

ROBERT MONSON

University of Denver / Iliff School of Theology

SEATED AT THE CROSS:

WHAT BLACK DISABLED BODIES CAN TEACH US ABOUT

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

As early as 2014, governmental officials in the city of Flint, Michigan made a series of decisions that would prove to have deleterious effects on the people and environment of Flint. As officials sought to make room in the budget, they decided to switch the city's water supply to the polluted Flint River without a plan to treat the water appropriately. The fallout from citizens being poisoned has largely impacted the city's Black population in disastrous ways. In fact, one study has found that:

Analyzing health records from 2008 to 2015, researchers found that fertility rates in Flint dropped by 12 percent and fetal deaths rose by 58 percent after the water was switched to the Flint River in 2014. Additionally, babies who were born at full-term during the water crisis had lower birth weights. The lead exposure also increased the risk of hypertension for pregnant women and may have interfered with their choice of whether or not to breastfeed. Moreover, the health effects of lead exposure in children in Flint increased the risk of impaired cognition, behavioral disorders, hearing problems and delayed puberty."¹

It is clear that budget concerns were deemed more important than the health of Flint citizens, animals, and infrastructure. In this way, it seems that various levels of disabling events were enabled to take place.

Since the inception of this country, Black people have found themselves disabled for a variety of reasons. Some of these factors include genetics, environmental issues, brutality of all sorts, as well as systemic racism. This paper will primarily

¹ "Lead Poisoning in Flint, Michigan - National Partnership for Women & Families," accessed December 6, 2023, <https://nationalpartnership.org/report/clean-water-case-study-flint/#>.

analyze the social implications of Black disabled people here in America, Christian messaging, and how they should shape environmental justice discourse. It is important to note that while Christianity is not the only religion that Black people practice here in America, it still represents a religion that the majority ascribe to (I will share more on this later in the paper.)² It is sufficient to say here that, while many Black Americans, while holding space for nuance, say that “they believe in God as described in their religion’s holy scripture (such as the Bible for Christians or the Quran for Muslims).”³ As a Black, disabled, theologically trained man, I will utilize Black theologians, scholars, and artists to point to a model of environmental justice that includes those who are most marginalized by this ableist society. First, I will go more in-depth on my own positionality and the tools that I use to analyze Black disability. Next, I will talk about Black disabled bodies and environmental justice, and lastly, I will turn to looking closely at what is “Good News” to Black disabled bodies.

My positionality

It is always important for me, when writing or speaking on a given topic to note my social location. It is my hope that doing so allows for others to locate themselves and to note that I am absolutely biased in what I am thinking through. First, I am a disabled Black man who grew up in the southern part of Chicago. This is especially important because often there are assumptions that are made when Black folks speak about God and the universe. Despite most of the people I grew up around having loyalty to the systems of the church, I did not. I did have ethics and a form of spirituality that I could never quite label though. I prided myself on being more moral than the Christians I knew around me. Second, after becoming a Christian later in life, I went on to study theology in a few different spaces and obtained Bible certificates, an MA concentrated on womanism/Black liberation theology, and am now in a PhD program for Religious Studies.

² In February of 2021, Pew Research Center published their findings on the religious beliefs among Black Americans. In this study, they found that the belief in some sort of higher power was almost universal (97%) with the vast majority of those studied ascribing to some form of Christianity. They also noted in their study that at least six-in-ten Black adults noted that religion was very important to them.

³ Pew Research Center, “3. Religious Beliefs among Black Americans,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), February 16, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/religious-beliefs-among-black-americans/>.

As a Black theologian that has been positively impacted by womanist theology, I ground many of my observations with knowledge that I have gained from womanist ethicists and womanist theologians. Womanist scholar Delores S. Williams defines womanism in this way: “Womanists not only concern ourselves about the liberation of women, we also struggle along with Black men and children for the liberation, survival and positive quality of life for our entire oppressed Black community.”⁴ This definition is beneficial to me as I write about Black disabled bodies, and environmental justice. I am clear, in approaching the topics of environmental justice and Black disability, that I am seeking for the liberation and thriving of all people. A womanist lens helps to keep me grounded in my research and writing. I bring forth the knowledge and beauty of Black disability even as I strive alongside other Black bodies to create a future that is full of liberation and life.

