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### Ecowomanism: A Solution to Climate and Social Injustice

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### Ecowomanism: A Solution to Climate and Social Injustice

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## Ecowomanism: A Solution to Climate and Social Injustice

Climate change and environmental degradation affects those that are historically underrepresented and oppressed. These affects were highlighted during The Civil Rights Movement, which traditionally provided efforts and policy change towards establishing racial equality for all Americans. However, a new perspective showed the unequal distribution of non-white Americans historically and currently living in harsher environmental conditions. This includes the redlining of minorities into inadequate housing, where there is higher levels of pollution and natural disasters, and places lacking access to food and healthcare. This idea was left out of the initial environmental movement, inspired by Rachel Carson's novel, *Silent Spring*, which was primarily focused on preserving resources and generally cleaning the air, land, and water through a set of policy changes. The environmental movement is currently based on reversing the damages caused by the white colonialist view of land for instrumental and economic usage, preserving natural areas and species, limiting the effects of climate change, and ultimately returning the land to its "natural" state. It focuses on the land and its species, but fails to address problems among communities of humans, and how it perpetuates further damage and disconnect between the environment and mankind. Theologies that work towards establishing equality in society and its role in the environment is growing. Ecowomanism is a theology in which black and indigenous women use their experiences, histories and cosmologies to argue the parallels of environmental justice to racism, classism, violence and demonstrates the exclusion of their voices in the current environmental movement. Theologies such as ecowomanism can positively contribute to the demolition of supremacies and hierarchies that limit environmental movements, and can actively promote earth justice. By adopting an environmental paradigm inspired by the spiritual theology of ecowomanism, which acknowledges the connection between oppression and violence against communities of color, especially women, to the violence and domination of the environment, a more inclusive and effective methodology can be used to solve the problems of social and earth injustices.

Unlike single issue concerns, ecowomanism distinguishes the interconnections of social, political, and environmental injustice. The foundation of ecowomanism is derived from ecofeminism: a philosophical and political movement that combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, but centers religious, theological, and spiritual perspectives of women of color as they confront racism, classism, sexism, and environmental justice. Ecowomanist Melanie L. Harris describes a methodology in which "ecowisdom" is theorized, constructed, and practiced by women of African descent".<sup>1</sup> According to Harris, "ecowisdom" is the notion that "spirit, nature, and humanity are connected in an interdependent web of life in African cosmology".<sup>2</sup> Ecowomanism offers an approach that dismantles historical oppression in race, gender, class, and sexuality, which is related to colonialism and the enslavement of African women. Ecowomanist theorists compare the oppression and violence suffered during the times of slavery and the continual gender and racial violence in the present to the violence suffered by the earth.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 370.

<sup>2</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 381.

<sup>3</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* 490.

Rooted in African cosmologies, experiences, and the relationship that exists between women and nature, a religious connection can be formed between women and the earth. Ecowomanism is useful for black and indigenous women because of its religious pluralism, which redresses the duality of mind-body distinction, human-animal hierarchy, human-land dislocation, and science-religion divide. African and indigenous cosmologies and traditions worship a ‘Spirit’<sup>4</sup>, which is representative of ancestors and resides in living beings (animals, plants, humans) on earth.<sup>5</sup> Ecowomanist activists then use God to empower changes and inspires movements to the environment. Ecowomanism provides women of color the religious, theological, and spiritual foundation in the acknowledgement of the continual injustices in society and in the environment, and provides a platform in which to enforce necessary changes.

The relationship that ecowomanists propose with the environment is informed by the violence they have faced, as they often parallel their own traumatic experiences of violence and oppression to that of the earth. While traditional environmental movements tend to be associated with white liberals, ecowomanism suggests the interconnection between racial, gender, and environmental justice.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, an essential imperative of the ecowomanist theology in helping the environment requires a link to be made between social justice and earth justice.<sup>7</sup> The foundation of the injustice they have faced as women, and primarily women of African descent, is rooted in structural violence. Structural violence is the “physical, psychological, spiritual harm that certain groups of people experience as a result of unequal distribution of power and privilege”.<sup>8</sup> This existed in the form of slavery, during the Civil Rights Movement, and continues to occur today due to gender and class discrimination and bias. This is especially present in the way that these women’s bodies were “violated, raped, and abused by white oppressors functioning according to the logic of domination”<sup>9</sup>.

In Christianity and biblical interpretations, there are contrasting understandings of the intended role for humanity. Specifically, in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the creation stories are interpreted with two differing perspectives of humanity’s purpose: endorsing humanity’s dominion of the earth and its resources, or God giving humanity the responsibility of caring for the earth’s animals and plants. Contradictions of the term ‘dominion’ when referred to as the power that humanity holds over the environment, can shape the way that humanity interacts with the environment. Theologians and environmentalists have grappled with this idea of domination and its implications for the environment, but ecowomanist methodologies suggest that the domination theory supports paradigms of white supremacy and colonialism. A theologian, Thomas Aquinas, supported this idea of domination: humans (specifically men) were created by God as the purpose of creation, where “all lower beings”<sup>10</sup> are expected to fulfill the orders of the beings above them in ranking. Humans are “the end of the whole order of

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<sup>4</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 994.

