Preaching Black Earth

Sermons, Meditations, and Conversations on African American Environmental Justice and Ecowomanist Spirituality

Edited by Melanie L. Harris

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"Should *Asase Yaa* (Mother Earth, in Akan) decide to speak today, her voice would reverberate with the sounds contained in *Preaching Black Earth*. The authors of this polyphonic and polyvocal anthology witness through interviews, poems, spoken word, and preaching the groaning, sighing, and loud expressions of the agonies and triumphs of Mother Earth. The editor of this exceptional work, Professor Melanie Harris, has truly allowed the earth to have being and voice and thus be a participant in the global struggle for justice. Not only is God's creative vision that all beings live in harmony clearly declared in this volume, but also ways of teaching, preaching, and creatively modeling the vision are made abundantly clear."

—Emmanuel Y. Lartey, Charles Howard Candler Professor of Pastoral Theology and Spiritual Care, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

"*Preaching Black Earth* spurs our theological imagination for what it means to live in fidelity with the wider creation. This volume is thoughtful, inspiring, and adept in its attention to culture and contexts. Harris has curated another compelling collection that elevates Black women's spiritual wisdom as a vital source for engaging our daily encounters as opportunities for sacred practice. Practitioners, laity, and scholars alike will consider this a must for their personal libraries."

—Lisa L. Thompson, Associate Professor and Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair in Black Homiletics and Liturgics, Vanderbilt University

"This exquisite, spirit-filled, anthology invites all readers to centralize ecowomanist insights and methods in our work for earth justice. This book is a crucial guide for environmental and social justice in these times, especially (but not only) in North America. And the time to listen is now—especially for those of us of settler-colonial descent who inherited white theological privilege."

—Christiana Zenner, Associate Professor of Theology, Science, and Ethics at Fordham University

"The brilliance and prophetic wisdom that mark Melanie Harris's work abound in this book. It is a wellspring of deeply rooted soul-sustenance for the uncharted journey toward a world where Earth and earthlings may flourish. Ecowomanist wisdom guides the reader to weave contemplative practice into transformative power for earth justice as social justice. Brave and tender words light the way. Drink from this luminous volume to water your soul, illumine your connection to all that is, and ignite enduring courage for the collective sacred work of ecological social healing that is the great spiritual and moral calling of our time in history."

—Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Professor of Theology and Social Ethics at Church Divinity School of the Pacific and author of *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*; *Building a Moral Economy: Pathways for People of Courage*; and other works

"This text brings together leading academicians, activists, and religious leaders who care about justice for people and the earth and shows how justice for people and justice for the earth are intimately connected. Bringing together the wisdom from environmental justice, earth justice, ecowomanism, and liberation and black theologies among others, the sermons, interviews, and poems in this book help us to look at the intersectional issues involved in eco-injustice faced by peoples, nonhuman life, and the planetary community. Most importantly, the writings in this text not only appeal to our rational selves but also appeal to the deep affective realities that lie in the wake of colonization, slavery, and ecological degradation."

—Whitney A. Bauman, Professor, Religious Studies,
Florida International University

"This book is powerful in ways that deserve both careful attention and enduring praise. The variety of voices represented here is stunning. They are drawn together with Melanie's skilled weaving of suffering, solace, and solidarity in our times. She invites us into the space of effective transformative action."

—Mary Evelyn Tucker, Codirector, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology

To John Asante Arberia Harris
you are loved
the echo of stars lives in you
ancestors' smiles are reborn in your heart every day
you breathe
in
strength
pray earth joy, justice and sorrow
god will meet you
see yourself true
free
whole
earth love, earth prayers
are holding you
even
now
mama loves you

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Introduction

Preaching, Teaching, Leading, and Writing for Climate Justice

Melanie L. Harris

Coming to voice together for the sake of earth justice is the purpose of this book.

Preaching Black Earth is a collection of meditations, sermons, and interviews from scholars, preachers, and leading spiritual activists in the environmental justice movement that connect the prophetic tradition of spoken word, prophetic truth telling, contemplative thought, ecowomanism, and homiletics in the historical Black church with the environment. While it features many different homiletical styles, the book is not a traditional text in African American preaching that focuses on sermon development. Rather it is an interdisciplinary text that features models of earth-honoring faith and biblically inspired sermons. It is evidence of the importance of intellectual community, collaboration, and sharing of thought as art. When mutual enhancement, environmental justice, and ecological reparations are the goals, then the conversation between thinkers, scholars, and activists looks different. It is collaborative, not competitive. It leans into truth and community building, not reestablishing, falling prey to, or being complicit in hierarchical relationship. It is interdisciplinary, intersectional, and includes multiple fields connected to environmental studies and committed to environmental justice.[1]

