

***Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice:
Moral Theory in the Making?***

By Larry Rasmussen

Doing Our First Works Over

James Baldwin, who may have understood the white mind better than anyone else in the written record, wrote of “do[ing] our first works over.”¹ “In the church I come from—which is not at all the same church to which white Americans belong—we were counseled, from time to time, to do our first works over.”² “Go back to where you started,” Baldwin says, “or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but *know whence you came*.”³ To do first works over means to reexamine everything from its onset, and tell the truth about it.

First works, those by which we expect to work out our salvation, are layered deeply in psyche and society. They generate the “normative gaze”⁴ that frames and guides feeling and thought. They fund our personal habits and those of our institutions. They show up in our modes of production and reproduction, our cultural sensibilities, our basic esthetic, intellectual and moral values. They comprise, at day’s end, nothing less than our way of life.

As the incarnation of first works, a way of life is normally rendered so “natural,” so obvious, and so firmly in place, we barely notice its painstaking, costly and arbitrary construction. Only the stranger, some other wanderer from the borderlands, or those habituated by life experience to “twoness,”⁵ are routinely aware of its quirky logic and

¹ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), xix. I am indebted to the panel of Union Theological Seminary students and alumnae/alumni at the American Academy of Religion, Toronto, 2002, for this reference. The panel, on white racism, cited Baldwin and entitled its session “Doing Our First Works Over.” Members were Elizabeth Bounds, Karin Case, Robin Gorsline, Dwight Hopkins, Sally MacNichol, Jennifer Harvey, and Aana Vigen.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ I take this phrase from Cornel West and his discussion in *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 53 ff.

⁵ The reference is to the famous exposition of W. E. B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: New American Library, 1969. Original publication, 1903). “Twoness” means the necessity of

capricious composition. Those native to their own first works treat them as fish do water, or plants topsoil.

This essay uses the Environmental Justice movement (hereafter the EJ movement) to interrogate first works. Raised on the receiving end of environmental racism as documented from the 1980s onward, the EJ movement knows what basic works need, like faulty and dangerous equipment, to be recalled, disassembled and rebuilt.

The effort here chases a specific question: what might happen to Christian moral theory, especially its notion of justice, if urban environmental racism and the EJ movement supply the clues for reformation? What commended changes in moral habitat follow if environmental racism is the lens for reexamining first works?

The initial step is to describe the moral world of the EJ movement itself. That adjusts the question somewhat. Organizations addressing environmental racism do not begin, as ethicists are wont, with moral theory and a theory of justice, despite the very name “the Environmental Justice movement.” The quest for justice-centered, Earth-honoring Christianities, and the theologies, traditions and practices supporting them, may name well my pursuit and those of other Christian ethicists. But it does not name theirs. They work from concrete injuries of *injustice* and seek incremental remedies, relishing victories savory enough for another day’s sweat. So while understanding their world is vital, changing it is the aim. Their inspiration may or may not be Christian. It may or may not be interfaith. It may bear no religious logo at all. But whatever wells of the spirit EJ advocates draw from, they keep banging “on the door of hope”⁶ for the sake of another way, and never entertain the suggestion that nobody’s home.

How might the movement’s moral experience be described? Three topics are offered here: the collective, systemic nature of injustice; the presentation, or narrative, of the eco-crisis itself; and environmental justice as social transformation. Consequences for Christian moral theory—this essay’s preoccupation—will follow.

African-Americans to know two worlds, for their own survival as an out-of-favor minority, as well as the consequences for their souls and psyches of living on this ledge.

⁶ The words are Barbara Kingsolver’s in *Small Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 3. Kingsolver is not talking about the Environmental Justice movement *per se*. She is, however, telling a story (in which this phrase occurs) to speak of all those, and especially the poor, who seek a more just Earth as they battle degraded environments and the ravages of high-intensity and low-intensity warfare.

The Nature of Environmental Injustice

For the EJ movement, experiences of environmental racism and injustice are not random, nor are they individual. **Environmental injustice happens to groups and its causes are systemic.** And while EJ advocates are diverse—far more than the membership of other environmentalist organizations—they are of a common mind that understanding the collective experience of injustice means “uncovering the way society reproduces unshared power arrangements.”⁷ Routine privilege, or lack of the same, is not a product of the dice throw of good or back luck. Privilege and its absence are not acts of God, good or bad karma, or individual merit earned or lost on a putative level playing field.

Yes, the evolutionary happenstances of nature and the idiosyncrasies of history down the long corridors of time *do* decide socio-environmental conditions in grave measure. (Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and Rick Potts’ *Humanity’s Descent: The Consequences of Ecological Instability* argue this in different but compelling ways.⁸) Yet even signature socio-evolutionary developments finally play out “in the ‘hood,” the work of power relations in society-nature, not fate. The EJ conclusion is that **unshared power and lack of access to self-determining power is at the root of collective socio-environmental injustice.** (This means, for a theory of justice, that justice as recognition and participation move alongside justice as distribution and may be as critical. More on that anon.)

History carries harsh reasons for this conclusion about (lack of) power and access. Near-term reasons rest in Civil Rights issues and, behind those, a drama that stretches back to the Civil War. Few other environmentalists link to Civil Rights and post-Civil War struggles but EJ activists often do, for their networks, strategies, and inspiration. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s last act as one of solidarity with Memphis garbage workers is remembered as a bridge from Civil Rights struggles to environmental justice ones. The term “environmental racism” itself emerged in a similar context. It was the charge shouted by a young woman at a 1982 protest in Warren County, North Carolina, against

⁷ Mary Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 2.

⁸ See Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999); and Rick Potts, *Humanity’s Descent: The Consequences of Ecological Sustainability* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1996).

another PCB landfill in that predominately African-American county. “This here ain’t nothin’ but *environmental* racism,” she said. With that, the experience of generations rose to the surface, and the term stuck.

Deeper history runs back even farther, to the underlying first works of the modern era itself. Those works rest in what some now refer to as “the first wave of globalization.”⁹ They center in the impact of Europe-based ways on the local well-being of peoples and their environments around the world **within the framework of conquest, colonization, commerce and Christian implantation**. This complex, which sailed from Europe starting in the 15th century or so, established advantages that continue into the present.

The point for the EJ movement is that these four interlocking “C’s” exploited peoples of color together with their lands across the very epoch they created. To be sure, the legacy of slavery and the plunder of Native Peoples and their lands, together with the colonization of Latin and Caribbean peoples and lands, is not a matter of daily rhetoric in every EJ campaign. More proximate issues and causes capture the attention on most days. But in sharp contrast to the consciousness and narrative of white environmentalists, these burning memories live on. As part of knowing “whence [one] came” (Baldwin), they continue to fire the movement’s commitment to environmental justice.

This collective injustice, bolstered by memories firmly set in the bones, creates a markedly different moral world for the EJ movement compared with those of other environmentalist organizations and movements. Preservationist and conservationist organizations, for example, frequently make their case on the basis of *an assumed common good*. To their credit, more-than-human membership belongs to the moral universe of this assumed good. The goal is to bequeath as many elements of present nature as possible—forests, grasslands, rivers, wetlands and oceans, species—to future generations. Yet justice and a race/class/gender/culture analysis, together with a concentration on urban conditions and those of the urban, rural and reservation poor, hasn’t been part of this “common” good as normal fare. Commonly these have not appeared at all. Or, in the face of recent and stinging criticism, they appear a public relations afterthought rather than a substantive redirection.

