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Climate Justice, Hurricane Katrina, and African American Environmentalism

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Abstract

The images of human suffering from New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina remain seared in our nation's collective memory. More than eight years on, the city and its African-American population still have not recovered fully. This reality highlights an important truth: the disturbances that accompany climate change will first and foremost affect minority communities, many of whom are economically disadvantaged. This paper: (i) describes how Hurricane Katrina, an example of the type of natural disaster that will become more prevalent with intensifying climate change, has impacted the black community of New Orleans; (ii) explores the notion that African Americans, in the midst of racial oppression, have developed a unique and powerful brand of environmental thought that has much to contribute to mainstream environmentalism; and (iii) argues that the voice of the black community, which has a vested interest in climate outcomes, is critically needed in today's climate debate.

Keywords

climate change, environmental justice, Hurricane Katrina, African American environmentalism

The American public has known about the seriousness of climate change for a while now, at least since journalist and author Bill McKibben wrote his book *The End of Nature* in 1989. There has been a steady stream of warnings over the years. Some of these say that sea level is rising due to the melting of the earth's polar regions (Eilperin 2006a,b; Struck 2007b), and that the thinning of winter ice in the Arctic is causing broad ecosystem changes that will lead to the extinction of the polar bear and many other marine animals (Struck 2007a; Broder and Revkin 2007; Eilperin and Sheridan 2009); others predict a wave of extinction so massive that it will rival the five great extinctions of the past (Thomas et al. 2004; Fahrenthold 2007; Walsh 2009); still others relate how the most intense hurricanes are becoming more frequent as sea surface temperatures rise with global warming (Hileman 2005), and how a warming climate will promote disease or otherwise negatively impact human health (Epstein 2002; Patz et al. 2005; Farenthold and Eilperin 2008; Portier et al. 2010). Despite this mounting evidence, however, most of us have done little to fight the threat of climate change. We seem to lack the will to act; we go on living our lives as if nothing is wrong when, in fact, we stand at the edge of a precipice beyond which lies the very uncertain fate of our planet and our own well-being.

Meanwhile, in the U. S. Congress, progress on legislation to cut carbon dioxide emissions has stalled. Attempts were made in 2009 to enact legislation to limit greenhouse gas emissions through what is known as "cap-and-trade" (Mufson et al. 2009; Eilperin 2009). But those attempts failed (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2010), and passage of similar legislation seems virtually impossible now (Eilperin 2010). In his first term in office, President Obama, having spent what political capital he had in a divided congress on health-care reform, was able to accomplish little, although, if recent statements and policy decisions are an indication, he may be able to accomplish more in his second term (Eilperin 2013 a,b).

What the current political situation tells us is that, on the whole, we citizens cannot depend on government leaders when it comes to combating climate change. Instead, we will have to take matters into our own hands. Through grass roots organizing and civil disobedience, we must act to create a social and political movement; only then will anything of substance be accomplished. Many voices will be needed to build an effective climate justice movement. Especially important will be the voices of those most adversely affected—the poor, who are most often members of minority groups (Eilperin 2005). In the United States, participation by African Americans at all levels will be critical.

The African American community does not usually come to mind when one thinks of the environmental movement, which is viewed as mostly white (and politically liberal). However, there is a strain of environmentalism known as environmental justice (EJ) that originated within the African American community, specifically within the black church (Stoll 2006). The main concerns of the EJ movement, historically, have been about issues such as access to urban green space (Fisher 2006) and the siting of toxic waste dumps near black neighborhoods (Wright 2005). These concerns seem far removed from those of mainstream environmental groups such as the Sierra Club or the Natural Resources Defense Council, which usually focus on issues such as the preservation and protection of wild spaces domestically and around the world. Yet, when one considers that climate change will impact both human communities and the environment (Stern 2006), one can make the case that climate change, in particular, is an EJ issue, and therefore lies within the traditional ambit of concern of the black community as well as the larger environmental community.

In this paper I advocate for strong African American involvement in the climate debate, arguing that African Americans have a critical role to play. The paper is divided into two sections. The first presents Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast in late summer 2005, as an example of the type of extreme weather event that will become more prevalent as climate disruption worsens. The second lays out the case that the African American community possesses a unique environmental perspective that is critically needed in today's fight against climate change.