The interdisciplinary and intersectional frame of ecowomanism guides this volume and helps us as readers to see the many different sides or perspectives within environmental justice. Ecowomanism is an approach to environmental ethics and studies that uses intersectional (race, class, gender, sexuality, ability) analysis and centers the voices, contributions, and methods of women of

1. For more on mutual enhancement, see Melanie L. Harris, "In the Company of Friends: Womanist Readings of Buddhist Poems," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 36 (2016): 3–8.

color, especially women of African descent. Naming the importance of these women's approaches to climate justice as key to ecological reparations and strategies for moving us toward climate justice, ecowomanism both uncovers the his/herstory of women of African descent in the environmental movement and debunks the myth that the environment is a "white people's issue."[2]

Applying an ecowomanist lens provides a fresh lens to environmental justice in that it reveals the interdisciplinary, intersecting and intercultural, and interfaith perspectives that flow from critically exploring climate justice from a variety of perspectives. All these perspectives are necessary for the facing of this hour on the planet and the deep challenges that climate change means for the human and nonhuman earth community. One of the primary tenets of ecowomanist thought is the interconnected lens of justice. That is, for ecowomanism social justice is earth justice and earth justice is social justice. Put another way, social justice issues, including racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other unjust forms of oppressions, are important to take into consideration when examining environmental justice.

So, what is environmental justice? Environmental justice is the work of justice for earth and all beings on the earth. It especially honors the voices of communities of color and reveals the intersections between racial, gender, economic, and social injustice in connection with policy making decisions that place marginalized communities further at risk of being treated unfairly in society and trapped in unhealthy environments due to air pollution, soil contamination, overuse and unfair use of land, and more. According to Dorceta E. Taylor, "The environmental justice movement arose because of the urgent need to make connections between racism, discrimination, equity, justice, and the environment."[3] Recognizing the importance of interconnectedness between all beings for many in Indigenous cultural and religious communities and woven into many spiritual communities of people of color, the term "earth justice" is also used to describe work in the environmental justice movement that includes the voice of earth. Earth justice acknowledges the agency of nonhuman beings and offers a frame through which to think about how to create environmental justice that includes the earth. It takes seriously the voices of earth, wind, fire, and water—the ancestral message that the earth is speaking especially regarding the disappearance of certain forms of biodiversity on the planet, the erasure of certain plant species, and the unjust killing of too many people, animals, and trees for the sake of domination and human greed.

2. Alice Walker, "Nuclear Madness," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 345.

3. Dorceta E. Taylor, "Environmental Justice Demands Listening," *Sierra*, accessed February 27, 2024, https://digital.sierramagazine.org/publication/?i=686367&article_id=3841577&view=articleBrowser.

Weaving in the agency and voices of earth and connecting the examination of the causes of their suffering to the realities of racial and economic justice, gender and sexual injustice, as well as disability injustice set up an important matrix from which to explore how systems of oppressions that limit these kinds of justices from flourishing are perpetuated. This ecowomanist lens offers a glance into the touchpoints from which to construct new modes of being and thinking toward intersectional modes of justice whereby all beings, all lives with the earth, can thrive. This is the primary goal of ecowomanism.

When we use this frame, we consider that earth justice and social justice work go hand in hand. We recognize the importance of multiple justice seekers from various backgrounds and expertise being a part of conversations for climate justice. It is not enough, for example, to hear from just the preachers from the Black church tradition, whose homiletical genius has inspired generations from the antislavery and abolitionist movements through present-day antiracist, Black Lives Matter, and black liberationist movements. We also need to hear the voices of the climate activists, scientists, and others working and weaving visions of climate justice into clustered city neighborhoods, along the faith inspired vineyards of church gardens and interfaith climate collectives, and in organizational connections across the planet working to reduce carbon emissions. We must position the voices of women, nonbinary, and queer folx into the conversation about climate justice in ways that connect queer studies with environmental studies and highlight the problematic ways in which hierarchical gendered perspectives have forced non-binary folx, women, and especially women of color around the globe to pay the highest cost for climate injustice, while often contributing the least to it. We need to hear from the antiracist scholars working to dismantle white supremacy and scholars in disability studies working to change perceptions about the dominance of able-bodiedness so that we might see all bodies, and beings, as sacred and holy.