<sup>5</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 381.

<sup>6</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 432.

<sup>7</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 1012.

<sup>8</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 507.

<sup>9</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 427.

<sup>10</sup> B. Kyle Keltz, “Aquinas and the Problem of No Best World.” *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1082 (2016), p. 511.

generation<sup>11</sup>". In this position, which supports colonialism and domination, all other beings are inferior to man and God's purpose for them is to obey. Ecowomanists critique this perspective as it endorses slavery, as the exploitation of the land for crops paralleled the exploitation of women's bodies. Female slaves had no control over their bodies, nor their roles on the plantation, as many slaves were raped and forced into bearing children, caring for their owners and their children, and lacking any authority over their livelihoods<sup>12</sup>. Ecowomanists, such as Harris, believe that the original environmental movement lacked consideration of this idea of domination when considering environmental justice and equality. In contrasting this to the same Christianity that Aquinas followed, it is argued that "God influences creation, but does not dominate and control creation<sup>13</sup>". There is a notion of stewardship that must be recognized in terms of power, responsibility, and influencers to God and creation. As most environmentalists recognize stewardship as a positive term in which devotion to caring for the environment is prioritized, the term has a contrasting side in which it promotes historic economic pursuits of property and people.<sup>14</sup> It is essential that a steward to both the environment and to God recognizes that all authority, possessions, and salvation are directly from God<sup>15</sup>. The power given (not dominated nor controlled) by God to humanity, cannot be equitable nor repeated to the other creations as to same level. This means that if God cannot dominate over His creations, then His creations should not dominate over the other creations, ultimately as humanity is a steward to God and the environment, and not to each other. This idea alone undermines the entire paradigm of supremacy and Aquinas's conclusion of a hierarchy among God's creations. However, the domination of humanity over the environment is to reflect God's intention of well-being for all His creations, even the plants, mountains, and oceans.<sup>16</sup> It is important to recognize that there is both instrumental and intrinsic value the environment, which is recognized by people's experiences they have in nature and the physical resources humans receive from the land. However, the environment provides more than just experiences and resources to humans; the natural world provides a habitat to all other lifeforms, and symbolizes the resilience and beauty of symbiotic relationships and purpose. There must be a recognition of balance between this all, and not just between humans and the environment, but between different communities of humans. God or Spirit unifies ecowomanists in the fact that God could take the shape of a man, a woman, a mountain, or any other living or non-living thing. Ecowomanist desire to fight the structural violence caused by white supremacy and colonialism by tackling oppression both in society and in the environment, to overcome the literal and metaphorical domination from the past.

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<sup>11</sup> B. Kyle Keltz, "Aquinas and the Problem of No Best World." *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1082 (2016), p. 512.

<sup>12</sup> Dolores S. Williams, "Hagar's Story: A Route to Black Women's Issues". *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. New York: Orbis Books.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, "How Women Relate to the Evils of Nature". *Women and Christianity* (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2010), 51-65.

<sup>14</sup> Kelly S. Johnson, "The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics". Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly S. Johnson, "The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics". Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>16</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, "How Women Relate to the Evils of Nature". *Women and Christianity*.

A new environmental paradigm, which shifts the focus away from the white and dominating perspective, can be inspired by using history and a term known as ‘ecomemory’. Ecowomanists use ecomemory, which argues that the current environmental history and movement is misinformed because it rejects and denies the histories and experiences of Native Americans and African Americans.<sup>17</sup> Ecomemory is formed using experiences from black and African livelihoods, including art and literature, and weaving it into history and its complete role in the present environmental movement.<sup>18</sup> Ecomemory comes with the power of recognizing experience, and giving power to voices and people who have been silenced in the past. Ecowomanism relies on women of African and indigenous descent to return to their communal sense of belonging and connection to the environment, which may help heal the damages done by structural violence and white supremacy<sup>19</sup>. Giving power to these voices can provide a form of empowerment for groups of women and find a sense of recovery and identifying the problems that are usually forgotten in these modern times. Using ecomemory is a form of unification and allows for empowerment to create a new environmental paradigm that honors the experience of all humans, regardless of race, class, and gender. It is essential to rewrite these histories and acknowledge memories because these stories “can be told another way... then be included into the discourse as resource and codeterminer of actions and strategies”.<sup>20</sup> These experiences that are often left out of textbooks, lectures, curriculum, and the news could help provide knowledge of a more inclusive movement that offers relief and recovery to women who have been left out of history.