⁹ See Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1997), 104-117.

Nor has the core question of the EJ movement been the chief question of preservationists and conservationists. Namely, “What constitute healthy, livable, sustainable, and vital communities in the places we live, work, and play, as the outcome of interrelated natural, built, social, and cultural/spiritual environments?”¹⁰ Preserving present, lived environments without change and in perpetuity is precisely what is *unacceptable* to EJ environmentalists!

Deep ecology advocates, to cite another important group marginal to the EJ movement, are, to their credit, often attentive to injustice/justice. Their moral sensibilities are real, well-honed, and pervasive. Furthermore, these sensibilities are truly a matter of first works, with attention riveted on “species being” and “species justice” across the community of life. Given the whole drift of the modern West to elevate humans (“Some far more than others!” EJ advocates quickly insert) as an ecologically segregated species that treats the rest of nature in slavish ways, deep ecology’s re-positioning of *homo sapiens* is urgently needed. Anthropocentrism as the superiority of human beings and the priority of their needs and desires, always ready to trump the needs of others in creation, is dead on as an underlying cause of a planet in jeopardy.

Moreover, the ecocentric alternative of Deep Ecology is keenly aware of an eco-crisis that is socially constructed and sustained. The seven principles of the founder, Arne Naess, match many EJ principles. 1. Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favor of the relational, total-field image. 2. Biospherical egalitarianism. 3. Principles of diversity and of symbiosis. 4. Anti-class posture. 5. Fight against pollution and resource depletion. 6. Complexity, not complication. 7. Local autonomy and decentralization.¹¹

Nevertheless, the EJ movement is elsewhere. While hardly disagreeing that a new metaphysics of human-in-nature, a new psychology of self, and a different set of eco-moral virtues are needed, EJ advocates rarely focus on species *qua* species when they speak of degraded environments and their repair, or even when they talk of the inclusive community of life (as the EJ movement has since its founding summit in 1991). It

¹⁰ I have compressed the discussion of Charles Lee to arrive at this formulation. See his longer discussion, “Environmental Justice: Building a Unified Vision of Health and the Environment,” in *Environmental Health Perspectives*, Vol. 110, Supplement 2, April, 2002: 142. [Inclusive pages: 141-144.]

¹¹ Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary,” *Inquiry*, 16 (1972): 95-100.

assumes ours is a humanly-dominated biosphere fated to a life together that is wrapped several times around the planet as a necklace of densely populated and densely connected urban and rural habitats. So while “species justice” is not categorically alien to EJ consciousness, neither it nor a transformationist strategy focused on consciousness change and worldview, adequately convey the present ecological imperative—how to survive and thrive sustainably as a citified humanity with little *direct* or *unmediated* contact with the rest of nature; or, more precisely, **how to survive and thrive as a humanity living cheek by jowl with nature in all its forms, in town, city or country.**

Nor does the species focus and, more broadly in eco-literature, the debates about anthropocentrism and nature’s intrinsic value, contribute substantively and strategically to pressing EJ tasks. As “public ecologists” who must convince those who do *not* share their worldviews or experience, EJ advocates face the world of developers, both private (individuals and corporations) and public (local, city, national government agencies). Since the number of developers amenable to arguments about the wrong-headedness of species *hubris* approaches zero, environmental reasoning from metaethical positions and value theory hardly seems a viable course of action. EJ work instead is always to persuade developers to reorient their projects, on the grounds of developers’ self-interests; or, failing that, to effectively use policy, law, and protests to stop those projects. In short, negotiating the world of concrete clashing interests among decision-makers on the move is the EJ world. To focus attention and strategy on basic conceptual differences about humans in the grand scheme of things, and to count on paradigm shifts, is to “pass” before the cards have been dealt, even when those arching differences are undoubtedly important.

For numerous reasons, then, EJ advocates eschew deep ecology and preservationist and conservationist discourse in favor of “social ecology” or “human welfare ecology,” albeit with a community-of-life twist we will investigate shortly. Yet the larger summary point is about the nature of environmental injustice. It is collective, systemic and inclusive of human and otherkind; and it is lodged in oppressive historic forces that are anything but accidental, anonymous, or dead.

The Eco-crisis Narrative

A perennial eco-literature topic is the nature of the eco-crisis. How is the wasting away of vibrant life-worlds understood? What forces are most decisive and how are they presented? Never far away, but off in another corner, is a related discussion about human alienation (from the rest of nature).

The differences of EJ environmentalists from others are dramatic here. They go the distance in matters of de- and reconstructing first works.

A point made over and over in prominent eco-analyses is the threat all of us face together, a threat issuing from our collective and cumulative assault on nature. Whether we're just or unjust, poor or rich, we all live in the same threatened biosphere, breathe the same air, share the same atmosphere with the same ozone layer and climate patterns, eat food from the same soils and seas, and harvest the same acid rain.

We all share a common planetary citizenship as well. That blue-green, tan and white jewel making its humble rounds in an infinite ocean of time and space is our one and only home, and we all know it. In the Kennedy years Adlai Stevenson, Sr. offered the image of "Spaceship Earth" in a passionate address to the Security Council of the United Nations. It caught on quickly with the generation that geared up for the first Earth Day. Senator Al Gore, Jr. followed a generation later with a compelling analysis of a planetary eco-crisis—*Earth in the Balance*.¹² A decade after that, on February 15, 2003, millions of marchers in hundreds of towns and cities spanning the globe carried placards picturing only the planet and the words, "No War on Iraq, No War on the World." Meanwhile, scientists of numerous ilk quietly documented our commonality as not only earthly, but cosmic. We all emerged amidst the immensities that surround us by way of the same evolutionary processes. And we will all descend into the same future—first fiery, then frozen—together. The implication is that we are all on board, all trained, dressed and equipped pretty much the same, and all headed for the same rendezvous with destiny, rockets blazing.

Without for a minute denying a collective crisis, a shared planetary home, and even, ultimately, a joined and spectacular fate, the EJ movement found it necessary to make a

¹² Al Gore, Jr., *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

lot of noise in order to show that not all are being poisoned equally, or even breathing the same air. They found it necessary to “sing,” “shout,” and “testify” (Baldwin), but *not* “keep...to [themselves]” that some breathe at their own risk and surprisingly few drink the same water. Clearly all do not share the same access to land use and environmental decision-making, nor do all benefit equally from environmental redress and progress. Rather, environmental problems typically shake out much the way others do; the population that derives the benefits is not the same population that suffers the losses. The chief reason for differing outcomes is, again, the way privilege rigs the game on the basis of advantages and achievements resting solidly in a history friendly to oppression and exploitation. The chief implication, the EJ movement insists, is **the need consciously to integrate issues of equity and social justice into environmental decisions at every level.**

The most succinct definition of environmental racism, Bunyan Bryant’s, goes straight to this point. Environmental racism is “the systematic exclusion of people of color from environmental decisions affecting their communities.”¹³ Alexie Torres-Fleming of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, Inc., Bronx, New York, put it this way: “People get Ph.D.s to plan our neighborhood. When do we get to plan our neighborhood?”¹⁴ (This is another hint that justice as recognition and participation is as vital as distribution.)

