Book Review Essay

***Reclaiming Stolen Earth: An Africana Ecotheology*. By Jawanza Eric Clark. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022. xxx+210pp. ISBN: 9781626984806. $35.00 paperback.**

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Given the nature of the book and the socio-cultural location of the author, it behooves me to identify my own positionality: I am writing this review as a white, Roman Catholic male from Northwestern Pennsylvania. My ancestors include persons who came to the United States from Ireland, Germany, and Poland, most of whom arrived in the US during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Additionally, I have studied philosophy, theology and religious studies, and history at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels. My present academic work exists at a nexus of comparative theology and philosophy, with new work in political theology and critical animal studies.

Having said that, I would like to now acknowledge what several eminent reviewers of *Reclaiming Stolen Earth* have eloquently pointed out, viz., that Professor Jawanza Eric Clark's book is a tour de force of critical, constructive interreligious theology. I concur! The book was as engaging as it was challenging—philosophically and personally—because Prof. Clark has filled the book with so much that must be critically unpacked. This is not to say that I do not have questions, comments, or criticisms.

To begin, I found Clark's critique of what he calls "white epistemological hubris" to be powerful in its resonance with the work of several liberation theologians who critique the Eurocentric obsession with discursive reason. Clark defines white epistemological hubris as "the pernicious way whiteness [i.e., what Kelly Brown Douglas understands as 'the right to exclude'] operates both to oppress the racial other, with Blackness as its chief opponent, and to simultaneously damage and eventually destroy the land/Earth" (xiv–xv; see also 39, 53, 77). As Clark points out (rightly, I think), it is "an arrogance of perception and a misunderstanding of the natural world and how human beings exist in relationship to each other and the rest of creation" (xv).

However, I do think Clark falls into an historical error: what he calls "white epistemological hubris" is primarily (albeit not exclusively) a *modern*, Western Enlightenment-era hubris stemming from the likes of Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and others who viewed creation as little more than dross to be "mastered" by humanity (39); further, this is something pointed out by (eco)feminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood (both of whom, one

Indian and one Australian, are notably missing from his analysis of ecotheology). This is not to say that some of the errors of such hubris were not present prior to the Enlightenment, but I suspect that the error is rooted in how Clark tends to all but reject the historical (that is to say "temporal") dimension of life.

This appears to me to be present in some of Clark's critiques of ecotheology as well. To be clear, I find his critiques of the majority of present ecotheology to be quite compelling—they are critiques I have shared (or now affirm), such as Western ecotheology's assumption that *the whole* of humanity must undertake an "ecological conversion" while ignoring those traditions and lifeways which have never abandoned or neglected an ecological orientation (see especially x, 38–39, 102–104). Still, there is a specter haunting Clark's criticism: Lynn T. White, Jr.'s in/famous essay, "The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis" (*Science* 155, 1967).[1] Just like White, Clark neglects the full scope and history of Christian (eco-)theological thought and practice, a history which was (I would argue) polluted by the Enlightenment's emphasis on "humanism" *qua* hyper-anthropocentrism, especially vis-á-vis Eurocentrism and whiteness.[2] Bacon and Descartes are prime exemplars of this pollution at its source and fruition. Of course, we must acknowledge that even pre-Enlightenment Christianity was imperfect—the Crusades one example—but Clark emphasizes the clichéd highlights of the (*dominant*) tradition without providing contrasting positions (e.g., Augustinian and earlier Fall-based developments of Creation theology versus Maximus the Confessor's *logoi*-oriented Creation theology). My point is that Clark appears to (inconsistently) fall victim to (almost) exactly what he critiques throughout the text: an "epistemological hubris."