Environmental stewardship and motivation of protection can be found in religious praxis. Ecowomanism goes beyond a literal connection that women may have with the environment, and avoids the stereotype that women have a stronger relationship to the earth than men do. Therefore, a goal of ecowomanism is to reconnect women with their roots and provide a reflection of cultural experience, and connect it to problems of justice, for further empowerment and changes into society. Harris uses ecomemory and an ethical earth mandate to explain that women have an opportunity to cherish and care for the environment, which can be found in Christian practices and its worship of the Spirit. Harris argues that the earth mandate of ecowomanism parallels all religious duties of stewardship and emphasizes religious pluralism when it comes to honoring of the earth through spirituality, which offers a further connection between all religions.<sup>21</sup> However, it is important to acknowledge what Harris means when she uses the terms ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’: Harris claims, “spirituality is an acknowledged relationship with the divine/transpersonal/cosmic/invisible realm, while religion is a culturally organized framework for experiencing that relationship”.<sup>22</sup> It can be inferred that using religion when it comes to ecowomanist thought could provide too much structure and framework for practices and worship, because religion is a structured set of beliefs, and ecowomanism tends to acknowledge religious pluralism. This could be why Spirit is acknowledged more than God or

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<sup>17</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 626.

<sup>19</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 608.

<sup>20</sup> Emilie M. Townes, “The Womanist Dancing Mind: Cavorting with Culture and Evil”.

*Womanist Ethics*.

<sup>21</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 328.

<sup>22</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 1769.

the Creator when explaining ecowomanist relationships between the environment and humans, because spirituality offers more freedom and personifies aspects of Earth to better relate to those who worship. Therefore, ecowomanism offers an opportunity for women to find a commonality of their affection for the environment, and provides a unique way for women of different religious practices and identities to reveal the sacredness of the earth.

Understanding African cosmologies can help provide information on what the basis of care and stewardship is for a new environmental movement, which can help shift the focus from a white-dominant environmental narrative. African cosmologies provide an insight on ideas that have formed modern ecowomanist thought, as it resonated with slaves and empowered those involved in the Civil Rights Movement. An essential belief in African cosmology, which can and should be applied in a new environmental movement, suggests that a person's connection with nature is representative of their connection with themselves and their creator.<sup>23</sup> Having this mystical respect and devotion to yourself, which is a creation, can shape the way that you may have a devotion to other creations. Within black cosmologies, there is a "unified relationship between body, soul and creation"<sup>24</sup> which reinforces that within the acknowledgement of the earth and the living creatures as other creations, there is a confirmation of interconnection between all living things, especially between humans, the environment, and realms of spirit and/or religious praxis<sup>25</sup>. Humans are inadvertently related to one another, and same with all other creations, as ordered by God. This is the reason for diversity not only among the animal world, but the human world itself. Loving God (or Spirit) and loving nature cannot be separated or disconnected, which is why ecowomanist thought relies heavily on the spiritual and physical connection that is present between humans and the environment. Ecowomanists want to ensure that not only humans, but all creatures, should be treated more equally and respectfully, as a person's relationship with the environment is comparable to their relationship with other humans. Therefore, earth justice is social justice. This is rooted in the idea that "being accountable for and to the earth is a more imperative for one operating within an understanding that the earth, nature, divinity, and humanity are interrelated".<sup>26</sup> To connect this idea to a solidified version of religious praxis, it is essential for Christians (who ecowomanists might identify themselves as) that God's love is for the people of the land, and for the land itself, which implies the land having its own right.<sup>27</sup> In referring to Genesis 2, it is important to recognize that animals were also created in the same likeness of humans, and are equal to God's given right and power<sup>28</sup>. Looking to varying aspects of spirituality and religion can provide answers to approach different activism opportunities against injustice to women, communities of color, and the environment. To help fight against these injustices that have been done to the earth and to underrepresented people, there must be recognition of what has caused these disparities.

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<sup>23</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 1821.

<sup>24</sup> Emilie M. Townes, "To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in PostModern Refraction". *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*.

<sup>25</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2516.

<sup>26</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 1569.

<sup>27</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, "How Women Relate to the Evils of Nature", *Women and Christianity*.

<sup>28</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, "How Women Relate to the Evils of Nature", *Women and Christianity*.

Ecowomanism suggests that analyzing the failures of the original environmental movement, in the way that it lacks representation from indigenous, African or African-descent, or connections to religion, can provide a more inclusive solution to solving the problems of racism as it relates to problems caused by climate change.

