

Gonna Trouble the Water
Ecojustice, Water, and Environmental Racism

Edited by
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CHAPTER EIGHT

Praying for the Water—Racial and Religious Solidarity in the Shadow of Coal Ash

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Ash, Soot, and Lies

The backyard of the house I grew up in looked out over a forest of pine and hardwood, ringed with kudzu where the trees met the yard, and above that, interrupting the horizon, stood two gray smokestacks. The towers belonged to a coal-burning power plant, the Belews Creek Steam Station.¹ The people in my small rural North Carolina town had an uneasy relationship with this power station. It was an employer in an area where there was not much to do for work if you didn't work in tobacco. But also, every morning, we would walk out of our homes and find a fine layer of soot—fly ash, as it is called—covering everything. You could run your finger over the windshield of your car and come up with a smudge on your fingertip.

This was the 1980s, still the early days of the environmental movement, but there was enough concern and awareness that the power company that ran the plant had started making a big deal about how much it had invested in pollution controls for that plant and

those towers. There was new technology in them, we were told, technology that made them safer, scrubbers that reduced the smoke and the ash that came out. But still we came out every morning to the soot.

Beginning when I was about ten years old, my father worked at that power plant. He was a nighttime security guard who sat in a guard booth and regulated traffic in and out of the plant, including the long trains that came to disgorge tons upon tons of coal to be burned. Years later, not long before he died, my father told me that when he had worked there, he had learned the power company had been telling the truth about that pollution technology. They had installed it, and they did run it—all day long. But at night, when no one could see the black smoke against the night sky, they turned off the pollution technology and just let the smoke and ash go up into the air. It was expensive to run the pollution controls. It reduced the plant's efficiency. So, when they could get away with not using it, they did not use it. And we woke up every morning to ash and soot.

Years later this same power company made national news at another power station the next county over. In 2014 a containment pond broke, and 39,000 tons of coal ash and 27 million gallons of wastewater flowed out of the pond and into the Dan River.² I grew up swimming in the Dan River; I learned to skip rocks there, at a roadside river park that had once been a foundry for the Confederate army. The coal ash that flowed into the river traveled at least seventy miles downstream. I say “at least” because of those 39,000 tons of coal ash that went into the river, only about 10 percent ever got cleaned up. Five years on, 90 percent of it is still in there, somewhere, there or downstream.³ Coal ash is rich in all kinds of pollutants: selenium, boron, cadmium, copper, lead. After the spill, the Dan River tested especially high, dangerously high, for arsenic, barium, aluminum, and iron. It was below the thresholds for a lot of other things, but the levels were still higher than they usually were. The power company and the governments are, five years later, declaring victory and paying and collecting fines and moving on. But 90 percent of that coal ash is still in the river.⁴

Racist and Capitalist Solidarities

Oppressive and exploitative systems rely on unspoken and hidden networks of solidarity as the source of their power.⁵ As a person of some privilege because of my race, gender, sexuality, class, and education, I am familiar with the sensation of being recruited into relationships of solidarity with oppressive systems. This solidarity is a bargain and a promise: accommodate yourself to this system of exploitation and domination, and you will be guaranteed a special place within it. Of course, the definition of privilege is that you get the benefits of this bargain whether you accommodate yourself or not; but the bargain itself is seductive: say yes to this system, and you won't bear the consequences of its violence. In this kind of bargain, a great many terrible actions and attitudes are permissible, and even desirable, so long as the consequences of those actions and attitudes are visited upon someone else. In the discourse of race, we see that for many people racist structures are permissible or even desirable because they affect people who are not "like me." In the discourse of capitalism we speak of externalized costs: costs not borne by either a corporation or its customers, but rather borne by the "commons" or the society or world at large, or by people so far away and so un-"like me" that they become nothing but an abstraction.

Thinking in hindsight about my small hometown, it is easy to see both racist and capitalistic solidarities at work. A deeply structural racial apartheid system governed life in that town, managing the behaviors and attitudes of everyone who lived there, and constraining actions in domains as wide ranging as work, religion, sex, commerce, discourse, recreation, and politics.⁶ The logic of race was not always completely visible, but it was always completely present. Likewise, the logic of capitalism imposed and demanded its own solidarities. Tobacco dominated the economy—tobacco being an industry with incalculable externalized costs—and prosperity depended on the continued extraction of the broad green leaves from the land every fall. Every September, a number of my classmates received excused absences from school to work in their families' tobacco fields, because the demands of tobacco production surpassed the demands of education. I remember the sharpest conflict in my childhood church was over the

question of smoking inside the church, because for some any attempt to limit smoking, even in sacred space, was a violation of tacit solidarity with the tobacco industry.

