

An Ecological Reinterpretation of the African American Experience

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Carl Anthony, together with M. Paloma Pavel, founded Breakthrough Communities, an initiative to promote multi-class and multi-racial leadership for sustainable metropolitan communities in the United States. He is author of the forthcoming book, *The Earth, the City, and the Hidden Narrative of Race: Discovering New Foundations for Just Sustainability in the 21st Century*, which is based upon the writings of Thomas Berry.

Thomas Berry's writings have been an indispensable guide for my work as an urban planner and an advocate for environmental justice. The Earth/Universe Story, which he outlines in his books, has provided me with a robust framework for reinterpreting African American history in its larger ecological context.

I came to the environmental justice movement through my training as an architect and urban planner. Influenced by the civil rights movement and several great teachers, including Lewis Mumford, Paul Davidoff, and Karl Linn,¹ I began my professional career at the Architects Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH). ARCH, the first Community Design Center in the nation, had the goal of providing architecture and planning services for the district of northern Manhattan modeled on Legal Services for the Poor. However, the framework of this early work did not support my deeper sense of the potential of African Americans to shape cities by promoting justice and infusing the human environment with our most deeply held values.²

After graduating from Columbia University in 1969, I traveled to West Africa, in search of my roots, making drawings and photographs of traditional towns and villages. This experience reinforced my respect for natural regions, the cycle of seasons, variations in cultures, climate and resources as determinants of the human habitat. I learned about timeless ways people with few resources shape environments to meet basic human needs to reflect human values.

Returning to the United States in the 1970s, I set up shop as an architect. With the market slump there was little work, and I was unable to connect any of it to the struggle for racial justice. After several years of discussion among friends and colleagues, we reached a consensus that the environmental movement offered a powerful way to challenge the common assumption that economic growth automatically improved human welfare.

I closed my office and joined the board of Earth Island Institute, a nongovernmental organization founded by David Brower devoted to the conservation, preservation, and restoration of the global biosphere. From 1991 until 1998 I served as president of the board of Earth Island, working with colleagues on issues as diverse as conservation and protection of marine mammals, sea turtles, old growth forests and coral reefs, prevention of pollution and dispersal of endocrine disruptors, and demand-side management of energy resources. I came to see the Earth as living and whole. I sought to find my role as an African American architect and urban planner in protecting its ecological resources and considered the roles other people of color might play in a global effort to support a healthy planet. I had to confront the fact that the organization was exclusively white. Why weren't

¹ I exchanged correspondence with Mumford as an undergraduate in the early 1960s. Paul Davidoff, a planning theorist, shaped my work as an advocacy planner. I never met Mumford or Davidoff; but Linn, whom I met at age 19, was a mentor in my early years and a life long friend.

² In the popular understanding, the environmental justice movement began in 1983, when 500 African Americans were arrested protesting the siting of a toxic waste dump in Warren County, North Carolina. This conception does not acknowledge efforts to link environmental and social justice strategies during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. I believe that the true origins of the environmental justice movement are in the resistance of indigenous people to colonization, and in the resistance of Africans to being captured and uprooted from traditional village life in the 15th century.

people of color interested in issues like saving the whales and preventing global warming? Now this seems like a silly question, but at the time it was appropriate. Twenty million people had participated in the first Earth Day, the largest demonstration in human history; and the Civil Rights movement was in retreat or almost completely dormant during the early years of the first Bush administration. Why shouldn't people of color become environmentalists?

I realized that Earth Island had no programs dealing with cities, where the majority of Americans of all races live. Why not? In order to address these shortcomings Karl Linn and I founded the Urban Habitat Program as a part of Earth Island Institute in 1989. Its mission was to promote multiracial urban environmental leadership for sustainable communities in the San Francisco Bay Area as a model that could be replicated in other regions of the country.

When Karl introduced me to the work of Thomas Berry in 1988, I was struck by Berry's assertion that we need a new story, that our account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it is no longer effective. The old story, rooted in Western tradition, does not offer a convincing account of its encounter with non-European peoples, beginning with colonial expansion, the rise of capitalism, and the African slave trade. While Berry makes no mention of the African American experience and only passing reference to cities, I realized that the Earth Story he proposes might explain the missing elements in my own experience. I also realized that the Earth Story might also be enriched by an interpretation that takes these dimensions into account.

Here is a very brief version of such a narrative:

African Americans and all of humanity—ruling elites, peasants and indigenous people, people of European heritage and people of color, inside and outside the Western tradition share the legacy of cosmic evolution beginning 14 billion years ago. All creation—sun and stars, chemical atmosphere, evolution of life, drift of continents—is part of this heritage.