Colonialization is often left out of a traditional environmental movement, due to the desensitization of its presence in white society. Addressing the degradation that is rooted in the problems caused by colonialization can help distinguish a more inclusive movement, that addresses the problems and fixes them. Harris claims that “colonization is one of the reasons for climate injustice”.<sup>29</sup> This theory unfortunately remains ever present in society today, especially when it comes to legislation and policy regarding the environment and equal rights. Domination of land and other humans can take the form of supremacy, patriarchal regimes of power, and violence against women. Racism, classism, and oppressions against sexuality are all related to the theory of dominion: that a specific human (which is often male, heterosexual, and white) is the superior being. This can then be related to human’s relationship with the environment, in the form that these “superior” beings are designed to have more control, better status, and be more important than the other life forms on earth. This idea of hierarchy is left out of the environmental movement, in the way that finding solutions to climate injustice is trying to reverse the damage, and not trying to determine who and what is suffering, and why. This can be explained in what Harris refers to as “colonial ecology”<sup>30</sup>, which is the critique of the usual “environmental approaches that ignore the history of environmental justice work and refuses to acknowledge the impact of white supremacy on the development of the current environmental movement”<sup>31</sup>. Structural violence was inspired by colonialist methods, especially in relation to the environment as it paralleled the violence that has occurred against women. Capitalist endeavors of the environment and its resources is a modern-day form of colonialism of the land. Ecowomanists argue that the environmental movement was constructed based on white ideologies of how the land should be used, based on their own cultural backgrounds and lifestyles<sup>32</sup>. This is where the idea of preservation and conservation came into play, as people became more concerned about the amount of natural resources available for economic profit and capitalist prosperities, more so than the degradation of the environment and what it means for people’s cultures, well-beings, and livelihoods. Therefore, the environmental movement became solely focused on resource management and depletion, which can be seen in the goals of agencies such as the National Park Service and the National Forest Service. However, a new environmental paradigm, which is not only focused on primarily the preservation of the environment as though that were disguisable from economic, racial, or gender justice, can provide a better discourse for a healthier future for all creations.

By adopting a new environmental paradigm, which attacks the idea of colonial ecology and acknowledges the connection between oppression and violence against communities of color to the violence and domination of the environment, a more inclusive and effective methodology can be used to solve the problems of social and earth injustices. Using “components of

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<sup>29</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 1375.

<sup>30</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 414.

<sup>31</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 404.

<sup>32</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 867.



autonomy, land rights, along with civil or human rights”<sup>33</sup> can provide a way for African Americans and indigenous populations to become centered, rather than marginalized, in this new movement. Uncovering the problematic history of white supremacy as it relates to both the environment and to humans can provide an entry point that links earth justice to social justice. Fighting for a more considerate and equal environment, one that isn’t exploited for its resources, comes with responsibilities that all people must realize. Those that follow discourses such as ecowomanism can help provide opportunities that show the interconnection between the natural world and humans, and proves how the answer to solve both earth and/or climate justice, along with social justice, is dismantling the supremacies and oppressions that come with a colonialist view of the world. Ecowomanist thought is predominately post-colonial as it is paralleled with the resistance of the white, male, heterosexual domination of the political, economic, and ecological world. Through acknowledging the experiences of those who have been silenced in the past, who have been physically and spiritually violated by endeavors of capitalism and colonialism, it can be concluded that climate change and environmental degradation is inextricable from racism, classism, and sexism.

At this point in our earth’s history, we no longer have a choice to deny the connection between humans and nature. As stewards of the environment and potentially of a creator, whoever or whatever that may be, we must break the cycle of domination in society and in the environment. We must use theologies, such as ecowomanism, to mesh ideas from multiple cosmologies, religions, spiritualities, and geographies, to determine a better solution for climate injustices. Discourses taught in the earth science fields must provide a more inclusive educative experience that incorporates indigenous and African thought and perspectives. Paralleling the recognition of environmental activism, the role and leadership of women must be included in the fight for justice. It is imperative to recognize that “there is no such things as ‘universal’ women’s experience”<sup>34</sup>, because history often tries to integrate these memories and experiences into one narrative. By establishing self-love and a strong self-image, women of color can identify themselves as “full humans”<sup>35</sup> and equal creations of God, and have an essential role in the fight against injustice. This involves intrareligious and cross-cultural dialogue, which can be an effective methodology in beginning to tackle the oppression and exploitation from colonialism to women and the environment. Acknowledging the histories, memories, and experiences of women who have been left out of dominating narratives is the first step in creating an environmental movement that also tackles oppressions of race, gender, and class discrimination.

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<sup>33</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 876.

<sup>34</sup> Madipoane J. Masenya, “African Womanist Hermeneutics: A Suppressed Voice from South Africa Speaks”. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 1. Indiana University Press, 1995.

<sup>35</sup> Madipoane J. Masenya, “African Womanist Hermeneutics: A Suppressed Voice from South Africa Speaks”. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 1. Indiana University Press, 1995.

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