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**Van Jones, Majora Carter
and the Green Jobs Movement
By Paul Rockwell
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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In February 2006, Majora Carter, co-founder of Green For All, delivered an impassioned address to a gathering of environmentalists. When she held up a poster that read "Green is the new Black," the audience burst into applause.

Carter, a close associate of Van Jones, author of [The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems](#) (Harper Collins, 2008), grew up across the street from a crack house in the South Bronx, at a time when whites fled to the suburbs, and when landlords torched their own apartment buildings to collect insurance.

While the South Bronx is the birthplace of rap music, break dancing - Hip Hop's irrepressible culture - the historic borough is also an environmental calamity, the poorest Congressional district in the United States. Nearly 50% of its residents live below the poverty line, and New York City transfers 40% of its waste into the South Bronx. Dissected by three unwanted thruways, the borough encompasses a sludge plant, four power plants, and has the lowest park-to-people ratio in New York City. Sixty thousand diesel trucks pass through the area each week. While 75% of community residents do not own their own cars, all of the residents breathe the fumes and exhaust, and one in four children suffers from asthma, caused in large part by industrial and auto pollution. Hospital emergency rooms are often the primary care facilities for the uninsured poor.

And those made sick - those most victimized by fossil-fuel industries - often bear the least responsibility for climate change and pollution.

South Bronx environmental activist, Majora Carter, told CNN recently, "If power plants, waste handling, chemical plants and transport systems were located in wealthy areas as quickly and easily as in poor areas, we would have had a clean, green economy decades ago."

Because of Carter's innovative social work in recent years, the borough that gave Hip Hop to the world is once again making history. Green history.

A few years ago Carter leveraged a \$10,000 grant into a \$3 million eleven-mile waterfront park. The green-the-ghetto movement was born. Carter became Executive Director of Sustainable South Bronx, an organization that alleviates poverty through environmental projects, like recycling and urban agriculture. The Stewardship Training program is exemplary. It moves the poor, especially youth, into living-wage green-collar jobs. Many of the students have prison records or were previously on public assistance. Therein is the premise of the burgeoning green economy: Nothing is wasted. All human energy is renewable. According to Ms. Carter, 85% of trainees and workers in the four-year program land steady green jobs in urban forestry, or green-roof installation and maintenance, or other entry-level jobs.

Back in 1995, David Brower, America's most influential conservationist, a mountaineer and lover of wild things, identified the South Bronx and unemployment as environmental issues. In [*Let the Mountains Talk, Let the Rivers Run: A Call to Save the Earth*](#) (Harper Collins, 1995), he wrote: "Restoration means putting the Earth's life support systems back in working order: rivers, forests, wetlands, deserts, soil, and endangered species, too..." Some of his predominately white, middle-class readers might have been surprised when he continued: "Human systems also need restoration. Let's rehabilitate the South Bronx, and all the other places like it across the Earth. To accomplish that we must give the unemployed and the never-employed a stake in the wider restoration process."

Today Van Jones, a solution-oriented environmentalist, puts it more succinctly: "We are either going to create a whole lot of more green jobs or we're going to have a dead planet."

Oakland, California

The South Bronx is not alone. Many other communities are adopting a green economic development strategy. In 2007, without any fanfare, Congress enacted a Green Jobs Act, providing a modest amount of money - \$125 million - for workforce training in the clean energy sector. Today the bill is especially significant, not because of the size of the appropriation (which is mere pocket change), but because it promotes green jobs for the poor. The bill ensures training for at-risk youth, ex-prisoners, returning veterans, and families that fall well below the poverty line. Green collar jobs are "career-track jobs," says Van Jones. They're family-supporting gigs that contribute to preserving and enhancing the environment. Installation of solar panels, construction and maintenance of wind turbines, urban agriculture, tree planting in cities, weatherization and retrofitting of buildings, remediation of brownfields (cleaning up

abandoned, often-contaminated industrial sites), recycling and reuse of materials - these are jobs that generate local revenue, save energy, clean the environment, and cannot be exported.

The Green Jobs Corps campaign, inspired by Van Jones and the Ella Baker Center, began in Oakland. Olivia Caldwell is a young, single mother who lives in Oakland. Like the South Bronx, her community suffers from high unemployment, foreclosures, and violent crime. Olivia herself served time for petty theft.

When she was released from prison, Oakland's Green Job Corps changed her life. Backed by local trade unions and community colleges, 40 paid trainees were prepared for green construction jobs, primarily in solar panel installation. The program worked, and today, small as it may be in size, it is a microcosm for the future. As Mayor Ron Dellums put it: "This is an extraordinary effort. Elegant in its simplicity and embrace. You can fight pollution and poverty simultaneously." For the first time in their lives, impoverished youth have a tangible stake in climate change solutions.