But socially-created hazards and disasters are not the only ones unequally distributed and unequally redressed. Earthquakes, hurricanes, landslides—those proverbial acts of God—typically wreak more death and injury on the least protected, who are disproportionately poor and colored. These populations also have less, and are offered less, in the way of resources for recovery.

The consequences of varied socio-eco location play out in deeply ironic ways. The peoples who have the deepest cultural-spiritual ties to the land on this continent, the very

¹³ Bunyan Bryant, ed., *Environmental Justice: Issues, Problems, and Solutions* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁴ Alexie Torres-Fleming, Presentation in the Series on Environmental Racism, Union Theological Seminary, September 17, 2002. I take this opportunity to thank her and Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, Inc. in the Bronx for their contributions to this paper, as also WE ACT (West Harlem Environmental Action), Little Sisters of the Assumption (East Harlem), and UPROSE (Brooklyn). I thank my teaching colleague in the course on Environmental Racism as well, Professor Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens.

peoples whose “great work”¹⁵ was to achieve intimate rapport with the powers of the continents themselves—namely, the First Peoples of the Americas—occupy the most devastated lands. And a people enslaved to work the land and learn its ways intimately as its toilers—African Americans—are more landless after their emancipation than any other segment of the U. S. population.¹⁶

In short, the causes and costs of environmental degradation have never been parceled equally.¹⁷ Neither have the benefits. Whole peoples have been fed “with the bread of tears” and given “bowls of tears” to drink.¹⁸ And assuming present orderings of power and access, it will not be different for climate change fall-out or the rewards of genetic science. The common good, it seems, is never truly held in common.

Another subject rife in eco-literature—human alienation from nature in the modern era—also plays out differently in different circles. For veterans of environmental racism, any proper account of human/earth alienation includes the role of plain coercion in the transformations that have befallen lands, cultures and peoples. Moreover, any proper account understands that these brute transformations befell lands, cultures and peoples together in similar ways because they were governed by the same relentless logic.¹⁹ Rather than explaining human alienation by such accounts as these, much eco-literature describes it as a subtle, long-term, millennial weave of processes with powerful origins in the triumph of Greek dualisms, together with Gnostic and Docetic Christian ones, that eventually merged with Cartesian mechanistic cosmologies and a tacit but powerful partnership with Baconian science and technology. Such habits of mind and hand aided and abetted the Industrial Revolution and the growth of great urban centers. A chapter or two on major transitions in agriculture is usually included in this narrative as well,

¹⁵ The phrase and example are taken from Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 2.

¹⁶ In 1910, 218,000 African-American farmers owned 15 million acres. In 1992 only 18,000 African-American farmers remained; they owned 2.3 million acres. Later statistics are not available but the farm crises of the 1980s and 1990s shifted ownership to larger and larger, corporate entities. It is thus likely that even fewer African-Americans own even less farm land in 2002. “We Are What We Eat,” A Report Approved by the 214th General Assembly (2002), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 11.

¹⁷ For a compact account of this inequality as it impacts African-American communities, especially in the U. S. South, see Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 55-60.

¹⁸ Words used freely from Psalm 80.

¹⁹ For one account in the literature of environmental justice, see James H. Cone, “Whose Earth Is It, Anyway?,” in Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen, eds., *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 23-32.

wandering from subsistence farming and swidden agriculture through mixed farming to the mono-cropping of present agribusiness. If the reader belongs among the privileged, she might surmise that all this was evolutionary social change of an interesting but banal sort, a fertile and fascinating interplay of ideas and society. Little, if anything, it must be noted, is included about centuries of slavery as the forced relationship to the land of a significant population of millions. Nor is it pointed out that, in contrast to serfdom, slavery is a consequence of the transition to mono-cropping of cash crops that require cheap, mass labor—tobacco, cotton, sugar cane. Forcing blacks to work the land as chattel thus never registers as an ecological issue, even an eco-justice one, in the dominant accounts, even though the process of human domination and the exploitation of other nature occurred at exactly the same time by way of integrally related dynamics.²⁰ Sethe, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, wakes from plantation nightmares wondering if hell might not also be such a pretty place!²¹ Nor, as mentioned, is the disproportionate loss of the lands of African-American farmers and their resettlement in large cities in neighborhoods with minimal direct functional relationship to the rest of nature a part of the standard account in the story of environmentalism. The lot of uprooted Mexicans simply set adrift through the acquisition of two fifths of Mexico's territory by the United States in the war of 1846-48 is not a chapter in U. S. environmental history, either. The trail of broken treaties and violence done to Native Americans may get a little more play than the Great Migration north of African-Americans or the lot of dispossessed Mexican-Americans. But that, too, merits sparse attention in standard *environmental* histories, even when the subject is alienation from the land! When such ravage *is* noted, it often takes the form of regrets for lost indigenous wisdom and/or the effort to appropriate what remains of First Peoples' Earth-honoring spiritualities. The plundering thus continues in other forms, albeit much more politely and with a sudden love for diversity and multiculturalism.

²⁰ This discussion about omitted themes draws from "Ecopsychology and the Deconstruction of Whiteness: An Interview with Carl Anthony," in Roszak, Gomes, Kanner, eds., *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), 263-278. The citation is from p. 266.

²¹ Morrison is cited from "Ecopsychology and the Deconstruction of Whiteness: An Interview with Carl Anthony," in Roszak, et. al., *Ecopsychology*, 266.

In a word, **the moral world of dominant environmental consciousness rarely includes forced residence and forced working of the land, together with forced removal from it.** The history of coercion, brutality, cultural genocide and worse, are not part of the moral memory and narrative of most environmental organizations. That can only mean that this history and these peoples are *de facto* insignificant. In stark contrast, this history and these peoples are always part of the memory of the EJ movement, and the reason it channels rage that is centuries deep. The moral worlds of EJ and other environmentalists differ markedly from one another.²²

The workings of racism in the way environmental issues are presented is laid out in an interview with Carl Anthony, president of the Earth Island Institute and director of the Urban Habitat Program. Anthony gently points out to Theodore Roszak the suspicions about protecting privilege that arise among EJ advocates when participants in healing-the-Earth ceremonies are admonished to hear the voice of Earth in all that surrounds them and especially nature crying out in pain, yet are not admonished to hear the cry of other peoples, though these, like themselves, are also of Earth and nature. Or, participants are admonished to “think like a mountain” and take their place as humans in the Council of All Beings, but they are not, if they are white, admonished to think like peoples of color or take their place among those who belong to other strata of class, race, gender, or culture. The environmentally sensitive are admonished to attend to the impending collapse of ecosystems, vanishing wetlands, and bleaching coral reefs; but depression-era employment levels, degraded city neighborhoods, or the health of the rural poor are not environmental issues. Anthony’s own conclusion is that an unnamed whiteness is at work here that resists any genuinely multicultural self. That is, whites do not listen to these omitted stories, do not own them, and do not learn from them, despite the fact that a large percentage of Native Americans and African-Americans carry Euro-American genes; these stories are thus the stories of Caucasians in the Americas as well. Something like purity taboos seem to be kicking in, fending off inclusive, complex, complete, or “mixed” narratives. Historical experience that would dissolve the unmarked, unnamed status of privilege (white) rank is thus filtered out; it would soil the account. Knowing all