Hurricane Katrina and the City of New Orleans

On August 29, 2005, Katrina hit New Orleans, forever altering its character and the lives of its residents, many of whom never returned after fleeing the floodwaters that inundated more than 80% of the city (Mildenberg 2011). New Orleans lies below sea level, and so the waters of the Mississippi River that flow through the city must be kept out by a system of levees, floodwalls and pumps. In the case of Katrina, it was not the storm's wind that caused most of the damage to the city; rather, it was the storm's surge that did, weakening the floodwalls and levees, and causing them to rupture in several places. Many areas of the city were submerged, but especially hard hit was the predominantly African American Lower Ninth Ward.[1]

The images of Katrina remain seared in our collective consciousness: young mothers and children crowding into a sweltering Superdome, in desperate need of food and water; disabled and elderly persons suffering and dying in front of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center; bodies floating on the water; and those lucky to be alive plucked from rooftops by helicopter (Katrina Image Gallery; http://www.boston.com/news/weather/gallery/katrina_evacuation?pg=16). Those of us watching from our living rooms were shocked and outraged that help did not come sooner to these people, virtually all of whom were African American and poor.

Hurricane Katrina laid bare the uncomfortable reality of the racial and economic inequality that exists in New Orleans and, indeed, in many of America's cities. Thus, although Katrina was strictly speaking a natural disaster, in many ways she was also a manmade one, especially in terms of her aftermath. Robert Bullard, an EJ pioneer at Texas Southern University in Houston, and Beverly Wright, founder of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University in New Orleans, make this point in their book *Race, Place and Environmental Justice after Hurricane Katrina*, emphasizing that "the lethargic and inept emergency response after Katrina was a disaster that overshadowed the deadly storm itself (Bullard and Wright 2009, p. 3)." Moreover, "... questions still linger: What went wrong? Can it happen again? ... Do race and class matter? Volumes of disaster research have found racial disparities in disaster clean-up, rebuilding, reconstruction, and recovery" (p. 4).

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[1] This is a simplified account of events. Adding to the cause of the flooding was the presence of what is known as the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO), a seventy-five mile-long shipping channel located near the city that acted as a giant funnel to gather the surging waters. Moreover, as Mike Tidwell points out in *The Ravaging Tide* (2006), the decades-long practice of channeling the silt-laden Mississippi River water out into the Gulf by levees along its banks had caused the marshland to gradually subside, or sink, over the years, leaving open water in its place. Exacerbating this problem were the many shipping channels cut through the marsh by oil companies; these enhanced the encroachment of salt water into the marsh. With the marshland, which had acted as a natural buffer to attenuate storm surge, largely gone, New Orleans has become vulnerable to even less-than-extreme storms.

The evidence given below will back up Bullard and Wright's claim. We will see that the situation has been unequal with regard to clean up and rebuilding in the wake of Katrina, and that the "road home" to New Orleans has been more difficult for blacks than for others. Indeed, the 2010 census shows that New Orleans is now whiter (and wealthier) than it was before, with the percentage of blacks dropping from 67% before the storm to 60% in 2010 (Mildenberg 2011).

There are several reasons for the unequal repopulation of New Orleans in the wake of Katrina. First, many black residents have been unable to return. Many did not own cars before the storm; they got around the city using public transportation (Bullard et al. 2009). This may have been one reason why some did not flee as the hurricane approached, and why some who did manage to leave have remained away.

Second, whereas residents of white, middle-to-upper class neighborhoods such as those along the shores of Lake Pontchartrain (e.g., Lakeview) had the financial wherewithal to return and rebuild, residents of poor and mostly black neighborhoods such as the Lower Ninth Ward generally did not (Harden 2006). And even if they were financially capable of rebuilding, in many cases city-supported amenities such as electricity, drinking water and garbage collection were not available to them.

Third, disparities in home ownership were a factor. Many black home owners lacked adequate flood insurance on their homes which, in some cases, had been passed down through generations without clear records of ownership, further complicating efforts to obtain aid for rebuilding (Fletcher 2010). In poorer neighborhoods, moreover, the low values of homes led to owners not being able to secure loans of sufficient value to cover rebuilding costs (Fletcher 2010). Others lived in public housing projects, which were mostly torn down and not rebuilt (Nossiter and Eaton 2007). Evacuated to apartments in nearby cities or to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers, many did not have the resources to return (Nossiter 2007; Hsu 2009).