Definitions of Environmental Justice and Disability

In the quest for environmental justice, it is essential that we start from some sort of working definition of the term as well as how we think of disability. According to the United States Protection Agency, environmental justice is defined as *Environmental justice* means the just treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of income, race, color, national origin, Tribal affiliation, or disability, in agency decision-making and other Federal activities that affect human health and the environment so that people:

- are fully protected from disproportionate and adverse human health and environmental effects (including risks) and hazards, including those related to climate change, the cumulative impacts of environmental and other burdens, and the legacy of racism or other structural or systemic barriers; and
- have equitable access to a healthy, sustainable, and resilient environment in which to live, play, work, learn, grow, worship, and engage in cultural and subsistence practices.⁵

This definition serves to ground us because it points to an equitable outcome for all human beings. Environmental justice

⁴ Dolores S. Williams, *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, ed. Emilie Townes (Orbis Books, 2015), 97.

⁵ OEJECR US EPA, “Learn About Environmental Justice,” Overviews and Factsheets, February 13, 2015, <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/learn-about-environmental-justic>.

work should be about providing an equitable world that allows every person, regardless of status, to have a healthy environment. Human beings being able to enjoy the benefits of an environment that allows them to work and play in a sustainable way should be paramount to how we define the contours of environmental justice.

Now that we have a starting place to consider environmental justice, it is also important to note how we think of disability for the rest of this paper. According to the CDC, disability can be defined as “any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions).”⁶ This definition is crucial as we consider invisible and visible disabilities. While our society is just now beginning to make headway in considering the ways that visible disabilities impact our society and one another, there is so much work to be done in considering the full spectrum of disabled bodies. Some live in immense pain while others do not. Some experience their disability as a superpower while others are ashamed of their disability. No two people are the same and as such, we must consider nuance when we speak of disabled peoples: particularly Black disabled people.

Black people are disabled at a higher rate in the United States than any other ethnic group. Recent studies show that one out of every four Black people live with some sort of disability.⁷ Sometimes, when I speak at academic conferences, I like to poll the crowd before I give this statistic. I ask people what they would guess our disability rates are. I also poll the crowd and try to get them to name the amount of Black disabled people they know in academia, in movies, and personally. I do this exercise to frame the disparity between the statistics rates of Black bodies and the representation/space that Black disability takes up in the imaginations of people. Black people being disabled in such a way is massive for realizing that in a crowd of Black people, quite a bit are disabled in one or multiple ways. Some would label this positively. Still others are reeling from systems and environments that have disabled them.

⁶ DC, “Disability and Health Overview | CDC,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 15, 2020,

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html>.

⁷ CDC, “Infographic: Adults with Disabilities: Ethnicity and Race | CDC,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, October 25, 2019,

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/materials/infographic-disabilities-ethnicity-race.html>.

What does all of this have to do with environmental justice? In the journey to create policies that seek to remedy the damage that humans have done to the planet, it is imperative that we consider all bodies when we protest, write, and legislate. In my earlier exercise to poll different crowds about Black disabled people, it is apparent that Black disabled people are rarely considered. If this is the case in a teaching venue, one can easily see how this effect is amplified on a larger scale. If Black disabled people aren't even considered, then of course they aren't at the table making decisions. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when churches and many organizations were forced to shut down, many expressed their confusion at how to create meaningful online platforms. As so many scrambled for answers, there seemed to be an ignorance of the ways in which disabled people have had to create community with one another; how they had been forced to do this for many years. Disabled people have wisdom to share. I offer these concrete examples because perhaps, if disabled people, particularly Black, were asked to help form creative online spaces, we all could have coped with the pandemic in more engaging ways. Rather than trying to dream of something from scratch, churches could have asked their chronically ill to explain the ways that they have had to cultivate community when they cannot gather in person.

America as a Disabling Apparatus

I want to underscore how disability manifests for Black bodies as America itself is a disabling apparatus. The way this nation was colonized and made great was through brutalization, maiming, and the spread of disease. Productivity and success remain as American ideals that measure the success of individual and communal lives. It is because of this that I say that America is a disabling apparatus. How does this apparatus influence the lives and futures of Black people? Dr. Rheeda Walker wrote a book entitled *The Unapologetic Guide to Black Mental Health* where she discusses, among other things, the different avenues that this country employs to harm Black bodies. She notes that "African-American men, women, and children are mistreated and sometimes killed for doing normal things that white people do or could do without a second thought or consequence."⁸ This reality impacts Black mental health in very deleterious ways, as Black people are forced to live in a world where anxiety and fear are commonplace.

