Faith and Environmental Justice in Southern Georgia: Engaging a Unique Landscape Toward Faithful Action

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Introduction

Environmental and Climate Justice have become an area of growing interest since the 1980s. Both are distinct, yet connected. Climate justice is concerned with the conceptual implications of climate change and the greater issues of responsible resource use and resiliency, whereas environmental justice is a social movement that seeks to address the unfair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens that minorities experience and influence adequate political responses to these issues. Groups who are disparately impacted by environmental justice issues are largely people of color, the poor, and women and children.

The growing concerns of environmental and climate justice issues have also become a significant topic of faith and interfaith groups like Interfaith Power and Light, Creation Justice Ministries, and other faith-oriented environmental organizations who aim to equip people of faith at the local levels with the tools and support necessary to engage their faith in the public sphere at the local, state, and national levels. This emphasis on empowering people of faith to act trickles into one's local congregation. Many faith and interfaith environmental groups require a whole congregation, group of individuals from within a congregation, or a group of organized individuals from multiple faith backgrounds in order to allow this process to occur.

Through informing and empowering congregations and people of faith, one of the oldest institutions in the United States, and around the world, has the potential to play a significant role in the environmental and climate justice movements. To suggest the Church hasn't made impacts in this area would not be fair. From Christian leaders such as Pope Francis to clergy at local churches who have called for action on environmental issues at local and international levels and have done the footwork are noteworthy achievements. These achievements, and even instances

of failure, are important and newsworthy.

My project aims to address this intersection–faith in action and inaction with that of the environmental movement. The scope of this civic engagement project is to engage, more concretely, the Black Church and the ways in which the Black Church (especially in the South) is approaching environmental and climate justice. The way in which I aim to address this is through a journalistic lens with the intent of publishing an article that addresses the challenges and hopes of the Black church and the ways in which the Church, more generally, can be a force of unity on this front. A limit of this project is that its capacity aims to engage with the Black church and focuses more on the immediate communities served by Black churches in the South. Therefore, the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) will only be relevant with regard to the first letter. The 'IPOC' portion will be irrelevant to the overall scope of this project. However, this does not mean future iterations of this project will turn a blind eye to the realities of environmental justice issues faced by Indigenous and other persons of color.

Background

My internship with Faith and Climate Action Montana (FCAM) provided a place where I could explore the intersection of faith and spirituality with environmental concerns at a community level. FCAM is a community environmental group in Missoula, Montana that is affiliated with Emmaus Campus Ministry whose mission is to "create community that engages faith voices and spiritual wisdom to raise awareness, advocate, and organize in the public sphere…to take[s] action in response to the intensification of the climate crisis that creation is facing." The group considers itself a social justice community as they have worked to better include and represent minority and justice issues in their discussions and events.

As an intern, one of my duties was to attend the bi-weekly meetings to facilitate discussion and engage with the ideas that were presented. During meetings, some discussion would include issues regarding housing, healthcare, and other social services and how they connected to the issues of climate change and environmental issues. There was an emphasis from members to draw from their faith and spiritual traditions to promote action and education for the faith, spiritual, and local communities. The emphasis on the role of faith and spiritual people in the community was not new to the group as there had been significant work to activate congregations on the issues regarding fossil fuels and the benefits of transitioning to green energy. Through their pursuits, First United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ Missoula, and St. Paul Lutheran Church have partially or fully transitioned to green energy through their Solar Congregations campaign and created active Green Teams within each church. The goal to empower congregations on issues regarding energy and environmental concerns slowed on the heels of COVID-19, but FCAM continued to provide for and empower people of

faith into various forms of action.

FCAM provides a place for people from various traditions to come under the same umbrella to facilitate change within the community they call home. The emphasis, here, is faith in action without the added evangelical notion of converting or saving individuals souls but aiming to use their faith to guide their actions in favor of bettering the lives of their community–human and nonhuman alike. Faith in action is not a recent concept, however. One of the biggest modern displays of faith in action centered on the American Civil Rights Movement and was supported by African American Christians and led by Baptist minister, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Over time, northern white churches joined the movement in support of King's call regarding the civil injustices and discrimination the Black community faced. By the mid-1960s, on the heels of King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," the call came from the National Council of Churches for their denominational representatives to support the movement through demonstrations. Though slow growing, by the time the Civil Rights Movement peaked, it had become a Christian movement.

Being from southern Georgia, the opportunity to combine three components from above seems opportune. In connecting the threads of people of faith concerned for their fellow humans and other-than-human entities, faith in action, and the influence of the Christian Church on the Civil Rights Movement, this led me to consider the idea of how the southern Church, including the Black Church, is addressing justice issues presented by climate change and the role that the Black church could have in local and national environmental justice issues.

The South, as much as many other areas in the United States, has been subject to environmental justice issues ranging from the 1982 Warren County designation of an African

American community hosting a hazardous landfill, to the ramifications of 2005's Hurricane Katrina on poor and African American communities in New Orleans, and the frequent concerns of flooding in areas like Houston, Texas.