What are we to make, for example, about the fact that Harriet Tubman, cherished black feminist, is viewed as an environmentalist who read trees, *and* did so as a disabled woman who suffered from severe headaches and narcolepsy most of her life even as she led the Underground Railroad? Was there something sacred and holy about the divine connection that she recalls having when she was in an unconscious state and able to commune with God differently?[4] How is

4. Tubman's ability to read trees refers to her observation of the northern direction that moss typically grows on trees. Knowing which direction pointed north likely provided Tubman with valuable information about how to lead enslaved Africans on the Underground Railroad to freedom. For more, see Deirdre Cooper Owens, "Harriet Tubman's Disability and Why It Matters," *Ms.*, February 10, 2022, https://msmagazine.com/2022/02/10/harriet-tubman-disability-democracy/.

this model of being a contemplative with and in earth helpful to those practicing environmental justice and earth honoring faith today? Are there concepts, tropes, and practices in Buddhism, for example, that lend themselves toward seeing the unconscious mind as a storehouse of "good ground" from which to nurture the good?[5] How do we explain that it was not only Tubman's commitment to the freedom of Black people but also her commitment to earth that led her to cultivate land using earth honoring farming practices?[6] Seeing Tubman's life and her work as an environmentalist from this kind of intersectional perspective opens the door for us to see connections between social justice issues and earth justice. In this sense, an intersectional ecowomanist lens helps us map the methods, understand modes of thought, and discern conceptual resources and frameworks that historical and contemporary theorists, preachers, scholars, and activists use. It also invites us to apply these methods and be guided by these values of environmental or climate justice in our everyday lives.

ECOWOMANIST CONTEMPLATIVE THOUGHT, BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY, AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN HOMILETICS TRADITION AS INTERDISCIPLINARY SOURCES

In previous work, I have outlined the conceptual frameworks within African American religious thought, Black liberationist perspectives, and womanist ethics that serve as foundations for ecowomanism.[7] As for the connection between African American religion and ecowomanism, the key tenet of interconnectedness guides the conversation about climate justice to begin with the acknowledgment of a belief in a sacred connection between all beings. Reflective of African indigenous religious understanding, connecting the human, earthly, and divine realms together to shape an ethical and moral framework to cultivate climate justice, interconnectedness is a primary tenet and theme of ecowomanism. It suggests that climate justice work is accompanied by a spiritual undertone. This undertone matters in the work of climate justice because it keeps the agency of earth and nature in the forefront of climate justice, thus including the earth as a being and

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Also see Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (University of Georgia Press, 2018).

5. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Teachings on Love* (Parallax Press, 2007).

6. Nhat Hanh, *Teachings on Love*, 2007.

7. Melanie L. Harris, "African Diaspora: African American Environmental Religious Ethics and Ecowomanism," in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (Routledge, 2017), 199–207.

participant on the journey toward justice. In addition, the spirituality that undergirds climate justice helps to keep activists in the movement energized and empowered to take care of themselves through practices of contemplation, reflection, and rest, and to see these forms of care as central to the wider work of justice. Alice Walker reminds us of the importance of the connection between self-care and planetary care by encouraging all activists to have a spiritual practice. She writes,

> This is not a time to live without a practice. It is a time when all of us will need the most faithful, self-generated enthusiasm (enthusiasm: to be filled with god) in order to survive in human fashion. Whether we reach this inner state of recognized divinity through prayer, meditation, dancing, swimming, walking, feeding the hungry, or enriching the impoverished is immaterial. We will be doubly bereft without some form of practice that connects us, in a caring way, to what begins to feel like a dissolving world. . . . Take some time to contemplate what sort of practice appeals to you. . . . Everything has Life, everything has Spirit! . . . Whatever it is, now is the time to look for it, to locate it, definitely, and to put it to use.[8]

Alice Walker's invitation to contemplative practice is a model worth paying attention to. Walker's invitation becomes deeper as one's eyes scroll across the page. She invites us to open the heart and invite a practice into our lives in part based on the insight that only the cultivation of refuge space within can strengthen us for the justice work ahead. That is, by cultivating a contemplative or spiritual practice by deepening our connection to Spirit and having an awareness of the divine within, we can empower ourselves for the hard work of justice ahead.