⁸ Rheeda Walker, *The Unapologetic Guide to Black Mental Health: Navigate an Unequal System, Learn Tools for Emotional Wellness, and Get the Help You Deserve* (New Harbinger Publications, 2020), 46.

Racism, in its many forms, has a maiming, disabling, and disheartening effect on Black bodies in this nation. Inherent in writing about America in this way is the knee-jerk reaction that many face to defend America as no more brutal than any other developing nation. It is at this juncture that I must readily say that the systems of heteronormativity, ableism, and racism that have been embedded into this country were created. They are not simply a byproduct of evolution. The rise in work fatigue, and mental health breakdown in America cannot be ignored as Americans, irrespective of ethnicity, eventually breakdown over the demands that the workforce place upon their bodies and minds. If this weren't a problem, then the American Psychological Association would not have noted in recent studies that "Nearly 3 in 5 employees reported negative impacts of work-related stress, including lack of interest, motivation, or energy (26%) and lack of effort at work (19%)."⁹ These statistics are compounded when people face work exhaustion, stress, fatigue, and racial discrimination. Bodies develop disabilities that they weren't born with simply due to the way this country chooses to legislate work.

In light of the disabling apparatus known as America, I point to a model that aims for progress. Black disability politics can help us as we put disability, race, and gender into conversation with environmental justice. Dr. Sami Schalk defines Black disability politics as "anti-ableist arguments and actions performed by Black cultural workers. Black disability politics are often performed in solidarity with disabled people...they prioritize an understanding of disability within the context of white supremacy."¹⁰ Black disability politics and Black disability studies are frameworks that have been and are being used by scholars and activists today to study the relationships between Blackness and disability. Furthermore, organizations such as the Black Panthers were early performers of Black disability politics. In Dr. Schalk's book, she does extensive work to explore the history between the Black Panthers and the ways in which they fed needy people, strengthened families, and fought for the disabled. Her work clearly shows that even in the 1970s, the Black Panther Party was not ignorant of the rights of Black disabled bodies.

The Good News for Black Disabled People.¹¹

⁹ "Burnout and Stress Are Everywhere," <https://www.apa.org>, accessed March 20, 2024, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-burnout-stress>.

¹⁰ Sami Schalk, *Black Disability Politics* (Duke University Press, 2022), 5.

¹¹ The Good News I refer to here, that, while disputed in various aspects of Christianity on specifics, is in essence, the message of Jesus as God and the proclamation of his triumph over sin, death, and destruction. It is also referred to in many spaces as the "gospel."

In Christianity, the crucifixion of Jesus has been a place to rally many to view suffering and resurrection. Pain and discomfort can be seen as sacramental and desirable by some within Christianity. Researcher and scholar Robert Orsi, in his book *Between Heaven and Earth*, does a phenomenal job of looking at some of the history of Catholicism, suffering, and disability. He makes note of the ways that people have utilized the Bible to understand disabled bodies and any suffering that they may go through. At one point he notes that a common thought was that “pain was a ladder to heaven.” And in another place he notes a common phrase that “God always has a reason for sending pain.”¹² While it would be beyond the scope of this writing to trace the entire history of pain, suffering, and disability within Christian history, I bring some of Orsi’s thoughts here to broach the topic of how disabled people have been treated throughout history in relation to Christianity. Many have been ignored, some have been incorporated into churches for menial tasks, and still others have been treated as sinners who have displeased God in some way.¹³

While the predominant message of the Good News that Christianity seeks to provide revolves around Jesus’ suffering and disabling marks, perhaps it is time to consider those who are already disabled. What happens when those who are or who have been made disabled take a seat at the foot of the Cross hypothetically speaking? Good News to these bodies is not that they are invited to suffer more with Jesus. This society, built around ableism, heteronormativity, and racism has already made life harder for these bodies. Instead, a spirituality that calls them into the resurrecting life¹⁴ is truly Good News.¹⁵ In this resurrecting life, Black disabled people are consulted as society is reshaped in a way that makes a thriving environment for all.

¹² Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 23.

