The Study of Religion and Gender in the Time of Planetary Ecological Crisis and Pandemic

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As *Religion and Gender* marks its twentieth anniversary, the Covid-19 pandemic is causing enormous suffering all over the world. In scholarship moving forward, we should address the forces behind that suffering as well as that related to devastating natural events, from flooding and hurricanes to tornadoes and forest fires, all of which are increasingly becoming the norm. This requires attention to how the slippages between ecological ethics, animal ethics, critical race theory, and feminist ethics make for major challenges in our academic and public debates by addressing how the capitalist pursuit of profit and power, resulting in rampant disregard for the natural world, non-human animals, people of color, and women, have simultaneously facilitated and been exacerbated by environmental devastation and pandemic.

Why should scholars of religion and gender be concerned with questions regarding planetary ecology and non-human animals? When their habitats are destroyed, wild non-human animals are often forced into close contact with not only each other but also with humans. Increasingly, hunting animals occurs with the goal of profit. Wildlife trafficking is a growing industry worth billions of dollars every year. Some of these animals are destined for wildlife markets with cruel and unhygienic conditions. The conditions of farm animals, commodified for the meat and dairy industries, are equally cruel and often unhygienic. These conditions make it relatively easy for a virus or other pathogen to get transmitted from one species to another and to create a new disease. In fact, up to 75 percent of the new diseases emerging in humans, including Covid-19, are these zoonotic diseases.

The same capitalist disregard for the natural world that has resulted in the proliferation of zoonotic diseases has also led to the greatest threat to life on this planet—climate change and the loss of biodiversity. The meat and dairy industries are highly dependent on fossil fuels, greatly increasing emissions of the main greenhouse gas, CO2, and the animals themselves produce huge quan-
tities of methane, another greenhouse gas. The animal agriculture industries demand enormous amounts of water. On a massive scale, land is cleared to grow grain to feed the animals that humans will later consume.

Scholarship on religion and gender is suited to address the following questions regarding these crises: how do gender and sexuality feature in capitalism's viciously predatory disposition toward non-human animals and the natural world? In turn, how do the same animalizing discourses that uphold gendered and heterosexist structures of oppression feature in capitalist industries that threaten the environment (the effects of which disproportionately affect women and people of color), such as industrial animal agriculture? How do animalizing discourses link exploitative and expropriative economic activity, social injustice, and environmental injustice, and what role does religion play in doing the kinds of cultural work associated with that linkage?

In making my argument for attention to the slippages between ecological ethics, animal ethics, critical race theory, and feminist ethics, I draw on Nancy Fraser’s work calling for attention to the entanglements of exploitation and expropriation (a “structural feature of capitalism” and an “enabling condition for exploitation”) in the contemporary capitalist-racist world system (Fraser 2019). According to Fraser, “Beneath surface niceties of consent and contract lie brute violence and overt theft. The effect is to cast a new light on exchange and exploitation, which now appear as the tip of a larger, more sinister iceberg” (Fraser 2019). Fraser suggests, “What is needed, in fact, is to overcome capitalism’s stubborn nexus of expropriation and exploitation, to transform the overall matrix, to eradicate both of capitalism’s exes by abolishing the larger system that generates their symbiosis” (Fraser 2019). It is worth quoting Fraser at length on the question, “Is capitalism necessarily racist?”:

Universalizing precarity, financialized capitalism exploits and expropriates nearly everyone coming and going. Nevertheless, racial oppression lives on in this phase of capitalism. People of color remain racialized and far more likely than others to be poor, unemployed, homeless, hungry, and sick; to be victimized by crime and predatory loans; to be incarcerated and sentenced to death; to be harassed and murdered by police; to be used as cannon fodder or sex slaves and turned into refugees or “collateral damage” in endless wars; to be dispossessed and forced to flee violence, poverty, and climate change-induced disasters, only to be confined in cages at borders or left to drown at sea. When centuries of stigma and violation meet capital’s voracious need for subjects to exploit and expropriate, the result is intense insecurity and paranoia—hence, a desperate scramble for safety—and exacerbated racism.

