folklore, film/media, material culture and the recognition of sacred places such as lakes, mountains, parks, and gardens within African American cultures.

Further study of black women and religion in the context of the African Diaspora will substantially advance understandings of gender and environmental justice, but also of religion and transcultural ecological knowledges more broadly. Everyday religious and ecological practices, rituals, performances, and negotiations of power related to race/ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, nationality, citizenship, age, and geography are factors that influence the shape of black women's participation in religious environmentalism and the extent to which religious and ecological knowledge are effectively transmitted inter-generationally. In many African Diaspora communities, women have traditionally functioned as cultural bearers of knowledge, a role that has been defended by both conservative and progressive ideologies. The study of women's ways of networking and organizing for community work, within and across nation-state borders and racial/ethnic identities, could potentially illuminate pathways from local environmental activism to more formal transnational environmental politics.

### **Environmental Advocacy in African American Communities**

Resources for ecological practice are already available within African diasporic cultures, so that an overarching effort towards transformative practice may not need to focus on the greening and reforming of African American religious traditions. Culturally conscious efforts towards ecoliteracy and advocacy could potentially focus on recovering and re-inventing cultural heritage, invigorating intergenerational storytelling and knowledge sharing, providing forums for voices on the environment that are usually marginalized or ignored, broadening the conceptual boundaries of religious experience, and fostering existing relationships between religious and civic environmentalism.

### Methodology and Methods

“Religion” and “ecology” as concepts are not ahistorical or value-neutral. Historical ecology and African Diaspora studies are valuable in assessing how place, diaspora, and migration relate to changes in ecological knowledge, creative innovation in rituals, and landscape transformation. The insider/outsider problem must be reconsidered in light of religious scholars projecting their own ideological positions, research interests, and intercultural assumptions onto black people, black faiths, and black environmentalisms. African Diaspora traditions and environmental practices should be studied as convergences and emergences and for the meanings they have for their participants, not as imitations of Euro-American religious traditions or oversimplified syncretisms, and not as if their forms automatically correspond with Western theological categories.<sup>40</sup>

Case studies, spatial and temporal analyses that take transtemporal and translocative actions into account,<sup>41</sup> and oral histories are potentially fruitful methods of investigation. Qualitative methods also offer a means to illuminate the voice and meanings of religious participants and derive analytical categories from Black Atlantic diaspora groups as much as possible rather than impose empirical categories. Systems approaches, such as ecology of religion, geography of religion, or spiritual ecology, may be better research methodologies than religious environmentalism for the study of some African Diaspora religions, such as Rastafari in Jamaica, who view landscapes as sacred sites and practice deep ecology.

In drawing from the theories and methods from multiple disciplines, I have argued in this essay that Religion and Ecology has much to learn from further engagement with African diasporic traditions. The mix of continuities and discontinuities of traveling and transformed African religions and indigenous ecological practices is not an isolated case by any means; all religions and ecologies experience change, mutability, and multiformity. Does the inclusion of diasporic religions, transnational identities, and transcultural ecological knowledge into Religion and Ecology discourse challenge traditional sensibilities concerning the ‘religious’ and assumptions of single locale, non-hybrid environmental

40. Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*; Washington, *Black Sects and Cults*; Long, *Significations*; West and Glaude, *African American Religious Thought*.

41. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile*, 95.

thought and practices? I hope so. Our future engagement in dialogues concerning the study of Religion and Ecology in the African Diaspora may assist all of us in turning up new soil on old ground.

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