The relevance of such an endeavor to empower people of faith and communities of color to engage in environmental justice issues, or environmental issues more broadly, may lie in one's own backyard. On a more localized scale, my home area of Valdosta, Georgia has had issues regarding environmental concerns and justice issues in recent years. In 2020, an article was released by the Valdosta Daily Times that declared approximately half of Valdosta is a food desert according to federal guidelines and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Another environmental justice concern in the past few years involves the Okefenokee Swamp in southeast Georgia which is a blackwater swamp ecosystem and is recognized and is the largest national wildlife refuge east of the Mississippi River. The refuge is about 50 miles east of Valdosta and the concern here involved plans for titanium and zirconium strip mining on the eastern edge of the refuge, however concerns over the impact on the ecosystem and communities in the vicinity of the mining operation and downstream from the swamp. Though the full 12,000-acre plan was withdrawn in 2020, the company has since resubmitted a plan to produce a demonstration using just under 900-acres to avoid scrutiny. In November of 2021, Valdosta, Georgia passed a resolution that opposed mining operations within 10 miles of the swamp. Concerns about the hydrologic and habit impacts raise further issues for the proposed mining operation. According to the Georgia Conservancy, portions of the proposed mine drain surface water into the swamp and could impact water quality, a lowered water table due to shifts in groundwater flow could impact adjacent wetlands, and changes in the swamp's hydrology

could impact the frequency and intensity of wildfires. Furthermore, impacts to the habitats of the gopher tortoise – a keystone species, and the eastern indigo snake due to habitat loss and light, air, and noise pollution.

To further support the issue of locality, a town 20 miles north of Valdosta has had its concerns over community health and the role of local government in issues of environmental injustices over the past few years as well. A 35-minute documentary called, "Abandoned: Greed, Neglect and Environmental Injustice in Adel," was released by the Georgia Conservation Voters in January 2022 and addressed four main concerns the community is fighting to address, including a bitcoin mining operation, an abandoned lumber yard claimed to need chemical cleanup, pursuits of a biomass plant in the area, and a propane tank firm located in a residential part of town.

In each of these previous examples, demonstrations from members of one's own community, or a coordination of multiple communities, has brought about awareness regarding the concerns that environmental issues exist at the local level and are not only foreign issues. However, one voice is missing in each of these examples–that of the Church, or more specifically, the southern Black Church. Historically, Black Churches have been affirming places of worship for communities of color and is where motivation to rebuild communities originates. This specific voice has oftentimes been drowned out or ignored, but there is a place for the voice of the Black church in the conversation regarding environmental issues and concerns over climate change, especially when they intersect issues of justice and quality of life of community members.

In a broader sense, all peoples of color (and whites), poor, and women and children, can

be impacted by environmental injustice. The broad scope of environmental justice shows that many in our communities are subject to different justice issues that might fall under the environmental umbrella. The broad scope of justice concerns and those impacted shows that each locality, whether in Georgia or Montana, India or the United States, will have different concerns to address. Each locality will also have people of faith, many of whom in the United States, will be affiliated with one of many Christian traditions.

This is where journalism can come in. In the past, journalism has regarded the religion and environmental beats as separate, and has been largely unexplored. To remedy this, Meera Subramanian and Stephen Prothero created the Religion and Environment Story Project at Boston University in 2021. The organizers of this project and the fellowship opportunity they provide attempt to bridge the gaps between the two beats and engage journalists and academics to pursue stories in this uniquely unexplored intersection through training. Acknowledging the need to address this intersection displays the immediacy and opportunity for this work to become commonplace. Bringing forth the stories that present the challenges, successes, and hope regarding the role that people of faith play in addressing environmental justice is one way of lifting the voices of Black communities.

The active portion of my project will be composed of two components. The first component will be the development of a journalistic piece that brings the environmental and religious beats together. In this piece I aim to address the environmental issues in south Georgia and how the Church is responding to them. I aim to have the voice of the Black Church present in the piece. My goal is to have this piece published in a digital or print format that is accessible to the general public and those with whom the piece addresses–the Church and Black Church,

people of faith, people of color, and those working in the areas of environmental and climate justice.

The second portion of this project is to have a public event sponsored by Faith and Climate Action Montana that continues this conversation of environmental justice and communities of color with a faith lens. This public facing event will be a Climate Conversation that engages people of faith from the local community and brings voices from my program together through conversation. The development of the event will be informed by the work of Joanna Macy, a Buddhist philosopher whose work focuses on the spiritual dimensions of despair and working through that despair, while prompting the participant toward action. The event will also be inspired by Katherine Hayhoe, a climate scientist and evangelical Christian, who emphasizes that the best way to challenge climate change is to be in conversation with one another about it.

Theoretical Applications

Topics in Environmental Philosophy

Topics in Environmental Philosophy examined the debates, history, and issues the discipline has concerned itself with. Some of these topics included intrinsic value, debates over wilderness, perspectives of Indigenous and African American experiences and relations to the world, ecofeminism, and climate ethics. The course presented theoretical material from the discipline that could be examined in consort with practical matters.

Concerns over environmental justice issues and their connection to the greater justice concerns in marginalized communities has become a central topic to the movement. Though, this has not always been the case. Through the exploration of African American environments and relation to wilderness and generational trauma, Cassandra Johnson and J.M. Bowker explore collective memory and how successive generations of individuals who do not have personal memories of an event (i.e., the Holocaust, slavery) "may recount vividly stories related to them by parents, older relatives, and others who lived these experiences" (58). Their article, "African-American Wildland Memories," is focused on this type of experience and how it relates to the "contemporary black wildland view" (Johnson and Bowker 58).

In their essay, there is an explicit distinction between the white experience and the experience of African Americans. For white Americans during the antebellum and postbellum periods, the "middle-American view of wildlands and wilderness constructs these areas as benign places–spiritual, sanctified refuges distinct from the profanity of human modification (Johnson and Bowker 59). However, despite the guise of a spiritual wilderness where one might be able to experience the divine as John Muir suggests or as having heritage value indicative of

American nationalism, African American experience of slavery, racism, discrimination, and harsh living conditions due to the lack of opportunity proved to be the antithesis of this view. As a result, Johnson and Bowker consider the historical implications of slavery, sharecropping, and lynching and how they influenced the adversarial relationships with wilderness and look to the trends of connectedness to the wilderness in relation to hunting and fishing and being mindful of Black people returning to the South. The context in which the authors examine these topics is both historical and aligns with the phases of the environmental movement–beginning around 1820.

