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Environmentalism: Flint Michigan Water Crisis

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Christian Ethics

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Theologian James Cone describes, “the image of live black women’s bodies stretched along roads in North Carolina in order to block dump trucks from carrying toxic soil into their neighborhoods and destroying their gardens stays with me.”¹ This portrayal of environmental injustice within the Black community highlights the systemic and racial silencing of oppression that Black individuals face daily. One example of White supremacists’ lack of value towards the Black community is the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis in 2014. This event was not only racially based but was constructed to attack and undermine the residents of Flint, Michigan, who are predominantly Black and African American. The lack of clean water and high rates of pollution in the community created a health hazard that affected tens of thousands of children and adults. Black communities should not be exploited as economic commodities or used for monetary gain to benefit White supremacy. In the essay, I will implement the praxis of womanist ontology and environmentalism to demonstrate the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis as an issue of racial discrimination. First, I will apply Emilie Townes’ idea of systematic evil to portray how White supremacists abuse their privilege to exploit the residents of Flint. Next, I will use Katie Cannon’s concept of ontological silences and social class, which aims to give a voice to the oppressed and deconstruct the class system that keeps Black communities subordinate in society. Additionally, I will implement Toni Morrison’s portrayal of Baby Suggs, which strives to dismantle oppression and silencing through ontological wholeness. Lastly, I will use Melanie Harris’s approach to ecowomanism to connect social justice, environmental justice, and ecological reparations. Her use of religion and spirituality centers around ecowomanism and works to confront racism, classism, and environmental justice.

¹ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 2017), 58.

The Flint Michigan Water Crisis was a pronounced event that affected a community of Black and African American residents. This event struck as overly concerning in 2014 because of the health hazard it has caused for children and adults. The cause of this event was the switch of water sources from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the Karegnondi Water Authority to save money for the economically struggling city of Flint.² Before they could switch the water source, the city authorities instead decided to use the Flint River as the water source for the time being. This has caused an uproar because of the lack of clean water distributed to the community. The residents of Flint complained that the water appeared brown because of the elevated levels of lead that contaminated the pipelines. Even after the Environmental Agency notified the city of the health hazard, the city authorities and the government did not take precautions to resolve the issue. Not only was this event racially based, but it is evident that the lack of care for Flint residents contributed to an unethical abandonment of the urban area to save expenses.

Understanding the core meaning of evil is understanding that humans and their actions construct evil. Ethicist Emilie Townes defines evil as something that is culturally produced; the actions done by humans lead to systematic oppression and result in evil. The cultural production of evil deprives African Americans of value and worth and degrades them to a romanticized and stereotypical narrative portrayed by Whites. The form of contemporary racism has been normalized and structured to be subjective. The false narratives and perceptions of Black individuals create a space for nonblack individuals to be biased and cause hatred merely over skin color. As a result, the violence and oppression towards the Black community continue to follow a cycle. The problem identified is that Black and African American communities are

² History.com Editors, "The Flint Water Crisis Begins," *HISTORY*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-flint-water-crisis-begins>.

subordinate due to oppression and socioeconomic limitations. Therefore, environmental injustice is primarily a problem for Black and African American communities.

In Emilie Townes' book *To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction*, the author posits, "whether proslavery or antislavery, the major political parties and their respective constituents believed Blacks to be inferior."³ Segregation grew more prominent in the North; Black communities were oppressed, lynched, disrespected, and dehumanized. Ultimately, Black and African American communities face socioeconomic problems that economically disadvantage them and force them to experience environmental injustice. As a result, the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis is an example of environmental injustice caused by White supremacy exploiting Black communities for commodity gain. Townes posits, "in rural areas, planters sometimes used lynching for coercion and increased profit...lynching persisted as much to reaffirm solidarity and demonstrate power to *whites themselves* as to punish and intimidate blacks."⁴ The issues targeting African Americans continue to this day but have a different appearance. The framework of environmental injustice forms a sense of violence. The health hazard and the limitation of clean water have become a direct means of control, targeting African-Americans. Townes postulates, "in contemporary era, such control is systematic...rural poverty and urban blight are representations of conditioned segregation and control."⁵ Society has devalued Black communities because it has deemed Black individuals as unworthy of living in lavish or expensive neighborhoods because of the portrayal that they are poor or underqualified. Therefore, to be White means to own power and authority, and with that comes the privilege of being untouched and valued in society. At the same time, the privileged

³ Emilie M. Townes, "To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction," in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie G. Cannon and Angela D. Sims. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 190.