²² See “Ecopsychology and the Deconstruction of Whiteness: An Interview with Carl Anthony,” in Theodore Roszak, et al., *Ecopsychology*, 263-278.

the way back in order to travel the road again and tell the truth (Baldwin) of a genuinely multicultural self that reflects an inclusive history would deconstruct whiteness. It would render as *mainstream* environmental analysis the long and bloody history of the transformation of peoples—all peoples—and the transformation of the land—all of it—together. Anthony goes on to say that until such analysis is forthcoming, alarmist discourse about environmental dangers that do not include those who live prosaic lives of uncertain futures with uncertain resources in already alarmingly degraded environments will be suspect. Isn't apocalyptic talk of an *eco-crisis* one more diversion on the part of those who intend to retain political and economic control? And doesn't it continue to exclude peoples of color from policy affecting their own communities?

In passing it must be said, from a Christian ethicist's point of view, that to discuss human alienation from nature and the land without the history of white supremacy is not only an intellectual crime. It is a theological and moral one. It is a telling absence that, once examined, reveals gaping fault lines in morality and belief. To continue to omit this from environmental consciousness and policy can only mean that the cover-up, denial, erasure and amnesia of white racism and its partial, pocked narrative are still hard at work. The normative (and not just normal) way of life remains white, as do its first works. A presumptive equality as children of God who bear the same image and share the same status is flat-out denied where it most counts—in life together.

Environmental Justice as Social Transformation

The school that Environmental Justice is most identified with is, as I have indicated, “social ecology” or “human welfare ecology.” These are accurate terms if certain characteristics are underlined and explained. They mislead badly if they are not.

The preamble to the *Principles of Environmental Justice* adopted at The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, DC, in 1991 reads as follows.

We, the people of color, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to insure

environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice.²³

The first of the seventeen principles then follows: “Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.”

The significance of this preamble and first principle should not elude us. A key element of any moral theory and its theory of justice is that of membership. Who has standing in the moral community and who does not? **Here the question of moral membership is answered in ways far more generous than most justice theories in Western jurisprudence and philosophy.** Theories of justice crafted on Kantian, Cartesian, and Lockean assumptions—i.e., most modern theories of justice—do not, as the EJ preamble and first principle, embrace the whole community of life as the relevant moral community. They assume rather that morality is an artifact of human culture devised to aid the negotiation of human-to-human relationships. Sentience beyond human sentience counts for little, sometimes zip. Nor do ecosystems, biomes, even the biosphere as a whole, stand on their own in these moral worlds. Kant, in refuting Baumgarten’s contention that humans might have duties “towards beings which are beneath us and beings which are above us” says straightforwardly: “So far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man...Our duties towards animals are merely indirect duties towards humanity.”²⁴ Mary Midgeley’s list of those missing in action in most Social Contract ethics, to cite another prominent tradition, borders on the ludicrous: our ancestors, posterity, the senile, the insane, “defectives,” ranging down to “human vegetables,” embryos, sentient animals, nonsentient animals, plants of all kinds, artifacts, including works of art, inanimate but structured objects (rivers, rocks), unchosen groups

²³ *Principles of Environmental Justice*, adopted at The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit on October 27, 1991, Washington, DC.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, “Duties Towards Animals and Spirits,” in *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. by Louis Infield (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 239.

of all kinds (including families and species, ecosystems, landscapes, villages, warrens, cities), countries, the biosphere, and God.²⁵ “As far as the numbers go,” Midgeley says with polished British understatement, “this is no minority of the beings with whom we have to deal.”²⁶

In short, our most revered moral traditions and most commonly utilized moral discourse leave out the greater part of our actual communities and obligations! **In contrast, the preamble and first principle of the EJ movement’s “constitution” move close to another recent effort as a new “first work,” *The Earth Charter*,** which arose separately from the EJ movement but has included its voice in the course of drafting and redrafting. *The Earth Charter*’s preamble includes this: “Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life.” Earth’s “vitality, diversity, and beauty” is itself “a sacred trust” in our hands. Far-reaching moral imperatives follow.

We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.²⁷

The expansive moral boundaries and views of community in these two charters is not only a vivid contrast with much standard moral theory in Christian and secular ethics, however. The *Principles of Environmental Justice* are at a certain critical distance from the United Nations’ widely-used definition of “sustainable development” as well. That definition, offered by the Brundtland Commission to the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 and a fixed part of international negotiations ever since, is this: “the ability of present generations to meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.”²⁸ “Generations,” whether present or future, refers to humans only in this

²⁵ Mary Midgeley, “Duties Concerning Islands,” in *Environmental Ethics*, edited by Robert Elliot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 97.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ All quotations are from the Preamble of *The Earth Charter*. The full text is available in many places. For the text as well as numerous activities related to the adoption of the Charter, see the web site www.earthcharter.org.

²⁸ For a discussion of the development and meaning of this notion itself by one of the members of the Brundtland Commission on Sustainable Development, see Shridath Ramphal, *Our Country, Our Planet: Forging a Partnership for Survival* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1992), 140-141. Nothing

working notion. By contrast, development in the EJ principles “mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a *sustainable planet for humans and other living things*.”²⁹ For its part, *The Earth Charter* locates “the greater community of life” as the sphere of human responsibility and thus presumably of sustainable development.

It might be noted in passing that this inclusive emphasis on the community of all life as the relevant moral community reflects conscious efforts at inclusiveness in the EJ movement itself. Planners and participants in the 1991 Leadership Summit emphasized the importance of bringing every voice possible to the table, with respectful listening to each. One result was the interplay of largely urban-based African American and Asian-American interests and perspectives³⁰ and those of continental Native American and Hawaiian indigenous peoples. The latter insisted on the whole community of life as not only the relevant moral world but the relevant spiritual world as well. The first principle *as first*—“Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction,”—was the outcome of this exchange. Since something this important was not a foregone conclusion as delegates gathered, it nicely illustrates the creation of justice theory from within the house of difference itself, with difference an expression of inclusiveness (human inclusiveness in this instance).³¹

This vital issue of moral membership and standing for the whole community of life having been established at the outset, social ecology’s focus on social justice moves in quickly, already in the second principle: “Environmental justice demands that

Ramphal says about this working definition and the discussions that led to it deviates from the anthropocentric assumptions it carries.

²⁹ Principle # 3, *Principles of Environmental Justice*, emphasis mine.

³⁰ In part this reflected the organization of the first environmental justice summit. Vernice Miller-Travis (African-American) and Charles Lee (Asian-American) worked closely for years in the office of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. This office published the landmark study, *Toxic Wastes and Race*, a volume that can be credited for sparking the Environmental Justice movement. The same office organized and supported the founding event of the EJ movement, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, DC, in October, 1991. It was also a sponsor of the second summit a decade later.