Johnson and Bowker's examination of the phases of the environmental movement from the pre-Civil War era to modernity display a continual shift in the social status of African Americans, however the conditions in which blacks in the South experience environmental and social concerns remained discriminatory and lackluster. The shift from an agricultural economy to one focused on industry did not change the conditions of many African Americans. With limited social freedoms, Black people remaining in the South continued to fill roles in agricultural and domestic services. Even conditions for Black workers in the turpentine and lumber industries did not award them any distance from the inherent racism of camp owners and the dangers of working in the swamps. Societal influences maintained the status quo regarding the exploitation and treatment of African Americans. Lynchings were also a concern in the connection of black perception of wilderness for the authors. They state, "Lynchings did not always take place in forested, wildlands…the fact that some of these murders occurred in wooded areas sufficed to influence black perceptions of wild lands" as these places are not familiar landscapes for African Americans and imprint on collective memory (Johnson and

Bowker 73).

In 1982, Warren County, North Carolina was the stage of one of the most memorable environmental justice demonstrations. The predominantly African-American community was designated as the site of a hazardous waste landfill. The community quickly rallied together to challenge the designation through protesting over the course of six weeks. Though the protests ultimately failed, the incident has become known as the start of the environmental justice movement. The movement focused on "the inequitable distribution of hazardous and toxic waste sites in lower income and minority communities" (Johnson and Bowker 73). Unlike mainstream environmental groups, marginalized groups aimed to "preserve the 'natural environment' of home and community" (Johnson and Bowker 74).

Robert Bullard and Beverly Wright echo the emphasis on home and community as the focus of the environmental justice movement. They state at the beginning of their article, "Blacks and the Environment," that "pollution and various other forms of environmental degradation are exacting a heavy toll on Black communities across the nation" (166). They argue that institutional racism and discrimination influenced the lives of many in Black communities and that when it came to early agendas of environmental groups, the issues that Black communities prioritized were overshadowed by preservation of wilderness and resource conservation, thus making the environmental movement late to the show. Environmental activism has since broadened to include more minorities, but according to Bullard, "mobilizing [minorities] for action continues to be a difficult task" considering the influx of general social challenges including drug trafficking, crime rates, and concerns over infrastructure (168). Furthermore, regarding the environmental ills that plague Black and minority communities, the history tied to

zoning regulations, waste management, and workplace hazards began to make Black and minority populations more aware of the connections between environmental concerns and civil rights agendas.

The emphasis on home and community for Bullard are echoed by the Black Church. The traditional understandings and actions towards biodiversity, wilderness, and conservation, have not been at the center of Black communities and churches. As Johnson and Bowker point out, the long history of societal ills that plague black existence have not helped the desire to participate in collective preservation efforts that have little impact on minority communities. This is in part in due to the institutionalized racism and discrimination people of color face and the fact that the environmental movement was focused on different agenda items than what Black communities were concerned about.

The concern Bullard discusses relating to the lacking connection of justice issues with that of environmental issues presents an opportunity for the Church to step in and help facilitate these connections. The emphasis on rebuilding the community that the Black Church aims to accomplish requires these connections to be made. It requires addressing the collective memory shared by many members of the Black community and questioning whether the environment is truly "out there". If the environment is truly "out there" and not here, as a part of our communities, then it becomes difficult to view environmental issues as connecting to justice issues since justice issues are mostly community and human oriented.

We have already seen this play out. What is significant about the movement's genesis lies in the community members who helped organize nonviolent direct action – Reverend Luther Brown of Coley Springs Baptist Church and Reverend Leon White of the North Carolina United

Church of Christ. Between these two and other faith-oriented leaders, concerns over environmental justice issues were born through the sheer willingness of people to act on behalf of their community. Communities of faith were at the center of the impetus of environmental justice.

Critical Animal Studies

Critical Animal Studies aimed to address the complexities and nuances of arguments regarding the elevation of animal status in relation to animal minds, culture, and experience. In exploring the animal studies literature, comparisons of animal suffering to the experiences of people of color and minority groups have been used as a tool to elevate animals into the moral considerability discussion. However, this approach is problematic. In J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, the main protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, makes such a gesture in a lecture on animals. In her lecture, she begins by stating that she would not recite "the horrors of their lives and deaths" and continues by suggesting that she had no belief that the audience members had "what [was] being done to animals at [that] moment" in the front of their minds (Coetzee 19). She moves to suggest that her omission of the horrors would be evoked through other means of "adequate force" (Coetzee 19). It is then that she moves to begin discussing the horrors of concentration camps during World War II and the millions of lives that were ended at the hands of the Third Reich.

She zeroes in on Treblinka as a prime example at the beginning of her discussion. She not only includes the number of deaths at Treblinka, but goes on to discuss the people in the surrounding area of the concentration camp. She recounts that for the Poles living around the

camp, “they did not know what was going on in the camp…while in a general way they might have guessed what was going on, they did not know for sure; said that, while in a sense they might have known, in another sense they did not know, could not afford to know, for their own sake” (Coetzee 19). Because of this, Costello argues it was willed ignorance that lost a generation of Germans their humanity. Costello says “ignorance may have been a useful survival mechanism, but that is an excuse which, with admirable moral rigor, we refuse to accept” (Coetzee 20). It is at this point where she connects the events of Treblinka and the concentration camps to those of animals in factory farms and other exploitative positions by stating, “Denunciation of the camps reverberates so fully with the language of the stockyard and slaughterhouse…the crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals” (Coetzee 20).