Moving on, I think Clark rightly suggests that it is absurd to think that any text, especially one written and compiled over the span of centuries and millennia (namely, the Bible), can be the first, last, or definitive statement on the nature of the Divine. No text can do this; no text can fully understand the Mystery which (or "who") is "God" (or the "Gods"). As a further example, the Hebrew Bible and Christian Testament represent, in numerous respects, ethically contradictory positions—and they do so within themselves, as well. Moreover, the sheer plurality of religious traditions and other lifeways is suggestive of the limitations of any universalist claims from a single tradition. Yet we remain with the question of "interpretation" across all traditions: is it not an *interpretative act* to defend a "pragmatic" position regarding what is beneficial for one's theological program while relegating all else as *apocrypha* (if not even heresy) that which is not? This is exactly what happened during the fourth century (for Christians), and I would aver that Clark has done likewise while critiquing the interpretative project.[3]

And this leads to an important series of other questions. First, why (try to) save Christianity? If the symbols and beliefs of Christianity are so problematic, as Clark frequently states (see for example 92–93, 130–131, and so on), why not simply cast it aside or into the

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[1] Clark makes no reference to White's essay at any point within the book. Given that "The Historical Roots" is archetypical of both secular, Western ecological thought—which led to a backlash from Christian ecotheological circles—and white epistemological hubris, this is surprising.

[2] It is important to acknowledge that I recognize how Clark is necessarily and selectively limiting his book to the experiences of African-descended peoples. My concern is that he failed to acknowledge the *full* breadth and history of Christian ecological thought.

[3] It strikes me that Clark's critiques of Biblical interpretation are more eisegetical than exegetical.

dustbin of history?[4] This is my own temptation, and it is an issue Clark neglects to address, especially as he seeks to develop a Pan-African/Africana theology. Indeed, why not simply discard Christianity to return to African(a) traditions and lifeways? Still, he suggests that Jesus of Nazareth—the central figure of the Christian traditions—is an ancestor worthy of respect and emulation (see especially 148–149).[5] If this is the case, is there anything else we could or should retain? What stories of Jesus should we accept, and which should we reject? Should we turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38–42 and Luke 6:27–31) or should we make whips out of cord (John 2:15–17)? Why not both? In addition to all of this, in as much as Christianity turns to the Hebrew Bible for inspiration, one may suggest that the mythologies of Genesis 1 and 2 with regard to Creation are worthy of consideration when we seek to develop an ecotheological vision—and Clark's book is supposed to be an ecotheology. And what of other elements of the Torah, such as the Mosaic laws regarding care for the land and our fellow creatures?[6]

Speaking of ancestors, this is a central theme for Clark—as was mentioned, Jesus of Nazareth is highlighted as just such an ancestor. For Clark, the symbol of the *ancestor* "creates an ethical standard of the exemplary life" that serves as "a better criterion for determining what salvation means" (148). But there are numerous traditions of the world which elevate ancestors to a guiding symbol—and some include the oppression of those who are not members of the group. For example, the Japanese tradition of Shinto recognize honored ancestors as *kami* ("spirits" or even "gods"). Even Judaism does this qua the Hebrew Bible: we need only consider the triumvirate of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, persons of questionable character (considering how they are described). What is more, some are white. Take the (admittedly extreme) modern example of Nazism. Its adherents lauded so-called "ancestry"—"Blood and Soil!"—to defend their brutality and violence against those who did not share their "ancestry": non-German, non-"Aryan," non-white persons and peoples.[7] We are seeing a resurgence of such vitriol today, if it can be said to have ever passed away. This does not radically delimit the symbol of the "ancestor," although it problematizes it. Although "ancestor(s)" can (though not *prima facie*) be an excellent symbol, like *any* symbol, it is fraught with deficiency. However, it too can be redeemed.

Now I arrive at some of my chief concerns with Clark's work—from a comparative and interreligious perspective. It regards what I would term the "trans-dimensional cohesion" and intercultural experience(s) of (the) "God(s)." To start, Clark's portrayal of "God" strikes me as being as limited as the alternatives he critiques (for example, 104). To be clear, I am not going to say that a pantheistic experience of "God" is false (see, for example, 102–4). Far from it. What I am concerned with is the universalist rhetoric Clark uses to advocate a pantheistic "God"—especially for pragmatic purposes. And especially since he does critique other universalist claims.

[4] Clark does state on page 130 that the issue is not with Christianity *per se*; rather, "the flaw lies . . . with traditional white interpretations of it." The issue with this statement is not that white interpretations are not problematic—one need only look to the Prosperity Gospel and Christian Nationalism, especially in the United States—but that Clark levies critiques against Christian beliefs and symbols which were originally espoused by non-white (if, unfortunately, frequently male) Christians, such as Augustine. I do not disagree with Clark's criticisms as such, but with his apparently uncritical application of these criticisms.