The coal-fired power plant I could see from the backyard depended on both kinds of solidarities, both capitalist and racist. It courted solidarity from those of us who lived nearby, reckoning the economic benefit of job opportunities would be enough to make us turn away from the externalized costs of coal ash and soot every morning. But the fact the plant existed there at all was evidence of another bargain made with more powerful people who lived somewhere else: the plant was in our backyard, and not in someone else's, precisely because under the relentless logic of capitalism, it was cheaper to put it in our town, because we were less able to say no. We were someone else's abstract others, externalized costs in the bargain they had made. And within our sharply segregated small town, with white people and Black people clustered in neighborhoods which hardly touched and never overlapped, all of us who are familiar with the logic of race can already predict which particular part of town the Belews Creek Steam Station stood closest to.⁷ It was *visible* from my backyard, but it *loomed* over others' backyards—the backyards of the town's African-American residents. Our town and region had received this power station as part of a bargain made by someone more powerful than us, but even within our town, the burden was not equally shared, and the burden was distributed on the basis of a racist logic.

Trouble in Eden (and Little Egypt)

In the summer of 2019, I sat down to lunch with two women from my hometown: Tracey and Leslie.⁸ We spent ten minutes, in the way of Southerners, determining whether and how we were related, and whom we knew in common. Although both of the women claimed multiracial ancestry, by the racial logic of our hometown, one of them was clearly categorized as white, and one of them was clearly categorized as Black. Both are active as organizers against coal ash and as leaders in religious communities.

Tracey began to tell me about a community called Little Egypt. When they built the plant, the power company bought out all the families with land and homes where the creek would be dammed to create the lake which would serve the plant. “They all moved out,” she said, “but they just moved to the outskirts. But they would have moved further if they had known.” The anecdotes rolled in. People with stomach cancer. People with neurological problems. Young people. She mentioned another community, a larger one to the east, called Eden, where people who ate fish from the power station’s lake had begun to fall ill and die. Nobody had told them not to eat the fish, she said, and so they ate it. They had planted gardens, they had eaten fruit off the trees for years, washing off that ever-present thin film of black soot. She told the story of a family, two people who worked at the plant for years, who ended up in wheelchairs with neurological disorders. Another member of the family went to the doctor, got diagnosed with cancer, and lasted two weeks. Tracey brought up story after story, and Leslie interrupted from time to time to remind her of someone she had forgotten. These were anecdotes, not data that was measurable, at least not measurable at this lunch table. But the narrative of loss was palpable. In small communities of dozens or hundreds of people, on a scale the size of families, these stories were piling up. They had been piling up for decades. Surely, they wondered, it could not be coincidence these small communities of African Americans, the very African Americans who had been displaced from their land by the plant and who had moved to new land as the plant’s next-door neighbors were the ones affected? Could it be coincidence they were the very ones with all these stories about getting sick?

Leslie spoke up: it wasn’t just Black people getting sick. White people had been getting sick too, sharecroppers who worked land near the plant, people downwind of the twin smokestacks like my own family and neighbors. But the white people, she said, were slower to speak up. Even later, even once there was open conflict between the community and the power company about the plant, she said, it was middle-class white people who were last to join the fight, or who never joined it at all, even though they were affected. Even though they were sick, too. Though she didn’t use the word, Leslie was pointing to the power of solidarity. Polluters could count on the racist solidarity of

white people who accepted harm as long as it was disproportionately aimed at Black people, and corporations could count on the solidarity of middle-class people to maintain the status quo in which they enjoyed privilege. The logics of race and capitalism were functioning as intended in my small town, both recruiting accomplices into their systems of solidarity, and among the many externalized costs were that fine layer of soot every morning and a suspiciously high number of serious illnesses and early deaths.

Change

Life in a small town feels immutable. Things rarely change, and those that do change so slowly or subtly that it's hard to perceive. My life has taken me far away from that town and my visits have become less frequent. And when I do return, I see just how incremental the changes have been: a new stoplight here, a new sign for the hardware store there, the Baptist church has paved its parking lot. But in the days of internet connections and constant social networking, I have been able to watch other kinds of change play out in real time—kinds of change that I never anticipated from my childhood home, changes that would have been unthinkable when I lived there, mediated by Facebook Live and its digital kin.