"We want the federal government to buy into what is taking place here in Oakland," said Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-CA). "Once the federal government buys in, I believe our nation can see what can be done. We must go green."

The Green jobs movement, so timely in the current economic debacle, concerns every region of the country. Here are a few examples.

Iowa

Iowa lies on the edge of the Great Plains, "the Saudi Arabia of wind." A few years ago, 1800 employees lost their jobs at a Maytag factory in Newton, Iowa. Within a year, however, the old factory was re-tooled, and it is presently being converted into a plant that produces wind-turbines, the fastest growing sector of the clean energy market in the world. Wind turbines produce electricity for local communities, factories, homes. The power is clean, renewable, and widely available.

Hundreds of Iowa's laid-off workers are now returning to updated plants to work, not in the obsolete pollution economy, but in the green economy. These workers may not eat tofu, sit in hot tubs, or pay extra cash for organic foods. But make no mistake, they are converts to clean energy and social-uplift environmentalism. Arie Versendaal, who worked for three decades at Maytag, now commends the green economy. "Life's not over," he told a *New York Times* reporter. "For 35 years I pounded my body. Now I feel like I'm doing something beneficial for mankind...The wind is blowing out here for anybody to use." (*New York Times*, November 12, 2008)

Larry Crady, who lays fiberglass for turbine moldings said: "I like this job...I feel I'm doing something to improve our country. This is going to be the future."

Los Angeles

Los Angeles is already getting prepared for the green economy. In June 2007 the Los Angeles City Council established a City Retrofit jobs task force. The Apollo Alliance, a major player in the new economy, is encouraging L.A. to invest in water and energy retrofits. More than 1100 L.A. buildings are deteriorating, and the program could save

the city up to \$10 million a year in utility costs.

Energy efficiency is crucial to environmental restoration. Buildings in the U.S. are responsible for 36% of our energy use, about 30% of greenhouse-gas emissions, and 30% of waste production. "The cleanest energy is the energy that we never have to use," writes Van Jones. Weatherization and retrofitting provide entry-level jobs, with opportunities for advancement, the kind of jobs that cannot be outsourced. The most important tool in the green economy, Van Jones notes, is the caulk gun.

Sacred Earth, the Dignity of Labor

"Green the ghetto!" "Green jobs for all!" Green jobs, not jails!!" "Green is the new Black." These are some of the refreshing slogans and motifs of a new wave, a more inclusive, more economically savvy environmental movement.

In her latest book on earth democracy, *Soil, not Oil* (South End Press, 2008), India's Gandian environmentalist, Vandana Shiva, writes: "Two crises of our times are intimately connected - the climate crisis and the unemployment crisis. As long as we address these crises separately, we will not solve either."

For many decades the environmental movement in the U.S. lacked a practical economic agenda. As a result, the oil and auto industries dominated elections and convinced too many voters that environmentalism threatens jobs and economic stability. The oil industry even convinced the AFL-CIO to lobby against the Kyoto Protocol.

As climate and economic calamities converge, consciousness changes. Now the tables are turned. Far from threatening jobs, the environmental agenda actually constitutes the only practical, sustainable means for long-term economic revival.

The green jobs movement is turning into an international force. In a short article, "What the World Needs is a Green New Deal," (*S.F. Chronicle*, 11/26/08), Ban Ki Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, writes: "At a time when the global economy is sputtering, we need growth. At a time when unemployment in many nations is rising, we need new jobs...Only sustainable development - a global embrace of green growth - offers the world, rich nations as well as poor, an enduring prospect of long-term social well-being and prosperity...A solution to poverty is also a solution for climate change: green growth."

At long last, the new president is an environmentalist. Obama recently picked Representative Hilda Solis, a Latina, for Secretary of Labor. With the help of Van Jones and Green For All, it was Solis that authored the Green Jobs Act, and Van Jones' *The Green Collar Economy* may well become the most influential resource for the Obama Administration. The book is replete with examples of green U.S. jobs in the fledgling clean energy economy. But while this remarkable work offers prescriptions for economic growth, it's also a visionary work suffused with refreshing spirituality. Van Jones not only reawakens our sense of awe, our reverence for nature; he also renews America's long-suppressed respect for the dignity of all labor.

Labor, after all, is a renewable source of energy. And we cannot harness the geothermal energy of the inner earth, or the powers of the wind and sun, until we also harness the untapped creativity and yearnings of the poor, who still (43 years after the

Great Society) languish in ghettos, barrios, and reservations of misery and neglect.

The Green Jobs Corps connects America's poor to the noblest aim of humankind today: the restoration of nature's ecosystems, the fragile networks of mutuality that sustain all life.

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