[5] Clark points readers to his previous book, *Indigenous Black Theology: Toward an African-Centered Theology of the African American Religious Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) for reference.

[6] Sources for ecotheological development for the Christian tradition (in as much as it draws upon the Hebrew Bible) include: Isaiah 11; Isaiah 28; Jeremiah 4; Job 26; Job 28; Psalm 33; Psalm 104.

[7] A possible point of contention would be distinguishing "ancestry" from "ancestor."

In contrast, I would aver that a pantheistic experience of "God," like a panentheistic one—or any other theistic (mono- or polytheistic) or a non-theistic one—is only *one* manifestation of Divinity (or the Ultimate, "God," the One, and so on).

Even the variations of theistic experiences are variegated: in scientific terms, it is like a spatially two-dimensional entity experiencing a spatially three-dimensional entity: the two-dimensional entity would witness "slices" of the three-dimensional entity, being unable to "experience" the third spatial dimension (for example, a sphere witnessed as a series of circles). Applied to "God" and intercultural/interreligious experiences, wherefrom "God" is experienced in distinct and seemingly disparate ways, we can understand that we are (in the analogy) the two-dimensional entities experiencing "God" within the framework of the bio-physical and socio-cultural dimensions which are constituted by our creaturely, historical, and cultural positionalities. This is to say nothing of temporal dimensionality—which, despite Clark's diminutions against temporality, I do not think we should so readily cast aside since even emphasizing the "present" entails the temporality of our experience(s)—and perhaps the temporality of "God."

The shortfall I see in Clark's analysis as a whole is the absence of some demonstrably substantive, normative referent. It need not be Western; indeed, it should be trans-cultural. Otherwise, what prevents us from saying *any* cultural tradition is superior to another? Or, what is to prevent us from falling victim to the classic and modern European claim that white, Western "civilization" is clearly superior due to its ability to globalize itself? It could thus be "pragmatic"—a position upon which Clark leans heavily, and a position which, albeit variegated, generally emphasizes the *usefulness* of a claim to determine its truth value—to accept Western modernity. Clark assumes a pragmatic perspective, but the river of pragmatism can run in many directions. This is the struggle of cultural plurality, and this is what is missing from Clark's analysis.

I conclude with a general question: where is the "ecotheology"? I found Clark's "ecotheology" spread sparsely through the text, the references being brief and oblique. Indeed, compared to what was written, I expected a much deeper dive into the themes of ecotheology: with passing references to ecotheological themes (in conjunction with critiques of present Christian ecotheology), the reader is finally given a taste of what was promised in the final chapter. Still, it feels sparse—almost as if it were an afterthought. I would add a broader question: how would Clark respond to non-Christian ecotheologies, such as Islamic and Jewish ecotheologies, or even ecotheologies from non-Abrahamic traditions? While we must recognize that Clark had to limit his work, an acknowledgement of these other ecotheological traditions was warranted. Ultimately, ecotheology appears more as a *promise* (relatively) sparsely discussed by Clark as that which could follow from what reads more like a *political* theology.

My assessment is that Clark's work is less an ecotheology and more a (socio-)political theology—although the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I would aver that adverting to the socio/politico-theological implications of Clark's work lends itself and leads to the ecotheological consequences of the work. I simply bemoan that the text was advertised as an "ecotheology" without truly diving into that work. Prior to publication, the text could have been almost twice as long in order to develop these consequences, as well as addressing the questions and concerns I have outlined above (among others). As of now, I believe that developing the full ecotheological

consequences would make for an excellent future project, as a sequel to this text. It is one which I look forward to reading.

I would reaffirm my original statement from the introduction: Clark's *Reclaiming Stolen Earth* is a masterwork of Africana theology. While I have raised some critiques, concerns, and questions, I nevertheless believe that it should be essential reading for those grappling with how to understand the experiences of historically and presently oppressed peoples, as well the continuing oppression of the Earth, both at the hands of the West (namely, Western Christianity). In a persuasive and incisive style, Clark provides readers with a path toward connecting racial and ethnic oppression with the oppression of our world and fellow creatures, one which is unique to his analysis of Pan-African/Africana spirituality. It is a text I would gladly, graciously, and critically assign to my future students.

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