She then moves to link the ignorance of the Germans, Poles, and others who maintained willful ignorance to the atrocities of the camps with those of the people in everyday life. She discusses her drive around Waltham the morning of her lecture and admits that though she did not see any “horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, no abattoirs,” she was certain they were there (Coetzee 21). She goes on to say, “we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them (Coetzee 21). Essentially, she stands on the belief that everyone is willfully blind to the experiences and treatment of animals in the various forms of camps that exploit them. Though she admits the points she has made are cheap shortly after this statement, the comparison of the horrors

committed by the Third Reich and those of factory farms and laboratories is problematic.

The problem with this line of argument, whether admittedly cheap or seemingly genuine, lies with the idea of dehumanizing people through the process of comparing human and nonhuman experience. What this line of comparison does is collapse the experience of humans and nonhumans into a pool of inequitable experiences and dehumanizes humans in the process. Human experience, in the thought of the groups of people targeted by the Third Reich–Jewish, queer, disabled, Gypsy, etc., all belonged to the "human" species. Despite the ideology of Nazi Germany and its followers, whether out of fear or true belief in its cause, Jewish individuals, queer-identified people, disabled individuals, Gypsies, and others, all were subject to exploitation and death as a result of their identities, not for the purposes of testing and nourishment as Costello's statement of self-regenerating enterprises suggests for animals.

Furthermore, grouping the experiences of humans and nonhumans together not only collapses the divide between humans and nonhumans, but it also collapses the distinct shared experiences that different groups of people have as equal. Such a collapse runs the risk of stating that the experience of Jews during the Holocaust is the same as the experience of slaves in the United States and the expulsion and genocide of Native Americans from their ancestral lands. The issue here is that each of these three examples have very different experiences, involve different sets of events, and involve different identities. Certainly the different experiences of the groups can be expressed side-by-side in a historical manner that puts the different experiences going on at the same time (i.e., Southern plantation slaves and the expulsion of Muskogee, Cherokee, and others from the Deep South), but the experiences are all distinct. The collapse of these distinct experiences will not adequately express that animals have the same experience as

experiences of animals also vary.

Levinas supports this claim of identity experience in his own account of being a prisoner of war during World War II. Though his account is often referred to for his reflection on Bobby, a dog whom he encountered during his internment, he recalls how his forestry commando unit bore the French uniform which "protected [them] from Hitlerian violence" (Calarco 57). Here, it is apparent that the unit's identity spared them the horrors of the Third Reich. However, they were regarded "subhuman" and "stripped of [their] human skin" by the free men of Nazi Germany (Calarco 57). In his brief discussion of Levinas' experience, Matthew Calarco focuses on Bobby the dog and states that Levinas was blind to one thing, "Bobby's life [was] also at stake in the camp" (58). Though this may be true, the experiences of Levinas's forestry unit were not the same as Bobby's, and certainly were not the same as most of the Jewish, queer, or disabled identities who were subject to exploitation and death. When the guards chase Bobby away, they could have ultimately killed him, but did not do so. Levinas also qualifies Bobby as not properly human because he "lacks the brain needed to universalize maxims" (Calarco 58).

Though Levinas makes a claim that seemingly maintains a human-nonhuman dualism where humans are the only ones capable of transcendence, I am not arguing for the maintaining of such a dualism nor that animals do not deserve moral considerability, but that the experiences of animals are not the same as the experiences of human beings. Comparing animal experience in a slaughterhouse or laboratory to the experiences of various groups throughout history does not provide a just case for bringing forth the horrors of animal experience. Just as each human atrocity–the Holocaust, slavery, the Trail of Tears–are distinct, so too are the experiences of animals.

To take this further, when it comes to environmental justice issues, the challenges and experiences that a local community face in South Georgia are going to be different than in Western Montana. For instance, the concerns of strip mining in the area of Okefenokee Swamp for communities in south central Georgia and north Florida are different from the experience of the Berkeley Pit in Butte, Montana and the communities impacted by the superfund site. Though the stories of both may have similarities, the experiences are vastly different for those impacted. At best, we could use the experiences as case studies to determine paths forward when dealing with similar cases, but cannot state that the experiences are the same.

This is where I will return to Costello's discussion on willed ignorance to bring in another important point for this discussion. When she states that the Poles might have had an idea of the events going on in Treblinka, they could not afford to know for their own sake. Still, as I stated before about the unjust use of comparisons between human and animal experience, so too will it be inappropriate to compare the willed ignorance of those living around concentration camps to the willed ignorance of people living in a place and being unaware of the environmental justice issues where one calls home. Willed ignorance in either case suggests that moral actors in the community are either aware of the issues and choose to not act on the issues or are just blind to the very possibility of them occurring in one's own backyard.

When it comes to environmental justice, willed ignorance on local issues and how they impact one's community perpetuates the narrative that if "something does not impact me, then it does not matter to me." However, most people are going to care to various degrees about what is going on in their community when informed on the issues. Costello's point of driving around Waltham and seeing no sign of horrors supports this point when she states, "They are all around

us as I speak, only we do not, in a certain sense, know about them" (Coetzee 21).