³¹ To underline this shared principle does not mean that differences dissolved in the process of agreement. They remain. Most African-Americans, for example, would not say, as many Native Americans, do: “We are the land and the land is us.” See the framing of “the environmental justice movement as a spiritual movement” in Tom Goldtooth’s “In the Native Way,” in *YES! A Journal of Positive Futures* (Winter, 2002): 34-36. “We are the land and the land is us” is from Goldtooth, p. 34.

public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination and bias.” Remaining principles largely intersect public policy and the democratic creation of healthy environments: protection from nuclear testing and waste, issues around the production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons, the rights of workers to a safe and healthy environment, a fundamental right to the political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples, participation as equal partners on every level of decision-making, opposition to the destructive operations of multinational corporations and compensation to the victims of environmental injustice, the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild cities and rural areas in balance with nature, the honoring of the cultural integrity of all communities, providing fair access for all to the full range of resources, etc.³²

This side of the EJ movement’s moral world can be described as “Marx meets Muir.” Granted, it’s a match-up that plays only to academics, since the EJ ethic of outrage, resistance, and patient plodding is rooted in the raw experience of injustice long done to peoples and the land together. Its critical substance issues from that experience, whether Marx or Muir are noted or not—and usually they are not. The pairing is nonetheless helpful since Marx joins Muir in asserting, now in Marx’s words, that “[N]ature is [man’s] body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is part of nature.”³³ In a word, we are inextricably of Earth—body, soul, mind and spirit—whether in wilderness or urban core. The very factors that led to our most potent species characteristic--our ability to consciously modify our surroundings on a large scale—are factors that emerged as evolutionary responses to ecological instability and changing habitats. “Symbolic coding, complex institutions, cultural diversity, technological innovation, human occupation of Earth’s diverse biomes,

³² These phrases are taken from the seventeen *Principles of Environmental Justice*.

³³ This is cited from Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan and ed. Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 112, as included in the excerpted passages in Howard Parsons, ed., *Marx and Engels on Ecology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 133. For materials on John Muir, see William Bade, *The Life and Letters of John Muir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924); John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916); John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965); and the volume by Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981).

the ability to recover from disturbance and growth by colonization, a greater awareness of self and of external factors, and the tendency to buffer environmental disruption by altering immediate surroundings”³⁴ can all be understood as embedded socio-evolutionary responses. They are thus profoundly of Earth itself, innovation and adaptation in and by nature in the form of human beings.

With this embeddedness in nature as basic, and Muir satisfied, Marx goes on to iterate his critical and characteristic point that humans are always transforming nature with means that are socially organized. The social construction of nature as society in the history of human interactions with the rest of the community of life grabs his attention, above all the roles played by different modes of production. Since it seems that humans never reject advances in the means by which they meet their material needs, the outcome is growth in the productive forces of history. If, for example, we leap the millennia to the modern era, we recognize systems that render capital, and to some extent labor, increasingly mobile. Land is not mobile in the same way, but it is transformed mightily in place by modern technologies. (In the 1900s human beings moved more rocks and soil than did volcanoes, glaciers, and the tectonic plates that built the mountains!)³⁵ A global economy that impacts all—nature and society and nature via society and the way it is organized—is the world-shaping result, as Marx saw clearly already in 1848.³⁶

For Marx and Engels, a downside of this dramatic, far-reaching transformation of nature-society by modern modes of production is this: large-scale agriculture and large-scale industry enervate both land and laborer. Capitalist agriculture, Marx observed long before factory farms and corporate mono-cropping, though not before “the union of agriculture and industry,” is progress in “the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility.” It saps “the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the labourer. The more a country starts its development on the foundation of modern industry, like the United States, for example, the more rapid is this

³⁴ Potts, *Humanity's Descent*, 244.

³⁵ See J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

³⁶ See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1954).

process of destruction.”³⁷ For his part, Engels was convinced that both human alienation and land exploitation followed from a mode of interacting with nature that rendered all things commodities to be peddled for profit. A common logic and dynamic drove both. “To make the earth an object of huckstering—the earth which is our one and all, the first condition of our existence—was the last step toward making oneself an object of huckstering.” “It was and is to this day,” Engels goes on, “an immorality surpassed only by the immorality of self-alienation. And the original appropriation—the monopolization of the earth by a few, the exclusion of the rest from that which is the condition of their life—yields nothing in immorality to the subsequent huckstering of the earth.”³⁸

This dive into the work of Marx and Engels is taken because the EJ movement largely shares this perspective, on the basis of its own experience. Its summary conviction matches Marx and Engels: there are common and pervasive patterns of exploitation of land and peoples in the modern era, and the key to this exploitation is the arrangement of human organization and privilege as these wield powerful tools of transformation in systematic fashion.

One must add that for such social ecologists as these, the social organization of nature comprehensively is the key to transformation toward *a more just order* as well, for nature that is human *and* for the rest of nature. Systemic issues of power and the modes of its organization and use are thus the focus for socio-*environmental* justice (i.e., eco-justice as a comprehensive notion). That’s the point of “environmental justice *as* social organization” or, more precisely, as society-nature organization (changes in one are linked integrally to the other).

To call attention to the fact that ours is now a humanly-dominated biosphere only underscores this point. **Humans are increasingly the “wild card” of evolution, so basic decisions about the organization, means and uses of human power are the crucial ones.** As world-shaping decisions, these are nothing short of “first works” in process. The way(s) of life they generate or alter carry fateful consequences for the biosphere as a whole.

³⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, and ed. Frederick Engels (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 507, as excerpted in Parsons, ed., *Marx and Engels on Ecology*, 174.

³⁸ Frederick Engels, *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy*, in Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 210, as cited in Parsons, ed., *Marx and Engels on Ecology*, 173.

Christian Moral Theory in the Making?

This gloss on the nature of environmental injustice, the narrative of the eco-crisis, and environmental justice *as* society-nature transformation, concludes the tour of EJ turf. What remains are further implications for Christian moral theory, specifically the notion of justice.

We have already flagged EJ's pegged focus on membership and standing in both moral and material communities (recognition and participation as elements of justice itself). Those familiar with Michael Walzer might detect an echo of his contention that membership in communities is itself the primary good we distribute to one another.³⁹ Walzer is cited not only for that point, however. Among political philosophers, his theory of justice overlaps the EJ movement at other points as well, far more than, say, the work of John Rawls, Robert Nozick, or Immanuel Kant.⁴⁰ Walzer's concern, like the EJ movement's, is "a model of a justice and morality that honors dense, particular, communal cultures and provides an overall participatory democratic framework."⁴¹ Walzer has in view, not the organic communities of tight ethnicity and religion, but historically-shaped communities of "equal respect for difference in multicultural, multireligious modern states."⁴² Space for the thriving of diverse communities in a radically pluralist civil society, with power largely decentralized, aligns Walzer with the EJ movement in remarkable degree. They, too, are about "making a place for community"⁴³ in which the political economy is reconstituted on local and democratic terms as its basepoint of organization and operation. (So, too, is care for the rest of the

³⁹ Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 31.

⁴⁰ The relevant works of these three figures, for this and later points, are the following. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1974); and Immanuel Kant's writings as offered in Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant's Moral and Political Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 1949), and Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

⁴¹ I am here using Elizabeth Bounds's summary, from her fine work, *Coming Together, Coming Apart: Religion, Community, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 50.

