

12-13-2018

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## Recommended Citation

Raya, Ariana. "Paper: An Ecowomanist View on the Dakota Access Pipeline" (2018). *Womanist Ethics*.  
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An Ecowomanist View on the Dakota Access Pipeline

Ariana Raya  
December 13, 2018

Emilie M. Townes describes toxic waste sites as the “lynching of a whole people.”<sup>1</sup> This is because hazardous waste sites disproportionately exist near communities of poor and ethnic minorities. Often, the businesses putting these sites in place point to economic growth as a benefit for the location. The government says that 10,000 jobs were created through the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline.<sup>2</sup> But at what cost? This does not justify putting the water supply, and therefore the lives, of the Sioux at risk. The Dakota Access Pipeline, also known as DAPL, was built in 2017 and transports crude oil underneath the Missouri River.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will introduce ecofeminist and ecowomanist philosophies, provide a brief historical background of African American and Native American communities, explain the dangers of the pipeline, and finally, offer constructive alternatives.

Examining this discourse through the lens of ecofeminism and ecowomanism can help us gain a deeper understanding of how the operation of the pipeline is harmful. Ecofeminism, being the predecessor to ecowomanism, has a heavy influence on ecowomanism. There are three main branches of ecofeminist philosophy. The first branch, liberal ecofeminism, calls for political reform and establishing environmentally conscious regulations and laws. The second branch, radical ecofeminism, draws comparisons between women and nature. The third branch, socialist ecofeminism, views capitalism as the reason behind gender inequality and environmental

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<sup>1</sup> Emilie M. Townes, “To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie G. Cannon and Angela D. Sims. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 190.

<sup>2</sup> "The Dakota Access Pipeline Keeps America Moving Efficiently and in an Environmentally Safe Manner." Dakota Access Pipeline Facts, accessed October 24, 2018, <https://daplpipelinefacts.com/about-the-dakota-access-pipeline/>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Dakota Access Pipeline Keeps America Moving Efficiently and in an Environmentally Safe Manner."

injustice, with social revolution being the solution. All three critique patriarchal structures.<sup>4</sup>

However, while ecofeminism is the intersection of environmental justice with traditional feminism, ecowomanism is even more inclusive, which I explain in more detail below.

To appreciate the connection womanism has with the Dakota Access Pipeline, we must first understand the concepts of womanism. There are multiple people who contributed to the foundation of womanist thinking. Here I will introduce three—one African scholar, one Africana studies scholar, and one African American scholar. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi is a Nigerian author whose works helped make it more acceptable for African women to write about their personal experiences.<sup>5</sup> The validation of experience as a source of knowledge is one of the central tenets of womanism.<sup>6</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems is an Africana studies scholar who worked on naming characteristics that would help the community to run smoothly. These are values that continue to be important to womanism, such as: self-definer, strong, whole, respected, spiritual, mothering, and nurturing.<sup>7</sup> Alice Walker is an African American author whose definition of womanism is widely referenced today. In her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Walker defines womanism as:

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up.

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<sup>4</sup> Melanie L. Harris. "Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion, and the Environment," *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 3 (2016): 32. Doi: 10.1080/00064246.2016.1188354.

<sup>5</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 129.

<sup>6</sup> Harris. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Harris. 129-130.

Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.<sup>8</sup>

In her definition, particularly the third point, we see a strong connection between nature (“loves the moon”, humanity (“loves music, loves dance”), and spirituality (“loves the Spirit”). Around the same time she wrote this definition, her novel *The Color Purple* was published. In this novel is the line, “My first step away from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people.”<sup>9</sup> Here, Walker articulates the significance of nature in the worldview that white feminism did not include.

In “Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion, and the Environment,” Melanie L. Harris explains that ecowomanism is the intersection of environmental justice and race-class-gender analysis. Unlike the more generalized environmental justice crusade, ecowomanism functions as a sort of counternarrative—it emphasizes the perspectives of women of color.<sup>10</sup> Here we see

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<sup>8</sup> Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Alice Walker. *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Harris. "Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion, and the Environment," 28.

again the validation of experience as a source of knowledge. Due to their belief that humanity, nature, and spirituality are all interconnected, both African and Native American communities are empathetic toward the well being of the earth. Therefore, honoring the earth (even the inanimate parts!) is as important as honoring the self or another member of the community. The earth is seen as sacred and in harmony with people. This is in contrast to the hierarchical notion that humans have dominion over nature.<sup>11</sup> The mothering and nurturing values that Hudson-Weems advocated for apply to the environment as much as it would a human being.