Perhaps the most surreal of these mediations of change was a moment I had, sitting in my office at the Iliff School of Theology, watching people gather on the shores of Belews Lake, in sight of those familiar gray towers from the steam station.⁹ People gathered there on the shore with former vice president Al Gore and with preacher-activist Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II of the Poor People's Campaign. A reporter from the *New York Times* was there, and an article about the gathering was published in the paper a few days later.¹⁰ It is difficult to explain just how bizarre this was to watch at a distance of 1500 miles, my small town, suddenly famous on the internet. Those dignitaries were there to talk about the steam station—to point out the environmental destruction that had been wrought by the power company there and at other sites like the coal ash spill nearby. They cited scripture and they prayed. They sang hymns like "Victory Is Mine." They were there to draw attention to all those sick people that Tracey and Leslie had told me

about; they were there to speak publicly about those geographies of exploitation and pollution which had been such a fact of life for our town since I was a child.

It was a proud moment for me, but more than anything else it was bewildering, because as I looked at that crowd gathered there, I realized a great deal had changed in my absence, and that the power of both of those seemingly invulnerable solidarities—the power of the solidarity of capitalism and the power of the solidarity of race—had been eroded and stripped away. Not much had changed, but beyond stoplights and parking lots, something fundamental had changed about the economic and racial logic of that town. In the same way that solidarities of race and capitalism had once relied on each other in their construction and had drawn on each other for their power, as I watched from my computer screen, the power of race and capitalism were intertwined in their diminishment. The people in that crowd were there together on the basis of a different kind of solidarity than the kind I had grown up knowing. I had of course known plenty of times growing up when people gathered in a group across racial boundaries. But those gatherings always seemed to be governed by arcane and unwritten sumptuary codes and a kind of human zoning law; even in a public space like a Christmas parade or a football game, people gathered according to race, mimicking the segregated neighborhoods that they lived in and the schools and restaurants that had been segregated legally until just a generation earlier.¹¹ But watching those people gathered by the lake, it seemed the power of that old racist solidarity, the grandchild of Jim Crow, had been changed, possibly weakened and damaged, revealed to be less absolute than anyone had imagined.

Better Solidarities

The press conference with Dr. Barber and Vice President Gore was one prominent moment in a much longer arc of change. Leslie and Tracey filled me in on some of the history: as concerns about the coal ash spread, and as a company began to drill exploratory wells for fracking in town, again mostly near the African American neighborhoods, people began to question those old solidarities of capitalism and race. A

group formed to advocate on the issue of coal ash, and it formed across boundaries of race. Because so much of social life was organized by religion, people organized out of churches, and with the hymns of their churches, singing “God’s gonna trouble the water.” Another group formed to resist the fracking wells, and this group, too, stretched across racial lines. “They needed us,” Tracey told me, “and we needed them. We hugged each other,” she said, “we sang together, we fellowshiped together.” The power company went to its old familiar playbook; at a meeting the company held for residents along a street called Plantation Drive, whose water had been tainted by the plant, the company brought in plates of sandwiches, sodas, and chips and promised to give the residents water for free. There might have been a time when corporate benevolence would have been convincing, when those old solidarities would have taken over. But a new solidarity was forming, and the story in town became that the company was trying to buy people off cheap with sandwiches.

Both the town government and the county government had been cozy with the power plant, as might be expected. People organized across party lines and across racial lines and defeated some of those people in elections. Moratoriums were put in place for future fracking wells, moratoriums being the best they could do under a state law that prohibited local control over such things.¹² The power company came to town to test the water for pollutants from coal ash. The town’s water was over the limits. But the governor of the state at the time was a former twenty-nine-year employee of the power company, and the state increased the limits so that the town’s pollutants were within ranges of acceptability.¹³ And so things have proceeded—the power plant’s towers still jutting up over the trees, people still getting sick in mysterious clusters. But there is a sense something has shifted. In these new coalitions, which formed to resist fracking and hold the power company accountable, the old solidarities were diminished. The old bargains no longer seemed like such a good deal. The tobacco industry is very nearly gone now, something unimaginable twenty years ago, and people have discovered life has continued. People who a generation ago would not have associated with each other in public now organize and petition together, and they also eat and date and live together. It

is not all because of the coal ash fight, of course, but it is hard to escape the sense that some of it is.

