

Black Consciousness: Environmental Awareness

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Executive Summary

There is a stigma which persists that African-Americans care less about environmental issues, when in fact these issues affect communities of color first hand. By drawing on the historical link of slavery and African-American spirituality I contest the idea that African-Americans are stereotypically out of touch with nature. As important as current social concerns of eradicating racial barriers in education, racial intolerance in job procurement, and excessive use of force upon African-Americans by law officers environmental equality is of equal importance. In lieu of these concerns, recent years has seen environmentalism take a back seat in the consciousness of African-Americans. In a research paper on *Environmental Education* Kahn and Friedman (1998) put forth that, "Black communities in the United States are disproportionately subjected to large amounts of environmental pollution and environmental hazards; however, little is known about this group's environmental concerns, understandings and values." The stigma persists that African-Americans care less about environmental issues, when in fact these issues affect communities of color first hand.

Introduction

"In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."

-W.E.B. Du Bois, the Souls of Black Folk

Current studies show that African-Americans are less in touch with environmental issues, and it is fundamental to communities that suffer injustice to be educated about environmental justice. Johnson and McDaniel (2006) go on to say, “Generally, African-Americans are less likely than whites to visit wildland recreation areas or to participate in forest-based outdoor recreation.” So this begs the question, is environmentalism a priority in the African-American consciousness, or is environmentalism overshadowed by other social-political priorities?

Section I: Black Roots & Environmentalism

Slavery, one of the worst blights in American history fused the African-American soul to the American landscape.

In her book *African American Environmental Thought*, Smith (2007) states:

One might think that 250 years of slavery would have left Black Americans permanently alienated from the American landscape. Forced for generations to work the earth without just reward, without the right to own land, without even the freedom to travel, what meaning could they find in America’s pristine wilderness? Locked in a struggle for social justice, what interest could they have in the claims of nature? (p. 1)

Spanning more than 200 years, slavery created far-reaching implications for African-Americans, socially, politically, and economically. Inferences which show that differences between black traditions in environmentalism are not so different from that of whites. Resources should not be recklessly exploited, and every person despite race is guaranteed their intrinsic rights of

natural resources. However during the 1880's whites did not share this belief. Slave owners seeing slaves only as property to be bought and sold as easy as a cow or a goat, indirectly strengthened early African slaves' connection with the land they toiled. "Slavery created a complex relationship between slaves and the landscape, forcing most of its victims into an intimacy with the immediate natural world but also, in some respects, alienating them from it" (Smith, 2007). The first generations of Africans did not come to America by choice, stolen from their homeland this separation anxiety left them physically and psychologically alone. Through this perilous journey, first generation Africans fought to hold on to their spirituality. Smith (2007) points out, "Although west African peoples were religiously diverse, most shared faith in magic and some form of animism: a belief system teaching that the natural world is infused with spirits that can be propitiated and controlled through rituals and sacrifice." It was this bond that helped to sustain the observance that nature should be venerated. Dianne Glave (2010) states, "For African farmers, the cycles of planting and harvesting, alpha and omega, and life and death were fundamental to nature and agriculture. Farmers consecrated and benefited from the soil, which was, in turn, a source of spirituality, nourishment, and life to humans." With roots tied historically to the American landscape African-Americans have not lost their connection with nature, and in a way will always have a strong ancestral connection to environmentalism.

It should be noted that it wasn't until generations later, that Africans born in the Americas that the tether to mother Africa began to wane. Depriving Africans of their rights to freedom, slavery not only stripped Africans of their identity, it also shifted the importance of

caring for nature with the more progressive idea of *cultivating* nature. This need to refocus cultural roles to a survivalist manner meant devaluation in environmental fealties and prompted a more provisional focus upon freedom and equal rights. It is within this re-shuffling that current social justice concerns have taken center stage ahead of environmentalism. These concerns range from equitable achievement gaps in education, racial justice between blacks and whites, to excessive use of deadly force by law officers. African-Americans have a voice in, of, and around environmentalism, yet this voice is being overshadowed.

Influential black writer W.E.B. Du Bois understood the importance of having a strong relationship with nature. Du Bois also understood nature's impact upon mutual progress within society; mutual progress that is beneficial to all cultures is worth setting aside differences. Smith (2007) emphasizes this understanding, "The title of W.E.B. Du Bois' 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, announces a new theme in black environmental thought: the Romantic conception of southern blacks as a peasant community with an organic connection to the land." Contemporary testament stresses race as a main predictor that people of color usually reside within or near contaminated communities. These studies cite the reasoning as *Environmental Racism*. Environmental racism is described by Covert (2016), as "People of color and low-income people are most likely to be situated near sources of contamination and away from clean water, air, and soil." African-Americans unremittingly fight against an increasing unfair gap in economic-equity. The colloquy is nothing new, in the concert of the environmental movement climate change will affect those in destitute communities first. I will highlight two

key environmental disasters that have affected African-Americans in recent US history, Hurricane Katrina, and the Flint Michigan Water Crisis. My hope is to shed light on racially divided environmentally impoverished communities, and stoke the embers of environmentalism within the African-American consciousness, and rekindle the spark of spirituality, fulfillment, and environmental equality.