Some black New Orleanians may rightly believe that racial discrimination has militated against their return. Bill Quigley, a Loyola University law professor, describes a neighborhood in St. Bernard parish that is just two blocks from the bombed out-looking Lower Ninth Ward across the parish line. The St. Bernard neighborhood—which was whiter and wealthier, and whose residents were more often employed—in 2008 had electricity, drinkable water and FEMA trailers, whereas the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood did not. Says Quigley, “I am not a conspiracy person, but it is pretty hard to argue with the facts on the ground. If you are black in the Lower Ninth Ward and you don’t have electricity, water or a FEMA trailer and nobody is giving you a timeline when you will, that is a hell of a lot of conspiracy dots to connect" (Quigley quoted in Harden 2006). What these observations from Katrina show is that race is indeed a factor in rebuilding and recovery after natural disasters. There is an uneven playing field, and African Americans are disproportionately impacted.

At this juncture, it is important to make the following statement: *Hurricane Katrina was not caused by climate change*. Similarly, the intense tornado that hit the town of Joplin, Missouri, in May 2011 was not caused by climate change. Neither was the extreme heat wave that held Russia captive for 62 days in the summer of 2010; nor was the extensive flooding that ended the lives of thousands and left millions more homeless in Pakistan in 2010. Indeed, *no single extreme weather event can be attributed directly to climate change*. Why? Because many meteorological factors are at work in causing a particular weather event, and anthropogenic climate change is only one of them (albeit a predominant one in some cases). And, of course, in the case of Katrina in particular, there was a number of non-weather-related contributing factors: coastal marshland had eroded, reducing the natural buffer against storm surge; New Orleans was below sea level and surrounded by bodies of water (the Mississippi River and Lake Ponchartrain); and the levees and floodwalls that kept the water out were not adequate to contain the surge.

But this does not mean that we have license to paint a broad brush of skepticism over the connection between extreme weather events and climate change, a connection that has been predicted by climatologists for decades now. As McKibben wryly pointed out the day after the tornado hit Joplin: "It's far smarter to repeat to yourself the comforting mantra that no single weather event can ever be directly tied to climate change. There have been tornadoes before, and floods—that's the important thing. Just be careful to make sure you don't let yourself wonder why all these record-breaking events are happening in such proximity—that is, why there have been unprecedented megafloods in Australia, New Zealand and Pakistan in the past year" (McKibben 2011). And so, while it is true that we cannot attribute the phenomenon of Katrina directly to climate change, it is also true that extreme weather events, including intense hurricanes, will become more prevalent in a future dominated by climate change.

Thus, Katrina is an example of the type of event that is likely to occur with greater frequency in the future. And while New Orleans is certainly unique, in many ways she is also emblematic of other U.S. cities that are plagued with social and racial inequality. For this reason, the lessons learned from Katrina are generally applicable to cities across the country, many of which have significant African American and other minority populations.

African American Environmentalism

Works on the topic of black environmentalism are hard to come by, but two excellent ones are Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll's (edited) *"To Love the Wind and the Rain:" African Americans and Environmental History* and Kimberly Smith's *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations*. Glave and Stoll's book makes broad contributions to our understanding of black environmental history: it provides a glimpse into the origins of black environmentalism in slavery; it presents case studies in the modern EJ movement and gives an account of some of the ways that EJ differs from the mainstream movement; and it describes the role of the black church in shaping the character and focus of the EJ movement. On the other hand, Smith's book describes the African American intellectual tradition during the period from slavery to the Harlem Renaissance with an eye toward discovering clues about blacks' relationships with nature. Both books figure prominently in the discussion below.

Writing in Glave and Stoll's book, Mart Stewart, a professor of history at Western Washington University, emphasizes that any real understanding of black political culture and environmentalism must take into account the "long history of slavery in the United States" (2006, p. 9). He describes slaves' close connection to the land, on which they hunted and fished to supplement their diets, and from which they gathered medicinal herbs to heal sickness. He also relates how slaves developed cooperative arrangements based on kinship that strengthened communal ties and led to a strong identification with, and loyalty to, particular places.

Stewart describes communities in South Carolina and elsewhere in the South in which social bonds and identification with particular physical locales were so strong that "the old plantations, albeit with modified geographical boundaries, continued into the recent past to be the units of communal identity for kin networks..." (p. 16). Highlighting the fact that the roots of African American environmentalism extend deep in time, he states that:

> African Americans developed what in modern terms might be regarded as 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. ...Nearly every aspect of [the slaves'] experience put them into contact with the natural environment, and gave them a knowledge that was both detailed and practical. ... [Moreover], all aspects of their relationship

> with the environment were furthermore mediated by the ties of kinship, and environmental relationships were also political and social ones (p. 17).