Praying for the Water

Last spring a Facebook video caught my eye, and it is one of a few like it that I have seen recently. In it, a small group of people, about half white and half Black, gather at that same roadside park by the Dan River where once stood a Confederate foundry, where I once swam and skipped rocks as a child. It was a prayer service for the river, which was still silted with coal ash from the spill five years before. The group prayed over the water—they prayed across theological traditions and across the strong racial boundaries that characterize denominational traditions in American Christianity. They prayed for clean water. They prayed for good health. They prayed for financial reparations and health care for people who had been affected. The prayers were punctuated by cries of “yes” and “thank you, Lord.” And then a container of the water prayed for was carried to the riverside, and one of the ministers poured it symbolically back into the river. It did not mean the river was clean or that people had been restored to health, but it did signal, at least to me, something had shifted in the solidarities that governed life in that place. As Tracey said to me later as we remembered the prayer service together, what we need to do is protect people and the environment first, and then everything else can come afterward.

Notes

1. For information on this plant provided by its owner and operator, Duke Energy, see <https://www.duke-energy.com/our-company/about-us/power-plants/belews-creek-steam-station>.
2. See factsheet by the US Department of the Interior, “Dan River Coal Ash Spill” (2019), https://www.cerc.usgs.gov/orda_docs/CaseDetails?ID=984. A timeline of the spill and its aftermath can be found here: <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article10787168.html>.
3. Catherine E.

Shoichet, “Spill Spews Tons of Coal Ash into North Carolina River,” CNN, February 9, 2014; “The Dan River Coal Ash Spill, One Year Later,” Southern Environmental Law Center, February 2, 2015.

4. Jennifer Fernandez, “Cleaning Up and Moving Forward, Five Years after Dan River Spill,” Greensboro News & Record, February 2, 2019.

5. My thinking about race and racism as a system of solidarity is informed by Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012). I have also been strongly influenced to think of race as a system of oppression and domination that recruits persons into positions of dominator and oppressor by the work of scholars like Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012); Miguel A. De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús: A Hispanic Political Theology* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014); and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

6. One of the women I interviewed for this paper (introduced below), who identifies as African American, would nuance this statement. She recounts the friendliness of a local business owner who welcomed her and her family in his shop, despite his being the head of the Ku Klux Klan in the area. I can recall my own instances of this kind of doublespeak, or of the distance between ideology and lived experience, during my childhood in town. Living with this kind of contradiction and paradox is characteristic of life under the complex and twisted systems of solidarity produced by the practices of race and racism.

7. In this paper I use the terms “Black” and “white,” despite the difficulty with those words, to represent and reproduce the vernacular of the community about which I am writing. In some circumstances I use the designation “African American,” usually when I am taking the posture of an outside observer, in order to affect a more clinical stance. In all cases “Black” and “African American” are meant to be synonyms, despite the profound historical and definitional problems with that equation.

8. In the course of this conversation, both women agreed their comments were on the record and that I could use their names. They are both activists in religious and environmental activities in their own right, and both have a strong history of organizing and leadership. Leslie noted the significance of the location where we were meeting for our lunch and conversation. In 1968, the restaurant (then under different ownership) was the first one in town to be integrated. A group of African American students, perhaps

inspired by the sit-ins at lunch counters in nearby Greensboro, forced the integration of the restaurant.

9. A record of a live stream of the event can be found at:

<https://www.facebook.com/RevDrBarber/videos/belews-creek-press-conference-nc-ecological-justice-tour-north-carolinians-afec/2317712284920777/>

10. Kendra Pierre-Louis, “A Leader in the War on Poverty Opens a New Front: Pollution,” *New York Times*, August 24, 2018.

11. For a rich discussion of sumptuary codes in the practice of race, see Fields and Fields, *Racecraft*, 25–74.

12. Bertrand M. Gutiérrez, “Stokes Votes for Fracking Moratorium,” *Winston-Salem Journal*, September 28, 2015.

13. Some may dispute the framing of this claim. However, it is clear that shifting modes of regulation, especially under the McCrory governorship where regulation was rolled back significantly, have sparked concern and action from citizens of the state. See Alana Semuels, “The Saga of North Carolina’s Contaminated Water,” *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2017. More recently, something similar has happened with federal oversight of coal ash, as the Environmental Protection Agency recommends rolling back protections. Lisa Friedman, “E.P.A. Weakens Rules Governing Toxic Water Pollution from Coal Plants.” *New York Times*, November 4, 2019.