As two important aspects of contemplative thought, contemplative care and contemplative practices can help individuals engaged with social and environmental justice identify strategies to establish a sense of safety for individuals or communities, even in the midst of the climate crisis; and these two aspects of contemplative thought can help with strategies and touchpoints of hope, even in the midst of the reality of the polycrisis—the religious, cultural, social, and political unrest throughout the world. To better understand the connections, one definition of the former is, "contemplative care is the art of

8. Alice Walker, "This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations: Suffering Too Insignificant for the Majority to See," in *We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (The New Press, 2006), 88–110.

providing spiritual, emotional and pastoral support, in a way that is informed by a personal, consistent contemplative or meditation practice."[9]

Scholarship on contemplative and spiritual practice have roots in the disciplines of health, mental health and wellness, and religious studies. It gives particular attention to religious studies and a focus on skill development, method, and religious or theological underpinnings. It connects theology, pastoral care and counseling, trauma studies, community care, and healing. These connections have opened the door for study on the impact of contemplative practices such as meditation or mindfulness training on reducing the impact of eco-trauma, the development of trauma informed approaches in teaching, self-compassionate leadership, and global and community organizing. This work has paved the way for study in non-harming, compassionate practices for racial justice, nonviolent action informed by the civil rights movement, and even mindfulness work to assist veterans of war and those impacted by generational eco-personal, posttraumatic stress disorder and social trauma.[10]

Put another way, the way one feels emboldened on their path of life and also empowered to fight for earth's life through social and earth justice is by first being fully rooted. Some of the wisdom outlined in the interviews, sermons, and meditations in this text help point the way toward developing practices that help move earth justice forward. In fact, one might read *Preaching Black Earth* with a contemplative lens through which to listen for earth wisdom and wisdom from environmental activists pointing to new directions for climate justice in our day. Taking this view, *Preaching Black Earth* is a companion on the journey toward environmental justice, because it offers instruction for readers and insight from various dimensions and perspectives.

BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The theological themes of justice and liberation show up repeatedly in ecowomanist contemplative thought. These themes help shape and inform some questions regarding the experience of peoples of African descent with the environment: How have African and African American (Black) communities engaged in environmental justice historically in the United States and globally? How has the experience of navigating racial injustice and racial violence, often in collusion with white supremacist "ownership" and

9. Cheryl A. Giles and Willa B. Miller, *The Arts of Contemplative Care: Pioneering Voices in Buddhist Chaplaincy and Pastoral Work* (Wisdom Publications, 2012), xvii.

10. For work in non-harming, compassionate practices for racial justice, see Ruth King, *Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out* (Sounds True, 2018).

overuse of nature, impacted Black people's understanding of themselves, their relationship with the earth, and their understandings of environmental justice? How are ecological reparations and racial reparations connected? How might racial, gender, economic, and environmental justice be connected in unique ways for Black environmental activists? The first theme of justice underscores the importance of creating systems of fairness that create equal access to environmental health and prompt deep imagination so that we might foster communities of flourishing wherein the earth and all beings flourish. That is, through the work of exposing implicit racial, gender, and economic biases, and naming prejudices about sexual identity and other societal stereotypes, hierarchal structures can be identified and torn down.

In many Judeo-Christian religious traditions, this idea of justice comes from the theological understanding of *imago Dei,* the idea that the essence of God as light is in all things and as such all beings are related and worthy of thriving in balanced and equitable community. Akin, in interfaith and interreligious dialogue to Buddhist understandings of interbeing, wherein all beings are connected and in flow with one another, the work of justice and environmental justice specifically is grounded by a logic of non-dualism and interconnectedness rather than logic of domination and hierarchy. Central to the work of justice, and especially racial justice in Black and Brown communities, is fighting for freedom of and justice for the earth. Because of the myth that Black and Brown communities are not interested in environmental justice, developing an intersectional approach to environmental justice is key. James H. Cone, puts it this way, drawing connections between racial and environmental justice in his classic essay "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?": "Racism is profoundly interrelated with other evils, including the degradation of the earth. It is important for Black people, therefore, to make the connection between the struggle against racism and other struggles for life. . . . What good is it to eliminate racism if we are not around to enjoy a racist free environment?"[11] For Cone and other scholars who make connections among racial justice, gender and sexual justice, economic and disability justice, and divine justice, it is fairness and equality that guide the vision for working for social justice and environmental justice. The theological claim that God desires that all of creation thrive can be derived from a biblical understanding of the creation stories found in Genesis.