⁴² Bounds's summary, *ibid.*, 52.

⁴³ The reference is to the title of the important book by Thad Williamson, David Imbroscio, and Gar Alperovitz, *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

natural environment, but that is an important item missing in Walzer's universe and one to which we will return.)

Moreover, Walzer's commended way of social criticism aligns with EJ practice. The critic is an organic intellectual who practices her or his criticism in relation to particular communities and their views. This critical, contextual reflection and interpretation are made publicly available so that the whole community, addressing an issue or problem, can engage in self-scrutiny and informed choice. This is criticism that is concrete, informed, communitarian, and in the service of empowerment.

Walzer's apparent assumption that pluralism "protects against domination" is faulty, however, from the point of view of EJ experience. Any environmental justice activist can tell you by the middle of any given week that pluralism *per se* does not protect. This exposes a key absence in Walzer's pluralist account. He fails adequately to describe "structural relationships of power,"⁴⁴ a point well made by Elizabeth Bounds. This, when coupled with the omission of the full community of life in Walzer's theory and his concomitant innocence about the embeddedness of all human life in nature and its transformations, impedes the usefulness of an otherwise rich, collaborative notion of justice. Not that he is alone. Most political philosophers and political scientists move in traffic that fails to link the ecological to the complex workings of power that supposedly is their subject *par excellence*. Most simply bypass eco-justice, as though it were a subject that travels by another way.⁴⁵

Justice as distribution is another matter where the EJ movement deviates somewhat from Walzer and considerably from his fellow theorists of justice.

As we've noted, EJ work emerges because of maldistribution. Low-income communities and communities of color (not always the same) face more environmental risks than higher-income and white communities. They carry more environmental "bads" and share fewer environmental "goods." To no one's surprise, then, EJ activists have

⁴⁴ Bounds, *Coming Together, Coming Apart*, 54.

⁴⁵ Fortunately there are efforts to correct this. The work of Andrew Dobson merits special mention, beginning with *Green Political Thought* (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1990), and continuing with *Justice and the Environmental: Conceptions of Environmental Sustainability and Dimensions of Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). A particularly helpful collection of essays that carries on from Dobson is that of Andrew Light and Avner de-Shalit, eds., *Moral and Political Reasoning in Environmental Practice* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003). I have drawn upon all these for this paper.

consistently and doggedly sought ways to secure more equitable distribution of environmental risks, burdens and benefits. At the same time they have always linked these to other injustices—economic and political—because they experience them as joined.

In short, justice as equity in the distribution of social goods, comprehensively understood, is the first, most obvious meaning of justice for EJ activists.

As such, EJ justice joins the dominant concern in justice theory. When examined up close, John Rawls's famous justice-as-fairness formula translates as a conception of social justice "providing in the first instance a standard whereby the *distributive* aspects of the *basic structure of society* are to be assessed."⁴⁶ Like most EJ work itself, Rawls, too, offers a means of reexamining the first works of society. His effort is consciously to set the bedrock rules of distribution and the arrangement of social advantages by way of a thought experiment on justice. Brian Berry also centers justice theory on rules attending distribution, with a focus on society's economic structure. His interest is redistribution as greater social equity. This includes equity across generations.⁴⁷ Not least, Walzer himself marches in the justice-as-distribution band, albeit to a different drummer. He consciously moves away from Rawls and a universal theory of justice expressed in a set of universal principles or rules. He moves toward principles that are themselves plural. Different people value different things, or the same things, differently. Walzer wants to accommodate this diversity in the criteria for distribution (it belongs to the pluralism of society he cherishes). He thus develops "distributive spheres" that permit changes of value over time, as well as differently weighted values at any one time. *Spheres of Justice* is the result. The focus nonetheless remains, broadly speaking, justice as distribution.⁴⁸

By way of contrast, David Schlosberg and Kristin Schrader-Frechette argue, in different works,⁴⁹ that while justice as distribution includes the EJ movement, it fails to

⁴⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 9. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Brian Berry, "Sustainable and Intergenerational Justice," in *Fairness and Futurity: Essays on Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice*, ed. Andrew Dobson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, 6.

⁴⁹ David Schlosberg, *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), as well as his chapter, "The Justice of Environmental Justice," in the cited volume of Light

represent it fully or well. They find the work of Iris Marion Young a better fit and draw upon it. Young argues that the sole cause of injustice is not inequitable distribution and that justice itself ought not to be identified with equitable distribution. Justice as decision-making powers and procedures is as crucial to justice as the distribution of social goods. (It should be mentioned, even if parenthetically, that Young’s focus is not environmental justice. Yet it is probably not coincidental that her examples include a series of protests on the part of citizens opposing a hazardous waste treatment plant.)⁵⁰

Schlosberg, in working with this, helpfully sorts two closely-related elements, both beyond distribution: recognition and participation (negatively, lack of recognition and lack of participation). The comment of Alexie Torres-Fleming cited earlier, “People get Ph.D.s to plan for our neighborhood, when do we get to plan for our neighborhood?”, in effect names *recognition* as an element of environmental justice. In EJ lore, Dr. King’s campaign in Memphis alludes to the same. “I Am a Man” was the simple message on the placards of striking Memphis garbage workers. Injustice doesn’t only rest with inequitable distribution, then. Lack of recognition, misrecognition, and malrecognition—as manifest in lack of respect, denigration of ways of life, denial of rights or lax enforcement, cultural disdain and collective bias—are also sources, whether they are individual and subjective or structural and institutional.

Torres-Fleming pointed to *participation* as well as recognition. So did Bryant in his definition of environmental justice as the systematic exclusion of people of color from environmental decisions affecting their communities.⁵¹ Nor could *The Principles of Environmental Justice* themselves be clearer. The seventh principle says straightforwardly: “Environmental justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision making.” **In some ways participative justice is most crucial of all**, Young herself argues, since this is justice as the process whereby democratic decision-making is put in place on terms of a presumptive equality and with a view to inclusion of all affected parties. It gets these parties to the table to speak and to vote. That in turn increases the chances of recognition, even mirrors it, at least as an

and de-Shalit; Kristin Shrader-Frechette, *Environmental Justice: Creating Equality, Reclaiming Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁵⁰ As reported by Shrader-Frechette, *Environmental Justice*, 27.

⁵¹ See p. above.

institutional pattern and procedure. (Getting stakeholders to the table cannot guarantee respect, of course, or address the deficit of other moral sensibilities.) Representative participation also renders a more just outcome likelier. Thus even for justice *as* equitable sharing of socio-environmental goods and bads, justice-as-participation is critical as a means. Young's argument for "democratic decision-making procedures as an element and condition for social justice,"⁵² as appropriated by Schlosberg and Shrader-Frechette, reflects EJ convictions well.

In short, **EJ justice is justice as distribution, recognition, and participation, linked in ways that address the well-being of the whole community of life in a given locale.**⁵³ The means of achieving it are normally incremental ones that focus on structural relations of power and that pursue concrete transformations of society-nature in keeping with subsidiarity as organizational means and strategy. The push, in effect, is for "local democracy in a global era"⁵⁴ via changes the movement hopes will prove radical in their consequences.