Section II: Equal Environmental Rights

Environmental Justice is a principle, the belief of equal protection from environmental hazards. “This protection involves preserving natural resources for all races, no matter a person’s ethnicity or socioeconomic affiliation” (Hill, 2003). On February 11, 1994 President Bill Clinton issued the Executive Order 12898, which required federal agencies to include Environmental Justice as part of their projects while identifying and addressing human health in relation to environmental effects in disproportionately low income communities (SEEWS, 1995). This required governmental agencies to focus attention on the negative environmental health effects in minority and low-income communities, with the hope of creating a healthier environment for everyone.

If you look at where communities of color reside, they are usually in places with low forms of influence and higher rates of environmental degradation. This inequitable delineation of environmental benefits is exacerbated by latent scientific research, which is usually covered up by unethical policies and governmental agencies that inadequately listen to the pleas of its

black citizens. Although African-Americans have made great strides in combating racial issues within the latter half of the 20th century; there still remain challenges to be overcome. In 1995 Andrew Hurley published a book titled *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980*. In this book Hurley addresses the problem with environmental equality between whites and communities of color. In the beginning of his book Hurley comments that, "It was no coincidence that the age of ecology was also an age of environmental inequality." Hurley also points out that in 1970, "For blacks, the relevant environmental issues were poor sanitation, overcrowded housing and vermin." Poor sanitation still presents a problem today. Brown (2016) states in her article that, "More than 85 of Detroit's approximately 100 public schools were closed in January 2016, as teachers staged a sickout to protest the system's overcrowded classrooms, broken finances and crumbling facilities. Classrooms which are plagued by rats, roaches, mold, ceilings full of holes and unreliable heat." Schools are areas where children should be free to learn in safe and clean environments. If poor sanitation in communities of color still persists even by today's standards, what does this say about environmental justice? Grassroots movements such as Black Lives Matter have made strides in racial equality within the last year for African-Americans. Nevertheless I fear this may not be enough to have lasting impact upon equal environmental rights for African-Americans. Without a fair and just delineation of clean resources the African-American community could suffer other injustices similar to that of Hurricane Katrina.

Section III: Environmental Justice "Katrina"

Hurricane Katrina is documented as one of the largest environmental disasters ever in the United States. In his book *Hurricane Katrina: America's Unnatural Disaster* Levitt (2009) asserts, "Creating more than five-hundred oil and toxic spills, and causing more than one-thousand deaths, as well as displacing millions of people, Katrina helped shed light on the lack of concern for the United States citizens, namely people of color." Levitt's claims are supported by soil samples that were tested after Katrina's rampage, which showed that many flooded areas contained extremely high levels of toxic chemicals and deadly pathogens, levels many times higher than federal and local regulations permitted. The responsibility of protecting the public from environmental injustices falls to federal, state and local governments. By valuing profits and saving money in excess of a community's well-being, low income communities are left to essentially *fend for themselves*. Levitt (2009) elegantly revisits the aftermath of Katrina, "What we saw unfold in the days after the hurricane was the most naked manifestation of social policy towards the poor, where the message for decades has been: 'You are on your own.'" This lethargic lack of foresight resulted in U.S. citizens losing confidence of their government's integrity. As cameras scoured the aftermath Katrina left, the scene was that of a third World country, clutches of people peppered the landscape, the majority of which were African-Americans. Most barely hanging on to a meager existence. Katrina laid bare the underlying racial inequality that permeated New Orleans for decades prior. It was at this time that New Orleans and the rest of the world begged the question, "Could the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world abandon some of its poorest citizens at a time when they needed their government the most" (Levitt, 2009)? Levitt goes on to state that, "In part of poor

decisions and poor leadership before and after Hurricane Katrina, trapping America's most vulnerable citizens in its poorest, most dangerous land areas, this tragic loss of life and human suffering was on a massive scale." As it stands today, Katrina is a reminder that there are still battles to be won in the fields of equality, both socially and environmentally.