¹³ For more thoughts on disability, suffering, and Christianity, I would recommend womanist scholar M. Shawn Copeland’s book *Enfleshing Freedom*.

¹⁴ By referring to “resurrecting life” I am pointing at the Gospel accounts of Jesus rising from the dead. In the biblical account of John 20, Jesus appears to his disciples. With one disciple in particular, Thomas, he shows that even in his resurrected body he still has wounds in his hands and his feet. Rising from the dead in such a miraculous fashion did not erase his disabilities that he suffered at the hands of Romans.

¹⁵ In writing on the Good News for disabled bodies, I also want to note that there have been so many innovations around accessibility that started with disabled people in mind that have later helped everyone such as speech recognition, captioning, and other assistive technology.

On this resurrected life, I must point out the Christian doctrine of salvation. Many write about and speak about salvation in terms of what God saves humanity from, namely, sin, death, and hell. Fear of punishment in an eternal lake of fire aligns perfectly with the need for salvation. In the spirituality and the lived experiences that Black disabled people have to offer, hell is not the primary concern. Instead, many Black disabled people would join with the vision of salvation that Delores Williams points to when she says that “Womanists and Black male liberation theologians can make a special contribution to this resurrection. They can provide ideas about salvation in a social context for Black Christians who want to understand how Black people can be saved in the material world.” This reflection is necessary because Black disabled people, and really all people, need to explore what salvation looks like in the material world. Rather than being mostly concerned with spirit and soul, we must work together to create a world that offers life. In this framing, Black disabled people are pointing out what we need to be saved from (systemic inequities, environmental hazards like global warming, poverty, etc.) and unto.

Conclusion

Black disabled people have fought for this nation in various wars, in the Civil Rights’ Movement, in the classroom, and in modern digital spaces. From Harriet Tubman to Fannie Lou Hamer, Black people have been working, against oppressive odds to make society equitable. I note these women because they were maimed and disabled in their quest to seek liberation. As we consider how to fight for environmental justice, it is important to listen to current Black disabled activists like Talila Lewis, Verton Banks, Lamar Hardwick, Shelby Lynch, Ola Ojewumi, and Keith Jones. Not all of these activists claim an expressly Christian religious identity, but what is noteworthy is that they have a passion to make an inclusive society. And so, how can they be ignored in talks of environmental reparations and justice? Their voices, and the voices of many other Black disabled bodies are critical. Their reflections on community, the systems that disable, and how different progressive models of environmental justice impact real lives, are extremely nuanced.

Black people in this country have had to make a way out of no way as they have utilized their spirituality and concept of God to advocate for their rights and the rights of their children as referenced earlier. At different intersections of American

history, Black lives have served as a reminder that we are not all free and that our liberation is bound with the futures of one another. In that same way, Black disabled people stand as a witness in this nation that things can be different. Black disabled people remind us that this society was made this way and that we can remake it. They remind us that we cannot fight for the environment outside of knowing the stories of real people. We can work together to create a world where people can flourish.

As we consider environmental justice, I offer another concrete way that Black disabled people, especially in the ones that claim Christian religious identity, can be helpful to society, and that is in framing priorities. When policies such as paper straws are enacted to cut down on plastic waste, who gets the power to say that this particular thing is a priority? The answer is typically found at the top of an organizational chart filled with able-bodied men who are not part of the global majority. These types of policies, that, while done with good intentions, can seem crass when compared to Black disabled people being harmed in public. Furthermore, when Black disabled people are met with poverty, racism, lack of access to wealth, job scarcity, and hunger, we must consider that disabled people can help us to frame the priorities that we have when we strive for equality.

As I close this writing, I am reminded of a scene from Toni Morrison's famous novel, *Beloved*. In this novel, Morrison creates a scene known as the Clearing. This beautifully depicted, woodland scene is a staging ground for Black men, women, and children to come and display their full selves. In this powerful scene, the main character, Baby Suggs, holy, someone who has been disabled, invites them all to come. She reminds them that they are valuable, and worthy to be nurtured. As she watches them lament and dance, she states that "'Here, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh.'" This beautiful depiction of a woodland scene, with bodies expressing themselves is a picture of what is possible in a reparations model that makes room for Black disabled people. Perhaps this Clearing scene will be a future scene where all bodies, regardless of ability can be at peace with nature and one another.