

## Melanie L. Harris, Texas Christian University



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*(Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), Harris has also published widely in the area of ecowomanism. She is the author of several scholarly articles, including “African American Religion and the Environment”; “Keeping the Light: Women of Faith, Scholarship, and Activism”; “Teaching Ecojustice: Womanist Justice and Environmental Concern”; and “Saving the Self: Womanist Soteriology and the Gospel of Mary.” She is currently writing two books engaging global perspectives on ecowomanism.*

The image of black women’s bodies stretched along roads in North Carolina to block toxic waste dump trucks from carrying hazardous soil into their gardens stays with me each time I teach environmental ethics. As James Cone reminds us in his essay “Whose Earth Is it Anyway?,” these brave black churchwomen began a protest against soil contamination in Warren County in 1982. The protest would attract thousands to the streets and land hundreds in jail. While jail time is all too familiar to those engaged in justice movements in the South, it is important to remember that fighting for justice often has a cost. Holding up the banner for racial, economic, gender, sexual, and earth justice is a complex job that can leave marks — even in the college classroom.

Raising awareness of environmental concerns in the midst of other more human-to-human justice issues can be a challenge with my students in Texas. In a state where the common consumerist practice of driving large trucks dependent on fossil fuels is celebrated as a part of the culture, it isn’t surprising that finding practical strategies for environmental sustainability isn’t always a priority. Still, there are some positive signs — recycling bins on campus, students’ campaigns against overwatering the school lawn, and an impressive bike-and-ride program. Yet like most colleges and universities around the country, we could do more to move towards environmental sustainability on campus and beyond.

As a professor of ethics, African and African-American religion, and environmental justice, I teach students to critically understand the connections between racial, economic, gender,

sexual, and earth justice issues. Thinking about the host of ethical dilemmas that surrounded the Warren County protest scene and imagining what the voices of those strong-lunged black churchwomen sounded like, I encourage students to probe more deeply into the ethical questions posed by the hypothetical bystanders looking upon those protestors. “The Civil Rights Movement is over. So why this act for justice now?” “What in the world are these black churchwomen doing out here protesting violence against the earth when they could be standing up for gender equality, women’s rights, an end to mass incarceration, more peaceful conditions for women and children on the planet, and greater racial, sexual, and economic justice?”

### Understanding Womanist and Ecowomanist Perspectives

Womanist perspectives claim *all* these issues as central theological and ethical concerns for black women living on and with the earth. A term first coined by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Alice Walker in her first nonfiction collection, *In Search of Our*

*Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*

(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1983), womanism expresses a deep “commitment to survival and wholeness.” Walker writes in a variety of genres — as a human rights, social justice, and environmental activist. Since the 1980s, many African-American women scholars and other scholars of color have adopted Walker’s four-part definition of Womanism as a theoretical framework to advance and validate their theological voices and concerns. Womanism emerged as a perspective that examines racial justice together with gender, economic, and sexual justice — and sets these issues in conversation with the actual everyday-life experiences of women of African descent living with and across the planet.

For Womanists, surviving and thriving in wholeness on the planet doesn’t just refer to human-to-human encounters. It also means engaging all of earth as community. In my essay “Alice Walker and the Emergence of Ecowomanist Spirituality,” I define ecowomanism as “an approach to environmental ethics that centers the perspectives, theoethical analysis, and life experiences of women of color, specifically women of African descent, giving voice to their views and solutions to environmental problems.” (*Spirit and Nature: The Study of Christian Spirituality in a Time of Ecological Urgency*, ed. Timothy Hessel-Robinson and Ray Maria McNamara, Pickwick Publications, 2011: 224). An ecowomanist approach centers the moral imperatives of race, class, gender, and sexual justice, along with justice concerns, for and with the earth.

Many Womanist perspectives embody a worldview that is inclusive of a moral imperative for earth justice. Some have been influenced by an African cosmological perspective that asserts the interconnectedness of all beings in creation and emphasizes a connection between the natural environment, human life, and the spiritual realm(s). Layli Maparyan defines ecowomanism as “a Womanist approach to ecological and environmental issues predicated

upon the Womanist triadic concern with human beings, nature, and the spirit world simultaneously.” (Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, Routledge, 2011: 278).

