

DECOLONIZING CATHOLIC THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

Convener: Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Wake Forest University
 Moderator: Bradford Hinze, Fordham University
 Presenter: Heber Brown III, Black Church Food Security Network
 Respondents: Chanelle Robinson, Boston College
 Rufus Burnett, Jr., Fordham University

In this third and final year of the Decolonizing Catholic Theology Interest Group, our work together coalesced around the role of land and food in decolonizing ecclesial praxis and theological reflection. Prior to the start of the convention, our administrative team and respondents, along with nearly two dozen CTSA members, all met with our presenter, Rev. Dr. Heber Brown, who is Executive Director of the Black Church Food Security Network (BCFSN). Our group gathered with Brown in the community garden behind one of the BCFSN's member churches and learned from him about the network's philosophy and strategy, which starts with food access but aims more holistically for agency and autonomy in Black communities. In the spirit of decolonial dialogue, our interest group's session opened with two CTSA members' responses to our site visit with Brown and to the work of the BCFSN more broadly. Brown then offered his own remarks in response to our respondents. This unconventional format allowed for a more robust experience of mutuality and collaborative reflection that grew organically from our group's pre-conference encounter with Brown and the BCFSN.

Dr. Chanelle Robinson was first to offer her remarks, opening with Lucille Clifton's poem, "cutting greens," which calls to mind, through the preparation of collards and kale, "the bond of live things everywhere." From this starting point in the poetics of Black Atlantic cuisine, Robinson placed the realities of food apartheid and the work of the BCFSN in conversation with Catholic social thought, integral ecology, and ecowomanism to offer a compelling vision of Eucharistic theology with social and ecological implications. Robinson analyzed the foundations of food apartheid in colonialism, white supremacy, and racism, and drew on Pope Francis's articulation of the "technocratic paradigm" to further understand the technologies of control that produce the contested geographies of the plantation economy and the structurally racist nature of local and global food systems. She also traced the roots of the BCFSN back to the legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer, drew on Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick to highlight the creation of Black life in relation to the land, and emphasized the ways in which BCFSN exemplifies the principle of subsidiarity in its work to build power, create alternative food systems, and embody alternative Black geographies. Robinson's remarks culminated in a vision of Eucharistic life that centers the marginalized and oppressed, seeks solidarity in the face of oppression, and thus subverts the anti-Eucharistic scandal of food apartheid. Like the sacramental vision of making collard greens presented in Lucille Clifton's poem, BCFSN's alternative way of living with the land is an embodiment of Eucharistic work that heals, unites, and vivifies the "bond of live things everywhere."

Dr. Rufus Burnett, Jr. followed Dr. Robinson's reflections with a response to BCFSN that also rooted the organization's work in the legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer

and her theopolitical turn to the land. Gesturing to the need for a regenerative Indigeneity that washes those who are baptized “Black as soil,” Burnett’s response to the work of BCFSN followed the pattern of three improvisational riffs. First, Burnett related the work of BCFSN to the pain and trauma of the plantation economy, noting that the organization not only makes strategic plans to seek racial justice, it also makes space for black communities to sit in circles together to deal with the trauma and violence of how enslaved Africans and their descendants have been forced to relate to the land. Burnett returned once again to Fannie Lou Hamer as an exemplar of the Black agrarian imagination and Black autonomy in her commitment to the role of land and cooperative ownership in the total goal of freedom. At the same time, Burnett drew on Sylvia Wynter’s article, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” to offer a decolonial analysis of the BCFSN’s activity of baptism into the soil through not only access to the land, but through de-linking from the colonial imaginary of the plantation and its afterlife, as well as re-linking to a positive reorientation to the claims that the earth has on humanity. Finally, Burnett concluded with a riff on the Black Church as a complicated yet promising site of this decolonial praxis, in which the BCFSN is a way of being people of God that, in song and moan, signals a reimagined relationship to the divine in the world.

Rev. Dr. Heber Brown opened his response to Robinson and Burnett with a powerful acknowledgement of both the deep ancestral connections that Black communities have with the land and the witness of the natural world to an authority higher than white supremacy. He responded to Robinson’s Eucharistic theology from the perspective of the Protestant communion tradition, noting how Robinson’s invocation of the Eucharist challenges him and the BCFSN to think differently about the elements of communion in relationship to Black farmers, how the elements were produced, and how Black churches might enter into deeper relationships with farmers and land stewards to create a “sanctified supply chain.” Brown’s response to Burnett deepened all three speakers’ invocation of ancestral traditions, Fannie Lou Hamer, and the myriad of other Black communities on the great family tree of Black agrarianism who inspire the BCFSN to walk in the same way of freedom on and with the land. Brown concluded with a question and a song: what is next for this interest group, what will we do to stand in solidarity, make trouble together, support one another and “plant [our] feet on higher ground?”

Our session ended with a robust discussion of how this question of what to do next is connected with the experiences of international communities and solidarities in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Rwanda, and beyond. One participant drew our reflections together with the recognition that this is not a question of what the church is doing to “bless” farmers, but how we can all live into the blessing that the soil bestows on all of us.

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