Section IV: Environmental Justice "Flint"

We often think of racism as discriminating a group of people based on their race, however racism can take on other characteristics, such as environmental racism. In an article about the Flint Water Crisis Nichols (2016) states that, "Environmental racism is often an afterthought, even for those who want to fix our race-based ills and protect black and brown lives; the water crisis gripping Flint, Michigan, is shining a bright light on how structural racism is found in our environmental resources." African-Americans comprise of more than half of Flint's population, located 106km northwest of Detroit, Flint has since 1964 received purified water from Detroit. In April of 2014 a city official enacted a plan that would save millions of dollars interim, by switching the city's water supply from Detroit's Water and Sewerage Department from Lake Huron to the Karegnodi Water Authority. The plan was to buy more time for Flint to finish construction on a pipeline from the Karegnodi Water Authority to the city of Flint. The Flint River was to be a temporary source of water for city residents, as the assessment of the Flint River as a permanent water supply proved that treating water from the River would be more expensive than processing water from Lake Huron directly. City officials were warned of the potential health risks of the lake, *Fecal Form E.coli* and other carcinogens.

Hurley Medical Center pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha reviewed blood results from the city's children before and after the switch. Attisha found startling evidence of elevated blood-lead levels, which had doubled from 2.1% to 4.0%. Attisha's results had concluded that there was evidence of lead poisoning in residents. Historically Flint has been a city of inequitable environmental concern. With the loss of factories, Flint's economic blanket shriveled up. With less money to take care of its citizen's city officials enacted a plan to save money without weighing heavily on the people it would affect. In an article Cha (2016) writes, "Residents of Flint have borne a disproportionate environmental burden, so much that they have brought administrative complaints alleging that the amount of pollution residents faced violated their civil rights." With a community that is dealing with issues of poverty, unemployment, and violence, "water is not something you mess around with" (Attisha 2015). With over half of Flint's population being African-American this issue has come under scrutiny as being a crime against race and a form of environmental injustice. Although Flint is a much more recent event in environmental injustice "the poisoning of Black communities in America is certainly not a new phenomenon; historically and contemporarily, people of color, especially in low-income communities, have been and are continuing to be killed slowly, softly, and silently in their households, in their schools, and on their jobs with impunity – and at a greater rate than police killings and racialized state violence" (Swift, 2016). Environmentalism demands to be in the forefront of the African-American consciousness. Leaders in positions of authority have the obligation to educate the rest of the African-American Populace on environmentalism.

Conclusion: There's still work ahead of us

Abraham Maslow is most known for his Hierarchy of Needs; which demonstrates the human condition of satisfying specific needs, once a need is fulfilled the next one is satisfied and so on (McLeod, 2014). Represented as a pyramid the first desires to be fulfilled are physiological needs: clean water, clean air, access to food, and shelter that is not contaminated. The poor environmental state of communities of color such as the contaminated water in Flint Michigan and the unacceptable response to Hurricane Katrina victims prevents the progression of satisfying the basic physiological human right of access to clean water, shelter and access to food prolonging the struggle of African-Americans. Climate Change is unbiased and non-discriminatory; however the effects of climate change will first be felt by those in impoverished communities who do not possess the resources, and knowledge to combat rising temperature, dwindling food and water reserves. Environmental Equity and Social Justice are essential in bringing environmentalism to the forefront of the African-American verbal vernacular rhetoric. Just as important as police accountability and equal education rights are, so too is environmentalism.

There is a lack in diversity amongst environmental leaders, especially positions that impact communities of color. "The environmental movement has a bit of a reputation as being a wealthy white community, the movement is inauthentic if it remains all white...we can't get a seat at the table unless we emulate their values" (Fears, 2013). This lack of diversity leads to

less support for low-income communities of color. “Any movement or cause that’s racially exclusive will have less power and less influence, you’re leaving out too many good ideas, I think the cause of having a liveable, survivable environment is weakened by the fact that we have these divisions” (Fears, 2013). African-Americans within leadership positions need to inspire their communities to stay involved with issues concerning their wellbeing. As Jane Kay illustrates, “As the nation’s need to put waste grows, more U.S. corporations are moving into impoverished communities where people’s need for jobs surpasses the concern for a clean environment.” The media tends to over-sensationalize impoverished communities as being *fortunate* for these jobs; however Katrina demonstrated that being fortunate is not a sentiment that predominately white elites indulge in. Quintero (2016) is quoted by Fears as stating, “It’s taken too long for environmental groups to work closely enough with minority communities.” Communities of color need a voice on the Environmental field. Large *Grass-roots* organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Nature Conservancy have all but over shadowed many of the smaller grass-roots movements. These Minority grass-roots organizations focused less on, “wilderness, upper and middle white class areas” (Fears, 2016), but environmental contamination by landfills and incinerators. Today African-Americans are part of a larger ghettoized image that many Americans have become accustomed to. This must not be the legacy of African-America environmentalist image. It is essential, now more than ever, our future demands we make our voices heard, stay educated, get active and unite as one *hand*.

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