In the context of the place-oriented ethos described here, one can begin to appreciate how the disruption and uprooting of black communities by toxic waste dumps and polluting industries, long concerns of the EJ movement, can become identity-shattering experiences.

In her own book, Smith, who is at Carleton College, examines the works of Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke and others, and makes a number of observations about the character of black environmentalism that are highly relevant. First, in the chapter titled “A Land Cursed by Injustice,” Smith asks whether it is even possible for an enslaved people to develop an authentic relationship with the land. A tough question whose answer is not trivial, this question is not answered by Smith in any one place. Instead, she grapples with it throughout her book, returning to it often, turning it over and examining it one facet at a time in the light of the black experience. Along the way, she gains important insights. For example, citing Douglass as well as a group known as the Black Agrarians, the latter of whom advocated for the establishment of free African American farming communities in the mid-1800s, Smith can see that slavery made it “psychologically difficult to appreciate the beauty and order of nature, or to see in it evidence of God’s benevolence” (Smith 2007, p. 66) She observes that both the Black Agrarians and slaves in their religious discourse emphasized “the close connection ... between physical nature and human morality. Nature is not independent of human society: both its physical integrity and its moral meaning are deeply intertwined with and dependent on humans’ moral decisions” (p. 67). Thus, we see that from the beginning, long before the rise of the modern EJ movement in the early 1980s (see Bullard 2005 for a brief history of the movement in the U.S.), African Americans have fostered a unique brand of environmentalism, one that has emphasized the close connection between social justice and environmental concern. The concept of the dependence of environmental concern on social justice appears to be deeply rooted in African American consciousness.

But a similar notion—i.e., that there is a link between social justice and ecological health and that a land scarred by injustice is also physically scarred—is deeply rooted in ancient Hebrew tradition as well. This is pointed out by Michael Northcott, a Scottish Episcopal priest and author of *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, who was not thinking at all about African American environmentalism when he wrote: “For the ancient Hebrews, justice was not a human invention but a divine attribute set into the character and structure of creation. ... [W]hen [the people of God] enslaved one another and the land to serve the greed of the rich, the land lost its fertility and rich and poor alike were exiled from the land” (Northcott 2007, p. 12). Interestingly, this is precisely what happened with slavery in the United States. According to the eyewitness accounts of writers such as Charles Ball and Henry Bibb, the Southern embrace of slave labor had, by the middle of the 19th century, led to severe degradation of the land (Smith 2007, pp. 51-61). Indeed, so great was the devastation that large tracts of land in the South had lost much of their fertility.

With these examples, we are confronted with the notion that the intimate connection between justice and the health of the land is not simply a belief conceived by an enslaved people, but is a fundamental characteristic of the cosmos itself. However—

and here is the crux of the issue—whereas an oppressed people, the African American community in this case, would be able to perceive this fundamental reality, others who were not enslaved may not. Moreover, this reality, born of suffering, would be lodged unshakably in the black consciousness. The truth of the reality could not be abandoned by African Americans, for to abandon it would be to abandon one's very soul and identity.[2]

Second, in her chapter "Possessing the Land," Smith describes Du Bois' belief that "racial oppression and political inequality made property and contract rights insecure—and therefore prevented blacks, as individuals and as a race, from establishing a long-term relationship with the natural world..." (p. 84). She writes that "[t]he black tradition also differs from progressive environmentalism in its concern with private space and private property. ... [It] highlights the importance of property and other civil rights to achieving this capacity for individual and collective stewardship" (p. 96).

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[2] This idea that the intrinsic connection between environmental concern and social justice is written both on the soul and on the fabric of the cosmos may have informed Carl Anthony's reflection on his life as a black man immersed in the environmental movement. Anthony, an EJ activist and the former president of the Earth Island Institute, says: "As I thought about my own history and who I am, I realized that I am an end product of fourteen billion years of life in the universe. I saw that even as humans have a conscious and expanding role in shaping life on planet earth, the forces of the universe are much larger. Only through reclaiming my sense of who I am, in that largest sense, could I make sense out of these two stories—the story of the environment and the story of the struggle for racial justice" (Anthony 2006, p. 202).

We can see in Du Bois, then, the origin of the modern EJ focus on empowering black communities to protect their property (their homes and land) from environmental harm.