All this can be said somewhat differently, now in ways that draw from the earlier discussion of EJ moral turf. The starting point of EJ justice is, as noted, the collective experience of injustice. This renders justice less a utopian vision or a model state of affairs than an ongoing process to establish incrementally better life conditions in the face of specific problems. As a matter of course, it roots justice in transforming praxis attentive to local circumstances in ways that place a premium on enhancing peoples' self-provisioning, self-organizing, and self-governing capacities. This is, then, justice conceived as maximum community democracy in which "community" includes the health of other-than-human nature in the places people live.

⁵² Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990), 23. Young, in protesting distribution as too narrow a scope for justice, is drawing heavily on discussions of communicative ethics and citizenship in the work of Juergen Habermas, Agnes Heller, and Seyla Benhabib. See also Young's more recent elaboration, in *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵³ Discussing justice in these ways and with reference to these figures is directly indebted to the essay by David Schlesburg, "The Justice of Environmental Justice: Reconciling Equity, Recognition, and Participation in a Political Movement," in Light and de-Shalit, eds., *Moral and Political Reasoning in Environmental Practice*, 77-106.

⁵⁴ This is the subtitle of the book mentioned earlier as one that makes a strong case consonant with EJ movement aspirations, Williamson, Imborscio, and Alperowitz, *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era*.

This praxis matrix promotes a mode of practical moral reasoning highly attuned to place, process, and experience. This in turn distances EJ deliberation from the kind commonly done in, say, Kantian-influenced ethics. Kantian moral reasoning reflects little influence of practice or the twists and turns of context and story. Rawls, for instance, and Nozick, while different, are both broadly “Kantian” in method; and for that reason they fail to take up into their justice theory the history of oppression, for example. In Kantian moral theory, the particulars of narrative and experience don’t work, as a matter of method, to help establish the baselines and content of justice. But for justice theory as an expression of daily praxis, they do matter. They are certainly critical to EJ reasoning. In this sense EJ justice and practical moral reasoning shares a profile similar to Christian liberation theology/ethics.

Conclusion

So is this moral theory in the making for Christian ethics? In part, it certainly is. The EJ movement tries, albeit fitfully, to bring together two vast worlds of moral work not yet integrally related in Christian ethics or elsewhere. The scene looks something like this.

It begins with the stark matter James Martin-Schramm and Robert Stivers note at the outset of *Christian Environmental Ethics*: “Until recently the great ecological systems of the earth were a problem for human beings. Now the reverse is true. This reversal represents a revolution in the natural history of this planet.”⁵⁵ Martin-Schramm and Stivers then survey what are, in effect, the “first works” of human beings in the long tale that stretches from hunters and gatherers to agriculturalists and settled societies to recent, dramatic changes at the hands of science, industry and capitalism. Their conclusion is twofold. (1) Much of this success, while huge, genuine and cherished, is, to put it mildly, now a problem: “What humans have done well for themselves has among other things reduced habitat for animals and plants, changed climate, polluted air and water, and created a burden of toxic wastes for future generations.”⁵⁶ (2) Another revolution is thus needed and has, in fact, begun—the ecological revolution. It is in conflict, however,

⁵⁵ James B. Martin-Schramm & Robert L. Stivers, *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

“with traditional perceptions of success, ancient material needs and desires, and a system that has its own dynamic and momentum.”⁵⁷ It thus remains to be seen “whether humans can renegotiate their fit into natural ecosystems before those systems force the issue...Little in the past prepares humans for the needed changes.”⁵⁸

Said differently, we find ourselves standing in the need of prayer and some deeply revised first works. Environmental racism and the Environmental Justice movement take us a long way into the moral world of these revised first works. Two spheres of EJ activity, when subjected to ethical analysis, speak to the sketch and conclusion of Martin-Schramm and Stivers.

The preambles of both *The Principles of Environmental Justice* and *The Earth Charter* explode the boundaries of moral belonging in most Christian and modern secular ethics. There is a vast agenda here, pushed by those whose frame of reference is bio-cultural evolution as part of the universe’s story (many deep ecologists and eco-feminists, some indigenous peoples, including those in the EJ movement, scholars of comparative religions and ethics, paleoanthropologists and cultural historians). That agenda cannot be pursued in detail here. Suffice it to recognize that, from the perspective of the EJ movement, to exercise the kind of cumulative transformative power we do as a species without recognizing the import of our own embeddedness in the biological and ecological communities upon which our lives depend utterly and which we impact fatefully is—I borrow Thomas Berry’s terms—to expect the “microethics” of present human worlds to match the consequences of human “macropower.”⁵⁹ But the varied versions of microethics do not match our macropower. **Human agency far outstrips the way we even conceive moral responsibility and accountability, much less exercise it. Justice in and to shared habitat, for the welfare of the full community of life and its indispensable abiotic frame, is justice without a theory or practice yet elaborated in Christian ethics.** The EJ movement, at least in some quarters, pushes for it. How to order the proper, subtle, concrete, and far-reaching exercise of human power across

⁵⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See Berry, *The Great Work*, 100-106.

society-nature is the EJ moral agenda.⁶⁰ With a view to this exercise of power, the EJ movement seeks to banish moral exclusion on two fronts simultaneously: the full circle of human participants and nature comprehensively.

Fairness demands that we acknowledge the serious efforts in Christian Ethics to press for eco-justice and draw the circle of moral standing and considerability around Earth's "unique community of life" (Preamble, *The Earth Charter*). Some have addressed well the issues of moral exclusion and its consequences.⁶¹

At the same time it must be said that those best at "eco-re-envisioning" Christian traditions under the impact of a planet in plain jeopardy at human hands—a critical first work—tend not to be those who deftly engage the other essential of the EJ movement;

⁶⁰ If this were an essay critiquing EJ justice theory, rather than critiquing academic Christian ethics, I would note in the main text the fact that the explicit treatment of justice elements in EJ literature, adding up to justice as distribution, recognition, and participation, does not yet accomplish the meaning of this for non-human recipients of justice. The continuing shortcoming can be traced in the EJ discussions of environmental justice as equity. Like that in most sustainable development discussions, it refers to the distribution of environmental goods and bads among human populations. It doesn't mean justice *to* the [non-human] environment. Equity doesn't, for example, commonly have species dimensions such that we seriously ask about the interests of other creatures and seek to determine what they require to realize their potential and ends. Any who know where their chicken or pork comes from is fully aware this is the case! Thus no biotic rights, to pick one possible moral course, are drawn from discussions of equity in most discussions of sustainable development. The point here is that many in the EJ movement are content to sit with this. M. Dowie's survey of EJ agendas finds that "the central concern... is human health"⁶⁰ and that wilderness, natural-resource conservation, and public lands policies are peripheral. Robert Bullard's important discussion of equity in the EJ movement itself lists three types: procedural, geographic, and social. The first is about fairness in policy formulation and enforcement, the second is about the burden of environmental hazard different communities carry, and the third is about the role that social factors such as race, ethnicity, class, culture, lifestyles, and political power play in environmental decision-making. (See Robert D. Bullard, "Decision Making," in Laura Westra & Bill E. Lawson, *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*, 2nd Edition (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 4-9. So despite the founding document of the EJ movement, *The Principles of Environmental Justice*, none of these notions of equity has the whole Community of Life in view. Nor does Bullard's own outlined "framework for environmental justice" and its five principles of "the right to protection, prevention of harm, shifting the burden of proof, obviating proof of intent to discriminate, and targeting resources to redress inequities."⁶⁰ Differently said, Muir has disappeared from the horizon in some EJ circles, as has Marx's understanding of human species' embeddedness in nature, together with the need to render the land and its more-than-human populations their due as a justice need with a seamless connection to human well-being. This is the valid source of accusations that the EJ movement in some quarters has not resolved issues of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. Deep ecologists, who share so much with the EJ movement, join the chorus of critics at this point. At the same time it must be said that voices of Native Americans and other indigenous peoples may bring remedies of these issues to the table; and the EJ process itself, with its emphasis upon justice-as-recognition and justice-as-participation, has the means to address them. Still unresolved as well are those ancient, gnawing ones present to every discussion of justice since Socrates fruitfully intimidated his students. Is justice as distribution based in need, desert, or inherent rights (entitlement)?