Making this connection to faith communities is imperative. Churches in the South tend to remain largely segregated, despite social advances. Traditionally Black congregations and historic mainline white congregations have not had too much interaction. Conferences, worship services, and pews will largely reflect the community surrounding the local church. Unfortunately, more often than not, folks attending a white mainline or evangelical congregation will have limited engagement with historic Black Churches a few miles down the road. This causes a disconnect of how extensive environmental issues, even in knowledgeable congregations, impact other members of one's community. Especially those who identify differently than that white, mainline or evangelical individual. Churches, both traditionally Black or White, have potential in engaging with one another on environmental justice concerns in a community by informing each other of what's going on and how the other might be of assistance.

Issues in the Anthropocene

Issues in the Anthropocene explored both the theoretical and practical aspects of this new era that has become known as the *Anthropocene*. This course presented applicable concepts to my project from Steven Vogel, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Bill McKibben, and others whose ideas of how to approach this era help identify permitted interferences and actions. Through these applications it becomes clear that humans have had a significant impact on the natural world through various means of greenhouse gas emissions, pollution from various sources such as industry and agriculture, and the physical construction of our world.

Steven Vogel spends time in his text, *Thinking Like A Mall, Environmental Philosophy*

After the End of Nature, exploring what a 'postnatural' environmental ethic would look like. This is due to his argumentation surrounding the term *nature*, and arguing that the term no longer serves intellectual value. Taking a stance on an *after nature* ethic, he echoes the voice of Bill McKibben, whose argument in *The End of Nature* suggests that humans have been influencing the environment for so long that there is no *nature* left. In his text, he uses climate for this qualifying claim.

The emphasis for both authors lies in the ways we have influenced our environment. For Vogel, this is through our continual social and physical constructions, and our transformative practices. For this reason, he suggests "nature might *always* have been gone," if it even existed at all (Vogel 26). On his point of transformative practices, he says the environment has been "the object of our practices" and through it, the environment comes to be (Vogel 65). Even the physical and social construction of the environment distances us from any true concept of what *nature* is or was, and ultimately, results in the loss in any nature-culture dualism.

Artifacts become the focus of his argument. These are the results of our constructions and interactions with the environment. However, Vogel acknowledges that there is a *gap* with what we create. This *gap* escapes human control and is the wildness inherent in the artifact. This gap, for Vogel, requires us to acknowledge the processes we cannot control and anticipate them in our constructions – "to design and build anything requires presupposing a whole set of processes that one does not design, and whose operation beyond one's understanding and intention is necessary for the build to take place" (Vogel 113).

Self-knowledge and humility are important to properly address artifacts, according to Vogel. These two are virtues of environmental responsibility and how we might better think

about our environment. Self-knowledge requires an active immersion into landscapes to discern "the consequences it shows of previous human action and…acknowledge the imperative to anticipate, before we perform any new action, the consequences for landscapes it will in turn have" (Vogel 119). The second virtue, Vogel claims, is that of humility. This virtue brings out the hidden aspects of human intention, "but it also reveals the way in which the consequences of those actions always escape the plans and intentions of those who participate in them" (Vogel 119). Thus, recognizing the consequences of our actions becomes an important part of environmental responsibility. "Combined…self-knowledge and humility might be the key environmental virtues, teaching us of our responsibility for the world we inhabit on the one hand but also reminding us not to overestimate our ability to remake it in any way we want on the other" (Vogel 121).

Environmental responsibility is the crux of Vogel's argument. It is through our actions of constructing material environments and the social practices associated with these environments that we have gotten to where we are as a society. The problem now "is to find new ways of building it that will make it a good environment, one that fosters good human life in community and that is filled with beauty, with pleasure, with freedom, and with happiness for all the beings inhabiting it" (Vogel 165).

Robin Wall Kimmerer's work, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, explores indigenous wisdom and the acquisition of scientific knowledge by blending the two worlds in a way that shows Native spirituality and science are not mutually exclusive. while tying in several concepts of Vogel's argument outlined above–namely, how our practices and concepts of nature prevent us from really understanding

our responsibility to the more-than-human world, and each other. Her chapter, "The Sacred and the Superfund," combines what Vogel aims to argue – finding ways to be responsible for what we create for the sake of the world's beings. In this chapter, she explores the history of Onondaga Lake from the history of the Onondaga Nation to the nine superfund sites that line the lake's shore.

The artificiality of Onondaga Lake comes out here. In Kimmerer's description of the lake, she mentions that the lake experienced "more than a century of industrial development" and was the dumping ground for the produced waste of manufacturers and the city (313). Solvay Process Company left a primary and long-lasting mark on the lake. The produced waste impacted the water of the lake to the degree that wildlife had largely disappeared from the lake's shores and "fishing was banned in 1970 due to high concentrations of mercury" (Kimmerer 316). Kimmerer shares that Onondaga Lake was "famed for its whitefish" in the 1880s and had a famed resort on its shore, but industry impeded upon the community to ban swimming in 1940. After the Solvay Process Company, Allied Chemical took root on the lakeshore and followed suit in contributing to the disruptive practices that continued to plague Onondaga Lake.

After years of colonial impact, forced removal, and failed treaties, in March of 2005, "the Onondaga Nation filed a complaint in federal court with the goal of reclaiming title to their lost homelands" and the right to carry out their stewarding responsibilities (Kimmerer 319). The Onondaga termed the suit a land rights action grounded by the precepts of the Great Law of Peace. Non-Native individuals also joined in the suit as allies in the Onondaga's call for healing as the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation. What was unique about the legal action was that it "concerned not only rights *to* the land but also rights *of* the land" (Kimmerer 322). However, in

2010 the case was dismissed. Since then, Honeywell Incorporated, the successor of Allied Chemical, was held accountable for the cleanup of the lake through its own plan involving "minimum cost and minimum benefit" (Kimmerer 321).