A third observation that Smith makes in her book is that Alain Locke, a principal architect of what is known as the Harlem Renaissance, successfully bridged the “Boasian divide” which had arisen from seeing culture as an epi-phenomenon of history and experience rather than racial essence. In the face of arguments by scientific racists in the 1920s that blacks were inherently culturally inferior to whites, Franz Boas had argued that it was history, not racial essence, that defined culture. Locke (and Du Bois) embraced Boas’s ideas, but they also did not want to reject the assertion, put forth by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, that African Americans were the authentic American “folk.” The term “folk” had a particular meaning at the time; it referred to a people who were close to nature, and therefore had more innate creative vitality (p. 98). Du Bois believed that “despite his exposure to civilization and Christianity, the slave remained a primitive and, therefore, stood near to ‘Nature’s heart.’” Moreover, it was this nearness that was the source of the black man’s greatest gifts to American culture (p. 139).

Locke sought to preserve both the special place that blacks have in conferring vitality to American culture and also the notion that blacks’ culture is not an innate expression of race, but is historically-derived. Locke brilliantly did this by asserting that black culture is, indeed, the genuine American folk culture, not because it is the product of a primitive race, but because it is “the product of the creative imagination and experiences of blacks themselves” (p. 146). In other words, according to Smith, “it is *experience* rather than a racial essence that bridges the Boasian divide between culture and nature” (p. 146). “In short, [for Locke] black folk culture has superior vitality because it is an authentic expression of a particularly intense collective experience" (p. 148). Finally, "...it is not race that produces culture and history, but culture and history—specifically a common history of suffering and oppression—that produces a race... (p. 149)."

According to this thinking, one can truly access nature only through an authentic culture born of an intense, sustained experience of the natural world. African Americans have such a culture, but accessing it has been painful because of the oppressive legacy of slavery.[3] On the other hand, according to black theorists such as Du Bois and Locke, white Americans would have trouble accessing nature because their conception of nature is artificial; what they see is "an imaginary, picture-postcard natural world in which all trace of human suffering and oppression was erased from the landscape" (p.

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[3] The discussion here has centered on the difficulties that African Americans can have in moving beyond the scars of slavery and racism to appreciate nature for its own sake, apart from social and economic considerations. This is not meant to imply that African Americans are somehow less able to relate to the natural world; rather, it makes a statement about the priorities of the community as a whole. A notable example (and there are many others) of an African American person who developed close ties to the environment was biologist Ernest Everett Just (1883-1941). Just's experimental research, which was informed by his love and appreciation of nature, was focused on understanding how marine invertebrate embryonic development is affected by conditions in the environment (Byrnes and Eckberg 2006). Through his work, which remains relevant today in a number of areas, Just made an indelible mark on the history of biology.

155). The only way for whites or anyone else to be in right relationship with the natural world would be first to see the racial oppression that exists and then to seek to eliminate it. In other words*, social justice is a prerequisite for environmental connectedness.* As Smith puts it, “under this analysis, achieving a proper relationship to nature requires reforming race relations” (p. 156). These are powerful ideas, and they represent a unique contribution that the black community, in particular, has made to environmental thought.

This idea that a commitment to social justice is required for environmental connectedness is important in today’s fight against climate change. Without an embrace of social justice, the whole climate change fight is impoverished, debased, rendered hollow. But including social justice concerns should not be seen as merely a tool for soliciting participation, although this would not be a bad thing. Rather, inclusion of these concerns as core components of the mainstream movement should flow out of an acknowledgment of the fundamental fact that care for the earth and concern for people are inseparably linked.

Conclusion

Several points can be made based on the above discussion. First, climate change, as exemplified by Hurricane Katrina—an example of the type of climate event that will become more common with intensifying climate change—is an environmental justice issue that deserves the full attention of the African American community. Second, the African American community, by virtue of its unique environmental perspective, has important contributions to make to the mainstream environmental movement as we move forward. Third and finally, the promotion of racial and economic justice must be an integral part of any fight against climate change. As Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director of Greenpeace International and a key player at the climate talks in Durban in 2011, has emphasized, the struggle to end global poverty and the fight to avoid catastrophic climate change are “two sides of the same coin” (Naidoo quoted in Broder 2011). One cannot truly embrace one without also embracing the other. One simply cannot have genuine concern for the earth without equal concern for people. This is a truth the black community realizes deeply in its soul; it is why the voice of the African American community is vital in today’s climate debate. Without this voice, the whole movement runs the risk of veering off course.

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