### **Black Women’s Bodies and the Body of Earth**

Womanists also link the treatment of the bodies of enslaved black women in the United States and across the diaspora with the harsh treatment of the body of the earth. In her essay “Sin, Nature, and Black Women’s Bodies,” Delores S. Williams explains that there is a “relation between the defilement of earth’s body, and the defilement of black women’s bodies.” (*Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams, New York: Continuum, 2007: 24). She argues that the logic of domination, patriarchy, and a culture of violence against the feminine systematically “beat down” on the bodies, souls, and minds of black women and upon the earth.

Williams names the systematic oppression of black women and the earth as sin. Her use of theological language highlights the moral stakes of environmental racism and accentuates the religious significance of the justice concerns of black women. Drawing a parallel between strip-mining and the constant rape and sexual violence enacted upon the bodies of enslaved black women, Williams asserts that the sin of defilement “manifests itself in human attacks upon creation so as to ravish, violate, and destroy creation, to exploit and control the production and reproduction capacities of nature, to destroy the unity in nature’s placements, to obliterate the spirit of the created.” (Ibid., 25)

### **Teaching Environmental Racism in Womanist Perspective**

In the classroom, I often couple Williams’s essay with other case studies of environmental racism to help students make interdisciplinary connections between ecology, theology, ethics, and religion. I also place Larry Rasmussen’s *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Orbis Books, 1997) in conversation with books by ecoliterary writers, such as Alice Walker’s

*The Color Purple* (1982). Through these pairings, I aim to remind students that the earth is one small “dot” within a vast universe and that we humans are in fact siblings to a whole host of other planetary beings. It is not enough, I find, to teach students simply about the scientific facts of climate change or global warming. Rather, when teaching environmental ethics, I try to point to the larger issues of our relationship with the planet, engage mythical and religious stories of origin, and study practical strategies of earth justice.

Integrating race, class, gender, and sexual justice with environmental concern has a deep impact on environmental ethics. It pushes back against some foundational premises and

policies that have shaped preservationist and conservationist approaches to caring for the planet. Ecological perspectives that don't take environmental racism into consideration lose ground in the environmental justice movement, because they disconnect the movement for earth care from other justice-related issues. Ecowomanist perspectives seek to connect justice issues.

### **Crafting Earth Covenants**

After we study the ecojustice Earth Charter and read selections from Rasmussen's *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*

, I ask students to write their own earth covenants. Working in small groups, students name five important themes in earth justice-keeping expressed in the readings and reflect on the following questions as they develop their own earth covenant. Questions for reflection include:

- When did I first discover nature?
- How does my own social location (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, geographical point of origin, and communal/historical memory) engage or highlight particular aspects of environmental concern for me?
- What is my relationship to/with the earth?
- What are some of my religious views, values, and beliefs about my relationship to nature?

Following this small group exercise, students create a one-sentence thesis, motto, phrase, ritual, or poem that captures the essence of their covenant. By moving from theoretical understandings of ecojustice to personal engagement, the exercise invites students to learn through personal reflection and hands-on practice.

### **Ritual and Ecowomanist Pedagogy**

I also use ritual in the classroom to engage alternative learning styles. In one ritual, I invite the learning community to gather in a space in nature — outside the classroom on campus or in a nearby park. I seek out a space where there is the obvious presence of nature, such as a space where trees stand or the sky is openly visible. Here, I invite participants to “feel” or “touch” the earth. I often encourage students to take their shoes off and walk barefoot on the grass, gather around and feel the trunk of a tree, study a fallen leaf, or close their eyes and be intentional about listening for the wind or feeling the breeze.

Once each participant has the opportunity to connect with earth, we gather in a circle. The

following poem I wrote is read for reflection:

*You are deeply rooted in the Earth.  
Her Amazing Grace flows through you.  
Her Divine Breath breathes through you.  
As wide as rivers run, and as far as oceans go —  
You are deeply one with Earth Community.  
You are rooted in the Earth, and Earth is rooted in you.*

After a quiet moment of reflection, students discuss in pairs how their own religious perspective, social location, and sense of environmental connection is expressed (or not) through the poem.

We come back into a circle formation, using the following three-step litany to close the ritual. As the students speak the words below, I first ask them to recall particular themes they have engaged in the readings and to consider how their own social location connects to an aspect of ecojustice. Second, I invite students to speak these words to themselves and to each other as they practice a deep embodiment of respect for one another, recalling that we are all “earthlings” — beings all connected in the earth community. Finally, I ask students to think critically, connect, or “commune” with nature while repeating the following verses:

*I honor you.  
I honor the Earth.  
And I happily join you in the moves towards ecojustice.*