Community and environmental responsibility are two main components of Vogel and Kimmerer's works that integrate into my project. Showing humility and self-knowledge in the construction of our artifacts make for an important part of environmental responsibility. This responsibility, as evident by Vogel, extends to the greater community by anticipating the ways in which our artifacts might impact those who are already feeling the brunt of environmental justice issues. Environmental responsibility means holding moral actors accountable for negative impacts when access to clean air, water, food, and other necessities become compromised.

Responsibility in Native practices are engrossed in a system of reciprocity and gift. But these are also wrapped up in spiritual significance. Native traditions do not have a distinct separation between culture and nature. They are intertwined and entities – Bald Eagle, River, Mountain, and Man – are all a part of a greater community where responsibility is shared through the use of gifts in a system of reciprocity. Community comes up in a practical way regarding the Onondaga example of the Onondaga Nation garnishing support from non-Native people in the community in pursuit of justice for Onondaga Lake. They also aimed to act according to their spiritual tradition and responsibilities of being stewards to the land. Thinking along these lines raise questions regarding the ways in which community is emphasized in the Church and the role of spirituality regarding environmental responsibility.

Both of these appear in the practical efforts of the Church to recognize and act in accordance to scripture. The Church has always been engaged in community, especially in regard

to the concept of neighbor and acting Christ-like. Concern for community is also elevated by the moral considerability of all people due to the status of all humans being made in the image of God. This connects all people, regardless of racial and ethnic identity and economic status, to an equal moral status.

Environmental justice is a term that encompasses a number of possible situations, from subjection to extractive industry to waste and land use issues, particularly involving poor and marginalized groups. Early on in my project, I mentioned the issue of proposed mining in the Okefenokee Swamp in south Georgia, environmental justice issues in Adel, Georgia, and the food desert concern in Valdosta, Georgia. These are merely three examples of many that call for a response from members of the community and enact their duties as members of a community. In Adel, community members have already formed a group called the Concerned Citizens of Cook County to address environmental justice issues regarding biomass plants and health concerns in the community. In Valdosta, the city passed a resolution opposing mining operations within 10 miles of Okefenokee Swamp in an attempt to preserve one of south Georgia's oldest gems and ecosystems. And in coastal Glynn County, Georgia, the area is home to four superfund sites that impede upon the community. Though some congregations, including Black Churches, along the coast have started to act in their communities, many have remained unmoved by the call to care for community and acknowledge what that entails regarding climate and environmental issues.

There is a slight disconnect within some faith communities regarding the connection of climate and environmental impacts with the call to steward the land, as understood by Christians in the faith's creation narrative. Challenges exist theologically and politically for these faith

communities, particularly within Evangelical congregations. Failure to make these connections between understandings of a faithful call to stewardship and climate change impact their ability to fully address their call to care for their neighbors. The emphasis of community and environmental responsibility go hand in hand. Acknowledging and acting on environmental justice issues is an extension of what it means to care for ones' neighbor as part of ones' commitment to their faith.

The anthropocene grants us the ability to determine new paths forward in this new epoch. Acknowledging that there might be no culture-nature dualism, as Vogel suggests, means we need new ideas of how to approach a society who has held this dualistic belief and struggles to fully understand the impacts of how we construct our world. This belief upholds a false sense that implies that what we physically construct does not impact the pristine nature we are accustomed to believing. In fact, this distinction collapses culture and nature into an *environment* where things flow freely and human influences on the environment become more visible. In this sense, the collapse between culture and nature has the potential to influence the ways in which Christians and people of faith interact in their world and recognize that what we do in our environments impacts all of creation. It provides an opportunity to better address the disconnect between stewardship and the impacts of climate change. For Chrisitans, it also grants an opportunity to fully acknowledge the ways in which care for creation is tied to care for our neighbor, while understanding that what we create in our communities will likely have impacts on human and non-human lives. This lack of dualism might even provide an opportunity to re-examine our faith's stories and how these stories might influence our relation to the world.

Actions Taken

At the start of my project, my main aim was to write 2-3 articles for publication through news outlets in southern Georgia. My primary outlet for publication was the Valdosta Daily Times in Valdosta, Georgia, with a secondary outlet being WCTV in Tallahassee, Florida, who serves northern Florida and southern Georgia. Both of these outlets are accessible to black communities, people of faith, and the communities experience many of the environmental justice issues I have mentioned. However, my project needed a more public component. Due to this, I began with no idea of what that component would be in August of 2021. By Spring 2022, I had contemplated different ideas for a public event, but had not committed to anything until late March. By that point, I had begun developing plans for a Climate Conversation with members of the Faith and Climate Action Montana community. By this time, I had only committed to one written article, still with the intent of publishing.

The thought for the written component began with an email from Professor Nadia White out of the University of Montana's Journalism program and Dr. Christopher Preston from the Philosophy department in the Summer of 2021. The email they both sent me was for a fellowship program that had begun at Boston University – The Religion and Environment Story Project. This project aims to network and train journalists and public-facing academics to write and report on the intersection of the religious and environmental beats.

The thought further developed during the Fall of 2021 to produce several pieces for publication as part of my project. However, that number was shaved down to produce just one story. This was due to failure on my part to adequately anticipate the difficulty of developing and writing such a public piece. In preparation for this venture, I spoke with two graduate students in

the Journalism program who gave me ideas behind how to conduct interviews, the types of questions to ask, and some notes for writing a story. They also suggested the text, *Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method* by Carole Rich, as a support text for my pursuits.