11. James H. Cone, "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?," *Cross Currents*, 50 (1/2): 36–46.

LIBERATION: HONORING BODY, CHERISHING BLACK EARTH

For many communities of color, including African and African American peoples, experiencing liberation from all systems of oppression means having the freedom to be fully who they are. This includes having a sense of freedom in body, mind, and spirit. Whether individually or communally, this kind of freedom invites a freedom of earth through an understanding of African cosmology wherein the divine realm, human realm, and earth/nature realm are interconnected.[12]

As the earth is free, so too are the people. As the earth is free, so too are the ancestors and all existence in the spirit realm. As the spirit realm is free, so too are the humans to flourish in balance and harmony with all of earth. These connections are important for ecowomanism because they reveal a sacred connection between the peoples and the earth that supports an ethical mandate—embedded in the cultural and social and in many cases spiritual values of the peoples and their communities—to care for the earth. That is, especially as descendants of enslaved Africans throughout the diaspora whose bodies were identified as property and whose bodies were used as beings from which to extract energy and labor, African Americans have a particularly complex relationship with the earth. This is what Kimberly E. Ruffin calls the "beauty-to-burden" paradox, highlighting the complexity of African American environmental history and connection with earth being filled with history, experience, and memory that evokes trauma, climate and racial violence, as well as beauty, awe, and sacred spiritual connection.

Recognizing the depth of the extremes of these paradoxical realities for African and African Americans doing work in environmental justice is key. Our entry into the work of environmental justice is often very different and sometimes misunderstood or misperceived by well-meaning (often liberal) white people in the movement with little to no experience or knowledge about the importance of true antiracist mutual relationship. Without a commitment to anti-oppressive paradigms the work of environmental justice can be difficult. Models of ecological reparations are helpful here in dismantling structures of white supremacy and exploring exploitive and extracting practices used against people of color and the earth. These practices, such as the establishment of the Dakota pipeline, follow a logic of domination whereby communities of color and land are subject to the desire of a white supremacist and capitalist agenda. The work of ecological reparations, then, is not simply to repair

12. Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (Compass, 1995).

the earth from destructive anthropocentric habits and unsustainable practices that destroy the earth: ecological reparations are also about transforming systems of domination, practices of abuse, and ways of thinking that posit one position, posture, person, or being over another to the point of utter extinction.[13] Put another way, ecological reparations deals with not only repairing the earth in all of its biodiversity but also repairing systems of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia that seek to tear at the essence of beingness and sacredness of beings of a particular race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and expression. Ecological reparations interrupts abuse and calls out abuse of power in a number of forms. From this vantage point social justice is earth justice, and earth justice is social justice. This particular perspective is held specifically from an ecological perspective called ecowomanism.[14]

Ecowomanism invites contemplative and scholarly reflection on environmental justice from the perspective of women of African descent. It takes seriously the work and scholarship of Black women environmental scientists, activists, and scholars who engage environmental justice with a focus on intersectional analysis. Ecowomanism invites us to develop skillful means through which to use and apply intersectional analysis in order to understand and glean wisdom from earth-honoring practices that help to construct more healthy, non-abusive, non-exploitive and sustainable ways of being with the earth. Similar to the Buddhist practice of looking deeply, ecowomanism looks deeply into the roots of inequity in cases of environmental racism to uncover systems in place that are helping to maintain environmental injustice.[15]

For example, ecowomanist wisdom suggests that there is something sacred and important to recovering a relationship with the earth for so many peoples of color, especially descendants of enslaved Africans who have known, or can tap into their own DNA to feel, the feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness in the face of lynching. What are we to make of the relationship between the earth that soaks up the blood of a Black lynched body and that soil's relationship with the descendants of that lynched earth being? And how are we to imagine ecological reparations regarding the repair of that community's relationship with the lynching tree, not to mention the racial repair that is still necessary between the descendants of the white people who raised the Black body to be hung and celebrated the expiration of life from that lynched Black body? How does one approach repairing earth differently, and walk into environmental

13. "Dismantle White Supremacy," Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed January 27, 2025, https://www.uua.org/justice/dismantle-white-supremacy. Also see Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Penguin UK, 2018).

14. Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Orbis, 2017).

15. Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life* (Riverhead Books, 2002).

justice work constructively, with an eye toward justice toward all, when one is a descendent of African enslaved peoples? Might this approach be different than the approach toward repairing earth as one who is the descendent of white peoples who historically lynched Black bodies in the United States? What do we make of the difference between the perspective on land sovereignty and rights from the perspective of the white colonial settler (recipient of stolen land) and that of Native peoples? Other questions emerge from this eco-memory reflection on the US lynching scene, including how the ecological perspective of the enslavers of Black and African bodies whose labor provided the economic base for America and whose persons were considered property, differs from the ecological perspective of those who were considered nonhuman for hundreds and hundreds of years? Considering the vastness of climate injustice, and the attacks on democracy over the past decade, have we been taught to be willfully ignorant about the negative impact unexamined white privilege has had on building a true democracy and an environmental ethic that honors the sacredness of earth? When the systems of exploitation, extraction, and abuse litter the earth with graves as a result of climate violence, when harmful unsustainable action abounds, what are we to do with the hope of healing the earth or, at least, sustaining basic ecosystems for life for the next seven generations to enjoy?