There are many parallels in the oppressions that African Americans and Native Americans have faced. In “To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction”, Townes describes the history of oppression that black people endured even after slavery had fallen out of practice in the north.<sup>12</sup> Their freedom was limited—they had certain legal rights, yet were viewed as inferior to white people. Similarly, Native Americans had limited freedom and even fewer rights. They were not allowed to become US citizens until the 1920s and could not vote until the 1940s.<sup>13</sup> Both groups also faced mob violence and lynching. Townes also discusses how federal housing policies kept the black community segregated from the white community. Racism in housing markets, combined with the fact that black workers generally had lower incomes than their white counterparts, caused a concentration of black

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<sup>11</sup> Harris. "Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion, and the Environment," 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> Townes, “To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction,” 186-187.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Faville. "A Civil Rights History: Native Americans," accessed October 24, 2018, <http://knightpoliticalreporting.syr.edu/?civilhistoryessays=a-civil-rights-history-native-americans>.

people in urban and rural areas while the white middle class settled in suburbs.<sup>14</sup> For Native Americans, segregation is even more pronounced. They were forced by the US government out of their homes and onto designated reservations: crowded plots of often barren land. Even today, poverty rates remain extraordinarily high in Native American communities.<sup>15</sup>

In light of this historical context, we can see that the Dakota Access Pipeline is a modern continuation of the unjust treatment of Native Americans. The inhabitants of Standing Rock were never consulted about the construction of the pipeline. While it does not cross their reservation, it does cross sacred burial grounds.<sup>16</sup> It also poses a threat in that it could contaminate Lake Oahe, a large reservoir on the Missouri River and the tribe's main water supply. Energy Transfer Partners, the company that developed DAPL, claim it is engineered to be as safe as possible<sup>17</sup>; however, the concern is that if (or more likely *when*) something goes wrong, an oil leak could have dire toxic effects. For the executives behind the Dakota Access Pipeline, both nature and the tribal community are not much more than resources to impose their financially lucrative

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<sup>14</sup> Townes, "To Be Called Beloved: Womanist Ontology in Postmodern Refraction," 193.

<sup>15</sup> Dedrick Asante-Muhammad, "Beyond Standing Rock: The Native American Economic Experience," The Huffington Post, accessed December 09, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/beyond-standing-rock-the-native-american-economic\\_us\\_58b6e21de4b0e5fdf619792b](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/beyond-standing-rock-the-native-american-economic_us_58b6e21de4b0e5fdf619792b).

<sup>16</sup> Robinson Meyer, "The Law Behind the Dakota Access Pipeline Disaster," The Atlantic, accessed October 24, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/dapl-dakota-sitting-rock-sioux/499178/>.

<sup>17</sup> Brigham A. McCown, "What Ever Happened To The Dakota Access Pipeline?" Forbes, accessed October 24, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brighammccown/2018/06/04/what-ever-happened-to-the-dakota-access-pipeline/>.

practices on. An oil leak in the pipeline would be concerning for business reasons, not out of compassion for the ground it runs through or the people it affects.

The Dakota Access Pipeline opposes the ecowomanist value of wholeness. To the government, the pipeline is an impersonal project. As Harris notes about Delores S. Williams' essay, "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies,": "Williams uncovers parallels between acts of violence against the earth and systemic patterns of violent experience in the historical lives of women of African descent."<sup>18</sup> The land is seen as property in the same way that people of color have been seen in the past. If we are to subscribe to the ecowomanist vision of unity in all things, this is a mistake. The separation of human activity from Lake Oahe is not possible. It is a source of life—to the Sioux, to animals that live in the water, to the earth itself. Attempts to compartmentalize these things results in destruction.

As a society, we would do well to drastically reduce our dependency on fossil fuels and turn toward clean energy. Doing so would eliminate the risks that come with transporting oil entirely. However, corporations choose not to switch from fossil fuels because of the monetary incentives. This is why environmentally conscious regulations are necessary. If no one holds corporations accountable, they will not change on their own volition. Alternatives do exist: solar energy, wind energy, water energy, geothermal energy, and bioenergy are available sources listed on the Department of Energy's Clean Energy page.<sup>19</sup> These are much more ethically sound options compared to crude oil. Curiously, nuclear power was recently added to this list. Using the Wayback Machine, I determined that the Department of Energy webpage was altered to

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<sup>18</sup> Harris, "Ecowomanism: Black Women, Religion, and the Environment," 34-35.

<sup>19</sup> "Clean Energy," Department of Energy, accessed October 24, 2018, <https://www.energy.gov/science-innovation/clean-energy>.

include nuclear power sometime between September 14th, 2017 and October 18th, 2017.<sup>20</sup> We can only speculate as to why the current administration made this change.

In conclusion, the US government's decision to operate the Dakota Access Pipeline is morally wrong because of its inherent risks to the Standing Rock Sioux tribal community and its detrimental effects on the environment. Ecowomanism and ecofeminism provide interdisciplinary discourses that are helpful in analyzing why that is. Further research into ecowomanism is needed if we are going to make efforts to embrace constructive alternatives to environmental racism.

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<sup>20</sup> "Wayback Machine," accessed November 29th, 2018, [https://web.archive.org/web/20170101000000\\*/https://energy.gov/science-innovation/clean-energy](https://web.archive.org/web/20170101000000*/https://energy.gov/science-innovation/clean-energy).

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