With my interest in writing a story situated in southern Georgia and discussing the intersection of the Black Church and environmental justice, I initially contacted a pastor from a Black Church in Valdosta, Georgia for an interview in December. However, they backed out in February due to family issues. I began to regroup around the interview shortly after. I had a discussion with John Lund at Emmaus Campus Ministry in late February, searching for ideas of people to contact. He introduced me to the Emmaus Campus Ministries pastor at Georgia Tech that day a few days later, I received an email suggesting I reach out to Codi Norred, the executive director for Georgia Interfaith Power and Light, who agreed to a brief meeting to get a sense of what my project was about. He later agreed to an interview in late March.

I conducted an hour-long interview with Codi Norred on March 24, 2022. I prepared a series of questions to guide our conversation, with the expectation that there would be room to allow further feedback from him at the end of the interview. We discussed topics including, how the organization began in Georgia, what the emphasis was for the organization in the early 2000s, and what they aimed to accomplish in the state. We moved into discussion of how the organization's focus has shifted over the last six years. He shared that the organization has put more emphasis on environmental justice issues, allocating more of their resources toward communities in need of support regarding these issues, identified issues and efforts they were involved in, and how their shift has allowed them to engage more Black Churches in the state – especially along coastal Georgia. We also discussed some of the theological and political

challenges they have faced with trying to engage faith communities in the coastal and southern portions of the state and their hopes of how to better serve these regions in the future. As a request of the interview, Codi shared that he would like to vet my writing before attempting to publish, since this was my first time producing an article for publication.

I used the information from the interview to write an article aimed at publication. Before writing, I hand-wrote a transcription of the interview and identified what I considered important bits of information and quotes for the article. In the article, I connect environmental issues of southern Georgia with the claims that Codi Norred shared. I ultimately attempt to raise awareness of the environmental issues Georgians face while sharing Norred's stance that faith communities have a responsibility to take climate issues seriously as they perpetuate existing justice issues.

I sent my first draft to Dr. Christopher Preston and received positive feedback about this milestone and provided some feedback regarding the areas in the draft to tend to. After addressing his comments, I sent the article to Professor Nadia White for review. She responded positively for this first attempt, however, there was a good amount of rewriting and restructuring to do to make the story more appealing and read like a piece of journalism. After addressing her comments, I sent a third draft to her. This draft was particularly challenging. First, she suggested not writing in first-person as stories are typically not written in that voice. Secondly, she suggested I restructure the article. In restructuring the draft, she suggested I start off with an example of environmental justice in Georgia to capture readers right off and show that something real is happening in the community. The example I used was energy burden, but I began the article with a quote from Norred, which turned out to be a wrong approach to storytelling. She

suggested I rewrite that section with a more anecdotal example of how this issue was impacting families experiencing energy burden in the region. She suggested doing an interview for that part. Unfortunately, I did not make an interview happen with the section in question and produced a fourth draft outlining a few issues low-income families experience

Currently, I am on the fifth draft of the article and awaiting further feedback from Professor White and I have sent a draft to Norred for comment to uphold his request that I share a draft with him when I get close to publication. Currently, the article has not been submitted to my primary or secondary outlet for publication.

One failure of this project is that I did not meet my goal of publishing the article by the project deadline. Between a lengthy drafting process, challenges in shifting writing styles from an academic to public facing piece, and my failure to manage my time appropriately regarding the article, this goal was not met. Through this process, I learned that if I desire to write pieces of this sort, I must be bolder in reaching out to people for interviews to make the story have different angles and get pertinent information.

The second active component of my project took place on May 16, 2022, and brought together 16 total individuals from Faith and Climate Action Montana, philosophy and literature graduate students from the University of Montana, and two of my family members from Georgia and Florida, into a conversation about climate change.

My public event developed from two points of interest. The first regarded literature I had been exposed to through Joanna Macy's despair work and Katharine Hayhoe's emphasis on having conversations with people and finding common ground to discuss the climate crisis. The second came from an observation that expressed the need to address climate despair. I had

experienced this through my work with Faith and Climate Action Montana as the topic came up for many members. As such, these became areas of focus for the event in March.

In developing the event, I acknowledged at the beginning that this event would look different here in Missoula than if it were to take place in south Georgia. I knew I would not be incorporating black voices into the conversation since I would be hosting it in Missoula, Montana. I also knew a limitation was that there were fewer evangelical leaning people here in Missoula as well.

For the event, I invited members of Faith and Climate Action Montana through the group's email listserv. Of the nearly 200 people, only four were able to attend. I also invited my graduate student cohort in the Philosophy department and students in my Spring 2022 classes. The event involved a short overview of my project and how this active conversation developed from what I have seen as necessary in faith communities and my exploration of environmental philosophy.

Connecting Joanna Macy and Katharine Hayhoe into the conversation was essential in creating a space for attendees to engage with one another. I also brought these two views into the development of the guided questions for the attendees to engage. I recognized with my work with Faith and Climate Action Montana that there would likely be people who wanted to address their own climate despair, but I also acknowledged that not everyone in attendance (especially the grad students and my family) would be in that stage and might be focused on practical actions or enjoying the conversation as topics unfolded.

I also acknowledged that with the spread of people I had invited, not all were going to be affiliated with a faith tradition, and in some cases, would identify as atheist or agnostic. Creating

questions that accommodated this aspect proved slightly difficult initially.

The conversation was developed, in part, as an opportunity for individuals to begin by addressing where they were with regard to their own level of climate despair and provide a chance to address shared values with each other. The conversation was set to move toward a discussion about how despair and shared values might be utilized to promote environmental action in a community, especially faith communities. This included discussion regarding environmental justice and how faith might be brought into the equation for those of faith identities.