The freedom to ask these questions and the capacity to host the courage to meet them require practice sometimes in traditional and sometimes in what religious historian Rachel E. Harding calls, "alternative spaces."[16] In 2022, I had the pleasure of working with Dr. Harding on a joint project sponsored by the Food, Health, and Ecological Well-Being (FHEW) program, which I direct at Wake Forest University, and the Veterans of Hope project. The inaugural FHEW Contemplative Leadership retreat was not only one of deep renewal for activists, scholars, and ecowomanist leaders in environmental justice. It was also a time of deep and urgent reflection on the need for self and planetary care. That is, as Alice Walker and bell hooks remind us, especially for Black women and Black communities, it is central to remember that our healing is deeply woven into the healing of the earth. Our healing from internalized and external forms of oppression, racism, classism, sexism; our healing from homophobia, transphobia; even our healing from racial trauma and intimate relational violence is connected to how we connect to the earth, put our hands in the soil, listen, and fight for environmental justice.

Ecowomanist spirituality is fully lived out in the spiritual practice, ritual, and worship life of the Root Church—a space that invites a collective of community organizers, mental health providers, and everyday folk in Durham,

16. Rosemarie Freeney Harding with Rachel Elizabeth Harding, *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism, and Mothering* (Duke University Press, 2015), ix.

North Carolina, together to worship God in Creation. The Root Church is organized by leaders of The Root Cause Collective, led by ecowomanist, A. W. Shields. This vibrant nonprofit organization is a collective of mental health providers and wellness professionals who are committed to liberative, holistic healthcare services for communities of color. In October, following the FHEW retreat, the Root Church celebrated worship in a truly ecowomanist way, fully honoring the intersections of Black religious life. Shaping a worship service that was grounded in a commitment to self and planetary care and anti-oppressive and life-giving ways of being for all in the earth community, including queer folk, partners, parents, children, pets, animals, plants, and friends, this model of ecowomanist spirituality embodied elements of Black liberation theology and womanist theology. Sacred space was created out of the Black farm, ritual was performed under the shade of an old oak tree, and children were invited to name their own reflections about earth, communion, and relationships, as adults were encouraged to listen to the wisdom of the children. The service also included a baby dedication service featuring an Afrocentric Christian practice of dedication and presentation to the community. The practices of Christian mysticism, mindfulness, and ancestral connection through the beauty of multiple African indigenous religious traditions were all welcomed in the space, making the "alternative space" of worship a truly interreligious space of sacred communal and earth care.

The worship space was carefully constructed outside on a beautiful fall Sunday in October on a Black farm in Durham, and the focus of this worship service was on Elijah's farm, giving us the opportunity to reclaim our connection to the land. Bell hooks notes that one of the most vital things that we can do as Black and Brown peoples and those committed to anti-racism as true white allies is reconnecting to the land. This work can be very healing and reestablish important kinship connections between Black peoples and the land that have been severed by white supremacist ways of thinking and racist acts of violence: "when we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully . . . estrangement from nature and engagement in mind/body splits made it all the more possible for black people to internalize white-supremacist assumptions about black identity. Learning contempt for blackness, southerners transplanted in the north suffered both culture shock and soul loss."[17] Developing "alternative spaces" that guide Black and Brown folks into creating spiritual faith communities that honor their own sacredness as well as the sacredness of earth helps us dive more deeply into ecowomanist spirituality and uncover the depths of

17. Bell hooks, "Touching the Earth," in *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (South End Press, 1999), 134–138.

eco-theologies informed by the sense of abundance that Rosemarie Harding and Dr. Rachel E. Harding describe in *Remnants*. Here, Dr. Rachel Harding writes,

> There is no scarcity. There is no shortage. No lack of love, of compassion, of joy in the world. There is enough.
>
> There is more than enough.
>
> Only fear and greed make us think otherwise.
>
> No one need starve. There is enough land and enough food.
> No one need die of thirst. There is enough water. No one need live without mercy. There is no end to grace. And we are all instruments of grace. The more we give it, the more we share it, the more we use it, the more God makes. There is no scarcity of love. There is plenty. And always more.
>
> This is the universe my mother lived in. Her words. Her ways. This is the universe she was raised in, by parents from rural Georgia who came up in a generation after slavery. People who lived with many terrors but who knew terror was not God's final say. This is the universe she taught me. Whatever I call religion is this inclusive, Christian, indigenous, Black, southern cosmology of compassion and connectedness. It is the poetry of my mother's life.[18]

