Chapter 13: Black natural law

Vincent Lloyd

Abstract

Vincent Lloyd's chapter considers the role of natural law in African American perspectives on law and justice. He begins by discussing the place of natural law ideas in the thought of three prominent African American political leaders: Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Lloyd argues that the embrace of natural law by these thinkers lies squarely within the mainstream of black political thought and activism. Furthermore, it suggests a distinctive way of understanding the concept that is characteristic of African American communities. Black natural law, for Lloyd, involves reflection on human nature to draw normative conclusions. However, this reflection does not take place individually or abstractly, but occurs within communities. Furthermore, black natural law challenges the reduction of human nature to reason, embracing the complexity and ineffability of human existence. The ineffability of human nature, Lloyd argues, provides the basis for a natural law critique of racist, gendered, or other exclusionary legal boundaries. This critique can then be extended to laws that prevent people from accessing their human nature - for example by denying them food, housing, health care, education, and security.
Vincent W. Lloyd. Black Natural Law offers a new way of understanding the African American political tradition, and it argues that this tradition has collapsed into incoherence. Vincent William Lloyd revives Black politics by telling stories of its central figures in a way that exhibits the connections between their religious, philosophical, and political ideas. Black natural law is not simply natural law radicalized; it is also natural law theologized: natural law with its creaturely soul rendered bare and trembling, open and heaving. Thus, reading Shakespeare with black natural law is not simply an audacious leap into our troubled present, but also brings new focus on the forms of scripturally-inspired pluralism that natural law theory supported in Shakespeare’s century, and might support again.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR Black Natural Law
“Carefully written and powerfully argued, Black Natural Law recovers a way of performing the higher law of God that enables a confrontation with injustice. To follow Vincent Lloyd is to glimpse the philosophical history of a tradition, its destruction, and its reconstitution that may yet deepen our care and concern, encourage our reasoning, and extend our moral imagination.”