⁴ Ibid, 190.

⁵ Ibid,190.

experience societal appreciation and praise, while poor, run-down Black communities are targeted and used in place of toxic waste facilities.

Melissa Denchak's article on the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis exemplifies Emilie Towne's idea of evil. Denchak presents the actions of the state's chief medical executive, Dr. Eden Wells, "who allegedly threatened to withhold funds for a project after researchers began looking into the Legionnaires' outbreak."⁶ Sadly, the city authority's use of a cheap water source ignores the needs and wants of the community because, in the end, they seek to profit from this unethical behavior. Black communities become "social prey for ill-advised or ill-conceived income generators such as toxic waste sites and industrial pollution...when the air is bad, communities suffer from higher risks of emphysema, chronic bronchitis, and other chronic pulmonary diseases."⁷ The sad truth is that Black and African Americans must live in a society that contributes to their economic struggle and make it the norm. There is no sympathy towards the community because they are the outliers of society, thrown on the back burner to be left to survive in a world that does not claim them. In this case, evil has been constructed by city authorities and government officials to attack the residents of Flint who are of Black and African American descent.

Undoubtedly, social class and institutionalized injustice are the core aspects of environmental injustice for Black and African Americans. Katie Cannon, author of "Unearthing Ethical Treasures: The Intrusive Markers of Social Class," signifies the framework of ontological silences and the endless cycle of class inequality. In this case, the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis is important to implement within class inequality because of the structural silencing that restricts Flint's Black and African American residents. Before the water crisis became evident, Flint was a

⁶ Melissa Denchak, "Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know," *NRDC*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/flint-water-crisis-everything-you-need-know>.

⁷ Emilie Townes, "To Be Called Beloved", 193.

flourishing area in the mid-20th century that housed 200,000 residents, many of whom were “employed by the booming automobile industry.”⁸ In the 1980s, the rise of oil and automobile imports decreased profit and many individuals were laid off from work.⁹ This caused the population of Flint to decrease immensely because many residents relocated and many homes were abandoned. Most residents who could not afford to relocate were African Americans, and 45% of these residents were under the poverty line.¹⁰ Fast forward to 2013, when Flint faced millions in a cash deficit, leading to the tragic water crisis in 2014. Flint residents raised concerns and protested in front of the City Hall. Still, their demands for clean water were not considered, mainly because city authorities valued saving money rather than valuing the needs and health of their community. When denied livable and healthy environments, city authorities lose the trust and respect of their community from the lack of protection the community deserves and should be given. Katie Cannon introduces Joanne Naiman to explain class power and ownership; she posits, “it is the owning class that hold ultimate control over the economy, it is the owning class that can exert the ultimate pressure over state agencies, and it is the owning class that is the dominant influence over ideology.”¹¹ The greater control over the capitalist system the White community possesses, the more Black individuals face inequalities and societal oppression. The advancement of capitalism continues the cycle of unemployment and forces African Americans “to combat structural barriers that confine large segments of Black people in less than desirable physical surroundings, reduced housing and residential options, and limited mobility.”¹² Therefore, White communities continue to advance in status and wealth because they

⁸ Melissa Denchak, “Flint Water Crisis”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Katie G. Cannon, “Unearthing Ethical Treasures: The Intrusive Markers of Social Class,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie G. Cannon and Angela D. Sims. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 239.

¹² Emilie M. Townes, “To Be Called Beloved”, 193.

do not allow Black individuals access to financial empowerment through businesses and economic gain. Katie Cannon's usage of ontological silencing is used to expose the discriminatory and alienating inequalities that attack marginalized communities in society.