Perhaps the greatest gift and inheritance that we receive from Dr. Harding is this gift of a theology of abundance. It is the theology of her mother, Rosemarie. She believed in a world of abundance, where there was enough for all to eat, to live, to breathe, to be. Even in the midst of battling against Jim and Jane Crow, as well as the structural racism that was a deep part of the lives of African American communities living in the south at the time of Rosemarie Harding's life, still there was a deep belief, an ethic of sufficiency, that God was an abundantly loving God and saw deep worth and value in every being and every Black life and every Black soul regardless of the daily evidence of white supremacy. A theology that both allowed for the acknowledgment of evil (white supremacy, white racial harm and violence) and a theology of resistance and divine love, this theology of abundance was much more than food or money ~ it was the wealth of being ~ and was filled with the inner knowing of one's worth and value as a full earthling, a child of God, a cherished part of the heart of the planet.

18. Harding and Harding, *Remnants*, ix.

Healing this heart ~ healing us ~ is not only evidence of healthy theology ~ it is proof that we are healing simply by being earth. This, being with earth and being earth, is true liberation.

AFRICAN AMERICAN HOMILETICS

In the tradition of African American homiletics, proclaiming the word and the gospel of Jesus Christ for the present-day liberation of communities of faith committed to social and earth justice is the primary purpose of sermon construction, development, and delivery. Aligned with Jesus's model of radical love, inclusiveness, and commitment to justice for the oppressed, African American homiletics celebrates a history through the great oratorical genius of Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey, and Martin Luther King Jr. While pressed by the realities of enslavement, and reading, preaching, and even ministering under the threat of death, these leaders and preachers used various styles to "preach the word" of justice in ways that exposed the evils of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression while painting the path forward for justice and the beloved community for all.

For ecowomanism, it is significant that King's vision of the beloved community was in part influenced by his own witness of the environmental health hazards experienced by the Memphis sanitation workers in 1968. It was to advocate for this cause that King came to Memphis to speak out against environmental injustice and for the civil and human rights of workers.[19] King's metaphor of the vision of God as a just democracy set to words in his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech sets the stage for an ecowomanist vision connecting the idea of the beloved community with environmental justice.

In King's theological imagination, illustrated through his sermon, we see an arc of divine justice and an argument that God intends for humans and all beings to live in harmony with one another. Due to the sins of greed, economic exploitation, militarism, and white supremacy, King explains that American society is not living into this vision, and he urges society to move toward God's grander vision of peace and justice for all. This example of King's sermon, connecting environmental justice with Black liberation, is just one through which an ecowomanist vision expands the dialogue mentioned above by James H. Cone and deepens the call for us to consider African American preaching and homiletics as an interdisciplinary source for ecowomanist reflection.

19. Diane Glave, "Black Environmental Liberation Theology," in *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History,* ed. Diane D. Glave and Mark Stoll (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

PREACHING BLACK EARTH: LISTENING, PREACHING, AND MOVING IN AN AGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

As an interdisciplinary volume, *Preaching Black Earth* is a collection that features sermons, environmental justice reflections, and interviews. Part I includes ecowomanist sermons from political activists Stacey Abrams, Sofía Betancourt, and Elonda Clay, as well as biblical scholar Kenneth Ngwa and meditations from the Black prophetic Christian liberation tradition by John Kinney and Otis Moss III. Deeply woven into the tradition of African American literature, this book also offers selections of eco-poetry that weaves parts I and II together. Part II opens with my own eco-poetry as a unique contribution to the field of environmental justice and includes five interview conversations with foremost scholar leaders in the field, Heber Brown, Christopher Carter, Frederick Douglass Haynes III, Larry Rasmussen, Frances Roberts-Gregory, and Gina M. Stewart.