The origin of humanity is in Africa in the Rift Valley, where early hominids evolved over a period of five million years. The first homo sapiens were likely dark-skinned people with a range of facial features and body types that reflected the full range of modern humanity. As late as 10,000 years ago, the majority of human population still lived in Africa, with the remainder scattered throughout the Eurasian continent, Australia and the Western hemisphere. The original human communities that evolved in Africa mastered the earliest human environments and developed the first toolkits, domesticating these first environments on behalf of the entire human race. African people are the ancestors of all of us and deserve our appreciation and respect.



Villages and towns in sub-Saharan Africa existed for a thousand years before the beginning of the African slave trade.³ Many Africans captured during the trans-Atlantic slave trade lived in villages, towns or cities. The old story of African backwardness was based upon European ignorance and the incentive for slave trading elites to rationalize their brutality and justify their exploitation of natural resources: gold, silver, and later agricultural products of slave labor.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, human bondage, and the plantation system in the New World as contributing factors in the appetite for consumption and proclivity for waste that began to take hold in Europe in the seventeenth century. Through exploitation, plunder and the export of disease, a small group of merchants from the previously marginal northwestern region of Europe, gained control of the resources of the New World—two continents, six times the size of Europe. Their tales of adventure and extravagant lifestyles seeded the imagination of European populations with images of endless opportunity and entitlement.

In the eighteenth century, three quarters of the immigrants to the new world were African slaves. This labor force built a new global economy based in large part on addictive substances and commodities like gold, silver, sugar, coffee, and tobacco and supported by the rapid expansion of global corporations. After four centuries of slavery and colonization, the African American struggle for freedom and justice took on new meaning in the brief decade after the American Civil War. After his successful March to the Sea, Sherman promised legal title for forty-acre plots of land to freedmen and white Southern Unionists. Four million people, freed from slavery, were eager to live sustainably on the land. Historically black colleges—Howard University, Atlanta University, Tuskegee Institute, among others—were established at that time, often on confiscated plantations.

The great migration of African Americans to the cities of the North and West in the first half of the twentieth century followed the failure of Reconstruction in the South. Pushed off their rural land holdings violently by white southern oligarchs, they built new institutions and contributed to the economic life of the cities they moved to. As blacks settled in industrial centers, whites began abandoning the cities and sprawling out into new suburbs in the countryside. The racial policies, urban renewal strategies, housing and transportation initiatives of federal, state and local governments, as well as private interventions, during and following World War II, created a devastated and impoverished wasteland of once-thriving urban neighborhoods, laid waste to the natural environment of the countryside, and reproduced apartheid in America's metropolitan regions on a national scale.

³ The first permanent cities in Africa and the Near East emerged about 3,500 BCE, although there is evidence that the institutions upon which these settlements were based are much older than that. Geographer J. M. Blaut has suggested that during the medieval period from the 5th to the 16th century C.E, cities and towns dotted the landscape from northern Europe to southern Africa to eastern Asia. This perspective is borne out by distinguished social historian Catherine Coquery-Vidrovich, who has documented the history of African cities south of the Sahara from their origins to the colonization of Africa by Europeans in the late 19th century.

As Dr. Margaret Paloma Pavel points out in her new book, *Breakthrough Communities: Sustainability and Justice in the Next American Metropolis*, it is no longer effective to separate issues of race, class, environment, and the viability of our cities. Tragic events in the wake of Hurricane Katrina demonstrated that the protection of wetlands, the functioning of the levees, and the protection of vulnerable human communities are all part of a single paradigm. A genuine movement for sustainability must include not only the environment, but the three E's—environment, economy and social equity. It must include the stories, leadership and aspirations of the most vulnerable and marginalized.

As we proceed into the new millennium, our challenge is to create a new possibility, linking the pursuit of justice with the quest for sustainability. In the new story, people of color have a history stretching back to the beginning of time, as rich, continuous, complex and full of lessons as those of any other people. This is the Great Work that Berry calls us to undertake. As he points out, history is governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe.

In order to realize the promise of full participation in society and build a genuine, 21st century movement for sustainability, the role of communities of color must be reinterpreted and integrated into a new story about race and class in our cities. African Americans and other communities of color must help lead society toward more just and livable communities and a healthier relationship with the environment. With the Earth Story as a guide, I believe we may restore a sense of purpose to rebuilding and re-inhabiting beautiful, healthy, green and just cities and regions.