Additionally, to counter Cannon's idea of ontological silencing, Toni Morrison's portrayal of Baby Suggs works to dismantle oppression and racial discrimination. Katie Cannon and Baby Suggs work to shed light on the ways Black communities are silenced and not given a chance to voice their thoughts and ideas and, more importantly, voice their struggles. Black communities are dehumanized and degraded to a lower status no matter how qualified and wealthy they present themselves in society. Ultimately, the idea of ontological wholeness deconstructs the notion of particularity and expresses "self-love." Baby Suggs posits, "they ain't in love with your mouth...they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear."¹³ It is important to realize what it means to "love one's heart." Emilie Townes notes what it means for African Americans to love themselves and be loved by others. To love one's heart is to care for one's environment and to draw on the community of resistance and solidarity. Black individuals are worthy of love not because they do something, not because of their culture, but because they are human. Emilie Townes states, "understanding the other is not predicated on how the individual (or the group) makes the shift from certainty of her inner experiences to the unknowable person."¹⁴ Townes explains that often these notions create romanticization and trivialization; the former meaning something that is idealized or unrealistic and the latter meaning something of less importance. Much of the discourse that relies on racism and classism are the stereotypes and false narratives delineating marginalized groups. Emile Townes argues these narratives tie "blackness as equivalent to

¹³ Ibid, 190.

¹⁴ Ibid, 186.

poverty and destitution.”¹⁵ In hopes of eradicating racial discrimination and social inequalities, White supremacists must deconstruct this narrow-minded narrative of what Black individuals are supposed to be like or how they should live based on their false perceptions. Therefore, applying the idea of womanist ontology means society must work as a community to regulate equality and value for one another. Structural evil is evident because individuals are not holding each other accountable for their unethical behaviors. It is also evident because they are not paving new ways or changing laws to provide better options for Black individuals who need better education, health benefits, or living environments.

The analysis of ecowomanism based on Melanie Harris’s article “Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion, and the Environment” establishes “an interdisciplinary discourse in womanist thought that reflects upon black women’s religious orientations and connections with the earth.”¹⁶ Essentially, ecowomanism confronts racism, classism, and environmental justice while making connections to social justice.¹⁷ Melanie Harris’s idea of ecowomanism is essential when discussing the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis because it analyzes the socioeconomic issues that cause Black communities, such as Flint, to be exploited, stolen, and destroyed for commodity gain. Nihilism becomes apparent when White supremacists ignore the economic struggle that Black communities experience when exploiting their environments. The lack of development in Black communities proves that White supremacists only care for their own monetary gain, especially when Black individuals are not part of the new growth or economic growth that White supremacists experience.

¹⁵ Ibid, 186.

¹⁶ Melanie L. Harris. “Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion, and the Environment,” *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 3 (2016): 32. Doi: 10.1080/00064246.2016.1188354, 27.

¹⁷ Ibid, 27.

Melanie Harris implements the idea of ecological reparations that works to restore ecological violence in communities such as Flint. The aim of ecowomanism when identifying the issues of environmental injustice within the Black community is to practice the earth-justice paradigm. Individuals must love and respect others the same way they should love and respect the earth. Melanie Harris connects to environmental ethics and the environmental justice paradigm by explaining “many African and Native American cosmologies, for example, that honor women’s wisdom include an ethical mandate to care for the earth based on an understanding that human, nature, and spiritual realms are connected. Honoring the earth, means honoring community (human and non-human) is central to honoring self.”¹⁸ Initially, the oppressed, which in this case are the residents of Flint, must question the mindset of White supremacists to dismantle the dualistic ideologies set in society. Ecological reparations look to validate the struggles and perspectives of African Americans and work to reassert “values of interconnectedness and interdependence.”¹⁹ Ecowomanist ideologies only work when racism, classism, and oppression are eradicated and when White supremacists take accountability for their racist, narcissistic, and unethical disparities in Black communities.

The Flint, Michigan Water Crisis exemplifies structural evil within the Black community. The atrocious decision-making from city authorities of the Flint community acknowledged the problematic health hazard it has caused individuals, mainly African Americans. The ideologies of ecowomanism, ontological silencing, and ecological reparations work to combat and bring awareness to the economic inequalities and racial discrimination that African Americans experience within society’s subjective views. The direct means of control and violence through manipulating and utilizing unhealthy water in the Black community is a form of oppression and

¹⁸ Ibid, 28.

¹⁹ Ibid, 62.

racial discrimination. In order to combat these issues, society must dismantle the inaction of evil and work to implement ontological wholeness in society.

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