⁶¹ See the important chapter by Kusumita Pedersen, "Inclusion and Exclusion: Reflections on Moral Community and Salvation," in Dieter T. Hessel and Larry L. Rasmussen, eds., *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 33-52.

namely, doing our first works of race, gender, class, and culture over so as to properly extend the moral circle around all humanity itself. Yes, equality is readily declared working principle—each one counts *as* one—and democracy is frequently endorsed as the preferred polity. Nonetheless, moral theory is not elaborated well with a rigorous view to the discriminating and oppressive exercise of privilege.

Differently said, persons sophisticated about intersectional analysis in the changing modalities of race, gender, class, culture, as many EJ workers are, are not apparent in the circles of those who are eco-revising moral and religious cosmologies and offering the requisite eco-virtues and philosophy of self.

Some of this is surely race-based, itself a sobering reminder of the precipitating topic of this paper. If to date it remains the case that few white Christian ethicists have taken white racism and white supremacy as their point of departure,⁶² despite the overwhelming presence of white power in the making and continuation of the modern world, consider the number of white Christian environmentalists who have taken environmental racism as their point of departure. It approaches absolute zero. And most of those revising religious and moral cosmologies are white.

Nor is the real-world answer to white privilege rigorously pursued by ethicists and others (rightly) revising these cosmologies. That answer is not “guilt, hopelessness, or self-absorption” on the part of white peoples, to cite Mary Hobgood, but “democratic appropriation of economic, political, and cultural power...forged...by the hard work of coalition politics...making connections across differences, a coalition of resistance and solidarity across racial-ethnic lines.”⁶³ While what Hobgood describes is exactly what is happening in many circles of the EJ movement, a spot check of Christian eco-ethics exposes a yawning gap. Two relevant literatures are present and each has merit. But they are so far apart the reader needs two different library cards! With the exception of World Council of Churches’ Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation literature, the sources in, say, James Cone’s “Whose Earth Is It, Anyway?” or Laura Westra and Bill E. Lawson’s *Faces of Environmental Racism*, share very few names with, say, the active

⁶² See James H. Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 55, Nos. 3-4, 2001: 1-14; and “White Theology Revisited,” in Cone, James H., *Risks of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 130-137.

⁶³ Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege*, 42.

interfaith discussions represented in the important series on World Religions and Ecology at Harvard or the remarkable *Daedalus* volume on “Religion and Ecology.” Many in the circle under the sway of Thomas Berry’s singular influence, or John Cobb’s, care deeply about justice and eco-morality, just as many EJ thinkers care about worldviews and the vibrant traditions of diverse religious faiths. But with the exception of some eco-feminist and womanist work, these circles overlap little in the academy or on the ground. The point, however, is not two literatures and two populations *per se*. It is that those in Christian Ethics who have done the most to extend moral community to the full community of life have not yet brought the same inclusion to the standing of human members on grounds other than species status. **More generous moral community is not yet well-matched to liberationist perspectives “which affirm that ethical questions deal centrally with power-in-relationship”⁶⁴ in society-nature.** The God of creation tends to cover, if not smother, the God of liberation.⁶⁵

At the same time it must be acknowledged that EJ thinkers about creation as comprehensive community have not to date found their way together to articulate emerging views of a cosmos characterized by holism, indeterminacy, and interconnectedness. “If the dialogue about race, identity, and the moral life is to be resurrected from the stylized jousting of weary opponents,” writes Barbara Holmes in *Race and the Cosmos*, “it will need the language that includes clues about a complex universe that is wondrous and rife with uncertainty.”⁶⁶ *The Earth Charter* is probably better as an opening for this than *The Principles of Environmental Justice* but, overall, **justice-seekers have yet to find the way to incorporate new knowing about the miracle of the community of life and the cosmos into their basic liberationist cause.** The God of liberation tends to cover, if not smother, the God of creation, at least in some ranks of the EJ movement.

The required task is not insurmountable, at least as theo-ethical statement and bearing. The transcendent God who, in Karen Baker-Fletcher’s nice phrase, is “the

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁵ I am indebted to Chang Yoon-Jae, 2003 Ph. D. graduate of Union Theological Seminary, New York, for the dialectic of the God of creation and the God of liberation used in these pages.

⁶⁶ Barbara A. Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), 3.

intimate ground of being”⁶⁷ that “sustains, enlivens, and redeems the whole creation” also shakes “the foundations of the earth” as belief in the necessity of the present order. But the point is that this creation-liberation synthesis is not elaborated well as moral theory, rhetoric, or method in Christian ethics. Intersectional analysis of interstructured privilege, if present at all in Christian ethics in methodologically rigorous ways, is not done in a manner that matches the reach of human macropower across the community of life.

In conclusion, the promise for Christian moral theory wrung from the experience of environmental racism is that the EJ movement directs Christian Ethics to do what it needs to but doesn’t yet do well—expand the boundaries of moral community to give standing to all creation in, with, and before God at the same time it embraces and addresses full membership in the human family; and to do so in justice-centered Christianities savvy about the play, for better and for worse, of power and privilege across both micro and macro worlds of society-nature.

In the end, the reason most of us haven’t analyzed and recast moral community along these lines is probably quite simple. While that work is clearly needed, a good, long stare at any one of the elements means doing one, or more, or many, first works over.

Baldwin: “In the church I come from—which is not at all the same church to which white Americans belong—we were counseled, from time to time, to do our first works over.”⁶⁸

Good counsel, and one of those times.

* * * * *

Larry Rasmussen is Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics Emeritus at Union Theological Seminary in New York, NY. He first presented this paper at the 2003 meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics (later published in the Society’s Journal Vol.24, 1, Spring/Summer 2004). His books include *Moral Fragments and Moral Community: A Proposal for Church in Society* (Fortress Press, 1993) and *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Orbis Books, 1996).

⁶⁷ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 84. The other quotations in this sentence are from the Ph. D. dissertation proposal of Yoon-Jae Chang, “God and Political Economy: A Critical Appraisal of the Late Twentieth-Century Responses to Capitalism, Socialism, and Ecology,” p. 21. Used with permission. Chang also uses the phrase cited from Baker-Fletcher and pointed me to her volume.

⁶⁸ Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*, xix.