The day of the event, I provided water and snacks for the attendees. Individuals were separated as evenly as possible as to have a diverse pool of participants from various age groups, education backgrounds, and faith or non-faith identities and be in conversation with each other. Even though a majority of participants were from a philosophy background, their diverse faith and non-faith identities added further depth to their respective small groups. Each group had a member of Faith and Climate Action Montana and three students from philosophy and literature.

I started with a 15-minute welcome, land acknowledgement, and brief overview of my project and how the conversation fit into my efforts. For the conversation, I allowed 45 minutes for the group discussions and had a 15-minute debrief for groups to share elements of their discussions. During the debrief, groups shared discussions of systemic and political concerns, the role of literature and creation stories, and difficulties of finding shared values among people with different value systems. This last piece was an important piece to my aim in the conversations. Though individuals come from various belief and value systems, and are informed by personal experiences, they should still aim to find that common ground for conversation to occur. In one

group, common ground was found. This group identified their common concern of the environment as their shared interest and was where the group dove into deep discussion with one another.

Following the debrief, I presented some ideas of further conversations that could be had between participants and those in the community. These included conversations with friends and family as starting points, with an eye towards further engaging organizations, people of color and other marginalized groups, and people of faith identities. I ended with an example of the type of information that might be useful for those of faith or non-faith identities being in conversation with other faith individuals. For my example, I presented information on the denominational stance of the United Methodist tradition on climate change, science, and stewardship. This information might prove beneficial to conversations involving those who might not be climate conscious. One of my family members in attendance responded that she was unaware of the existing denomination literature on climate change and was surprised that our home church in Valdosta, Georgia had not incorporated this information into sermons and bible studies, considering how easy it was to access the literature on the denomination's website. I ended with a short 4-minute video about the resiliency and actions that Black churches are taking in Brunswick, Georgia.

The climate conversations showed an important aspect to concerns regarding our environment. In this, it proved that people from various backgrounds can be in conversation with those outside of their own social bubbles and have meaningful conversations about their concerns, fears, and hopes about climate change.

Challenges and Successes

My project aimed to address the intersection of the Church with environmental justice while also looking at the Black Church more specifically. I started developing what the project potentially would look like in Fall 2021, but began the active components and writing mostly in Spring 2022. I accomplished creating a public event that engaged people from various backgrounds and faith and non-faith identities in a conversation regarding climate change while incorporating environmental justice and faith components. However, I failed to meet my goal of writing and publishing an article in southern Georgia by the project deadline, but I do plan to get the article sent out soon to begin the publication process.

I knew from the start that deciding to write a publishable article as an aspect of this project was going to be a challenge. The biggest challenge being the transition from an academic style of writing to one that is more accessible to the general public. The actual transition did prove challenging, but opportune for learning necessary skills in story development and concise writing.

Writing in the form of an article for publication with a news outlet often comes with a limit to the number of words one might use in their story. Writing an article based on an interview and current environmental issues in southern Georgia proved challenging to the word limit. There were pieces of the interview and environmental issues that had to be cut in order to fall under a 1,500 word limit.

I also failed to anticipate the time it takes in creating a publishable piece of work. When I began the writing process in early April, I did not account for enough time to effectively begin the publication process with Valdosta Daily Times and WCTV in Tallahassee.

Regarding my public conversation, one of the missed opportunities to bring out more people to this event was the lack of effort to share my event with immediate congregations in the city, instead of just Faith and Climate Action Montana. If I had, there would have likely been more people from local congregations in attendance. Another challenge with the number of attendees perhaps lies in the place where I held the event – the University of Montana. It might have been more applicable to do the event in a local Church with enough space to host approximately 40-50 people. This might have brought in more people of faith. However, the concern I had about doing the event at a Church brought out questions of whether non-Christian or non-faith individuals would willingly come into a house of worship and feel comfortable throughout the event. This is something I will have to wrestle with in future iterations of climate conversations.

Regarding successes, the article development served as a moment to bring light to the intersection of the environmental and religious beats that often go unreported. Stories around what Georgia Interfaith Power and Light and people of faith are doing in their communities can show a different side of what it means to be a person of faith in a secularized society. Far too often, it is assumed Churches are not concerned about the environment. It also gave me the chance to begin learning the skills necessary for writing in journalism. One pivot in my project came when I was preparing to do my project presentation. I wanted to determine a way to present my most recent draft of my article, so I decided to learn about creating an audio story that included recording my own audio bits, trimming audio from my interview with Codi Norred, and learning to combine them into one audio file. The end result was a 9-minute audio story of this draft.

Regarding article creation in the future, more efforts to address specific congregations and the actions they are involved in within their communities will be necessary. All churches cannot be involved in every effort, however, there many engaged in different ways. With regard to future story ideas, south Georgia has a few Native individuals in the state, though no sizable population. Being able to lift Native voices in future articles with the emphasis on environmental justice and exploring if there is any Christian support, would be a new perspective to this project. Other stories exploring how different faiths are collectively acting on the same issue would be another idea. Regarding evangelical communities, exploring the divide between stewardship claims and climate change belief might bring forward ways in how to effectively engage the two within those communities.

The public conversation also gave me a chance to acknowledge the challenges of doing a Missoula-based conversation and not a south Georgia-based one. In this, it gave me a chance to begin framing what components I might include in a climate conversation for residents in southern Georgia. For one, I would focus on conducting these conversations with Christian congregations with the goal of having various congregations from different theological stances in conversation together. With that, I would imagine it being a day-long event or a weekend event to grant more incorporation of congregational and denominational discussion around Creation Care, climate science, and ways to act collectively as one Church, rather than separate denominations.

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