FRASER 2019
Contemporary capitalist discourses that demarcate “hard workers” from “scroungers” correlate with what W.E.B. Du Bois called “the color line” (Du Bois [1938] 1998). As Fraser explains, “The expropriation of racialized ‘others’ constitutes a necessary background condition for the exploitation of ‘workers’” (Fraser 2019). “Exposure is the deepest meaning of expropriability, the thing that sets it apart from exploitability. And it is expropriability, the condition of being defenseless and liable to violation, that constitutes the core of racial oppression. What distinguishes free subjects of exploitation from dependent subjects of expropriation is the mark of ‘race’ as a sign of violability” (Fraser 2019; italics original).

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson adds to this perspective on capitalism and racism that animalizing discourses on gender and sexuality are inextricable from those pertaining to what is imagined as the inherent abject quality of Black people’s animality (Jackson 2020). “The fields of ‘human’ and ‘animal,’” as Jackson argues, “are populated based on the ever-shifting needs of Eurocentric (andro)anthropocentric” (Jackson 156).

Analyzing the entanglements of race, gender, sex, and animality means addressing the forms of expropriation to which exploitation is tied in the capitalist world system. By disclosing the capitalist imbrications of topics within the purview of environmental ethics, animal ethics, critical race theory, and feminist ethics, I wish to suggest that none of the communities most directly threatened by capitalism are “othered” on solely their own terms. So, for example, “racial discourse is not simply a by-product of the discourse of species, but rather race and species discourses are homologous and symbiotic” (Jackson 151).

Fraser points out,

Today, when the exploited are also the expropriated and vice versa, it might be possible, finally, to envision an alliance among them. Perhaps in blurring the line between the two exes [exploitation and expropriation], financialized capitalism is creating the material basis for their joint abolition. But it’s nevertheless up to us to seize the day and turn a historical possibility into real historical force for emancipation.

FRASER 2019

What I am suggesting is that the force for emancipation from capitalism requires, not just environmental, critical race theory, and feminist analyses, but also cross-species alliances based on a recognition of the symbiosis of exploitation and expropriation in financialized capitalism and of the unequal dispossession that people of color, laborers, women, and non-human animals suffer
in the face of climate-change-induced disasters and pandemics and the industries that contribute to them.

Consider the benefits of cross-species alliances and questions in addressing the following Covid-19 pandemic crises: amidst the pandemic, wildfires, and a heat wave across the west coast of the United States, undocumented farmworkers faced a “triple threat” (Democracy Now! 2020a); there have been devastating “covid surges” at meat-packing plants (Democracy Now! 2020b); there has been a well-documented disproportionate impact of the pandemic on working mothers (The New York Times 2021); and emerging diseases like Covid-19 also disproportionately affect certain people of color—in the United States, for example, Black and Hispanic people are twice as likely to die from Covid-19, and Native American people are more than twice as likely to die from it.

Questions around planetary ecology and animal ethics are critical in this era of pandemic and understanding religion’s role in upholding capitalism, from industrial animal agriculture to exploitative and expropriative corporate structures and economic policies, is key to addressing them. What is the role of religion in conferring the status of free individuals and good citizens on “hard workers,” while constituting others—from non-human animals, colonized subjects, and “illegal aliens” to scroungers and felons—as beings absent of morals and worthy of less? What religious logics of animality undergird debates regarding gender, sex, species, and environment? More specifically, questions might look like the following: How do white Americans construct the Muslim as an “other” to be feared; how does the media profit off of the use animals and animal imagery to construct the Muslim body as different and dangerous (see, e.g., Hotham 2017)? How might anti-colonial and feminist lenses on the ecologies of war and health justice illuminate the shifting effects of militarized violence, justified through religious discourses and to the benefit of the capitalist class, on the relationships between humans and non-human animals (see, e.g., Rubaii forthcoming)? How might womanist theory challenge the anthropocentric assumptions within animal studies in religion and theology, for example, by bringing attention to topics such as food injustice and insecurities, which are caused by racialized economic imperialism (Laughinghouse forthcoming). What are the convergences between marketing things like meat and marketing religion?; more specifically, how do meat and dairy industries benefit from white evangelical arguments for eating non-human animals, and how are those arguments rooted in a mix of religious convictions, gendered and imperialist political dynamics, capitalist commitments, and a longstanding wariness of mainstream science (Jain 2021)?

These are the kinds of questions that bring environmental ethics, animal ethics, critical race theory, and feminist ethics together in the study of gen-
der and religion. And these kinds of questions should be a part of scholarship going forward if we mean to analyze the discourses that are highly useful in depoliticizing the oppressive and increasingly grim reality of life on this planet.

References