The first interview features a conversation between me and Black liberationist pastor Frederick Douglass Haynes III about the resurrection hope alive in a vision of environmental justice that centers Black theology. The second interview features a unique conversation between me and preeminent womanist pastor and preacher Gina M. Stewart as she engages the method of ecowomanism and the tenets of ecowomanist thought. The third interview showcases the collaborative work between me and Larry Rasmussen as we discuss the significance of antiracist paradigms for environmental ethics and how this turn transforms the discourse of climate justice. In the fourth interview, I engage Heber Brown and Christopher Carter about their approaches to environmental justice, building and sustaining the Black Church Food Security Network, and invigorating programs in ecological well-being in church, seminary, and academic contexts. The final interview is hosted by Kate Common of Methodist Theological School in Ohio and engages Frances Roberts-Gregory and me in a dialogue about the arc of ecowomanism and African American environmental justice work in faith communities today. This conversation uncovers the gems and tenets of ecowomanist spirituality. The volume concludes with two eco-poems, one by young environmental and antiracist activist Liv Parsons and the other a self-authored closing mantra.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK: MY HOPE FOR YOU

Inspiring the Reader

Preaching Black Earth is a powerful volume in that it includes sermons, eco-poetry meditations, and interviews featuring many diverse and interdisciplinary voices in ecowomanist thought and environmental justice. As a collective, these voices illustrate the depth and expansive scope of ecowomanism and signal the importance of interdisciplinary, interreligious, and intercultural approaches in ecowomanism for the work of climate justice.

My hope for the reader who desires to be inspired is that the sermons in *Preaching Black Earth* will indeed spark hope, renewal, and encouragement into the heart and mind of the reader seeking refuge and solace, even as they engage the work of environmental justice in their everyday life. My hope for the reader interested in prayer and poetry writing themselves is that they be encouraged to write their own ecowomanist prayers and poems and that the eco-poems included in the volume might inspire a new generation of environmental writers. My hope for the reader of the interviews is to be able to glean new wisdom and inspiration from the voices of political activists, spiritual and religious leaders, and scholars who are committed to social and earth justice. Each interview in *Preaching Black Earth* is unique in that it models communal, respectful, and critical conversation. These models can be used to frame other conversations and discourse at the intersections of environmental studies, theology, ethics, and climate activism.

Inspiring the Student, Activist, and Teacher

Preaching Black Earth is also an excellent addition to any classroom and can be easily adapted to courses engaging environmental studies, Black and womanist theologies, theology, ethics, homiletics, ecowomanism, and more. Teachers will find the sermons helpful for describing the theological underpinnings and conceptual frames of ecowomanist thought. Themes including interconnectedness, interdependence, earth community, and the connection between theory and praxis can be gleaned from an initial reading of each sermon. These themes could be discussed in class as a way of deepening student learning and comprehension of ecowomanist perspectives.

Theology and Ethics Courses

Pedagogical Strategies

For courses in theology and ethics, one pedagogical exercise that will assist students in more deeply understanding the major themes in ecowomanist thought is to invite students to select one of the sermons and glean three or four major themes (or points) from the sermon to write about. By describing those themes in their own words, students might reflect on their own theology and how and whether the themes in the sermon align, expand, change, constrain, or transform their own theology and why.

Preaching, Rhetoric, and Homiletics Courses

Pedagogical Strategies

A particularly helpful exercise would be to invite students to write a short three-to-five-page paper responding to one or more of the following questions: How do the themes in this sermon expand my own theological understanding of earth, stewardship, and earth community? How might my faith and my faith communities be served by hearing this sermon or a sermon like this one? What critique might I bring to this sermon? What are the sermon's blind spots? What do I wish the sermon would say more about?

Considering the dynamic and diverse use of rhetorical styles applied in each of the sermons, a pedagogical exercise specifically for classes in preaching and rhetoric would be to bring a rhetorical criticism or womanist lens to the sermon and study the sermon for uses of narrative, story, and language. Students might reflect on the question of what narratives, stories, and language used in the sermon best communicate the principles (community etc.) embedded in ecowomanism. How does an examination of the sermon reveal how preachers can speak prophetically about environmental justice, engage the biblical texts, and meaningfully engage the audience by empowering them to act for earth justice?

Ecowomanist Courses

Pedagogical Strategies

Preaching Black Earth is especially helpful for students in courses in ecowomanism and environmental studies because it models several different kinds of writings used to expand the discourse. For example, one teaching strategy helpful to students in ecowomanist and environmental justice courses is to consider the eco-poems as models to inspire their own poetry writing about earth justice. What connections can students make between their own activism and the activism they witness in the stories, sermons, and interviews?

Students can be invited to write a short poem, prayer, or reflection inspired by the eco-poetry to spark their own thinking about writing forms helpful for various audiences committed to earth justice.

A CONTEMPLATIVE MOMENT

May the earth be sustained, even as we enter a new age of climate change, and may the songs of these hearts breathe alive for a new day in which justice does roll down like water ~ throughout the earth and for the sake of all beings.

breathing earth

by *Melanie L. Harris*

breathing earth
let us
proclaim
a new way of being
interconnected
honoring
safe refuge
one to another
all
sacred
all
whole
all
free

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