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Repurposing Queens:
Excavating a Black Feminist Eco-Ethic in a Time of Ecological Peril

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ABSTRACT

"Repurposing Queens: Excavating a Black Feminist Eco-ethic in a Time of Ecological Peril," articulates how Black feminist theories of race, gender, and science critique both conservative and liberal trends in environmentalism and environmental studies. The project is transnational in scope in that it analyzes figures/objects from the United States and Kenya by engaging theories and discourses developed across the African diaspora. The project also focuses on the Modern Environmental Movement period (running from the inaugural "Earth Day" in 1970 to the present) in order directly confront how contemporary Western cultural biases limit the political impact of environmentalism and the intellectual reach of environmental studies. I confront these limitations through an interdisciplinary exploration of four Black women ecoactivists through the race, gender, and class-focused framework of Black feminist studies. Each chapter focuses primarily on one of the forward thinking and vigilant "Queens" centered in "Repurposing Queens" (so named to emphasize their roles as vanguards and leaders in environmental discourse). These figures include Hazel Johnson (widely recognized as the "Mother" of the environmental justice movement and founder of pre-eminent environmental justice organization People for Community Recovery); science fiction author and theorist Octavia Butler; contemporary visual artist Wangechi Mutu; and Nobel Peace Prize winning Dr. Wangari Maathai of the Green Belt Movement.

Using their writings, art, and advocacy, I argue that they "repurpose" ecological wounds wrought by ongoing colonial and state violence—wounds such as deforestation in Kenya or the unethical citing of waste facilities in Black communities in Chicago. Despite their entanglement in the grips of (post) colonialism's raced, gendered, and classed toxicities; I contend that their aesthetic methods of "repurposing" enable them to empower themselves and their communities. Moreover, "Repurposing Queens" positions the cultural productions of these marginalized communities as indispensable to better conceptualizations of our ecologically degraded present as well as ethical discussions of more sustainable futures.

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DEDICATION

To my highest self—for quieting the noise of my ego's imposter syndrome and always lighting my way back to the purpose behind my work. And to my ancestors—recent and ancient—who provided a beautiful and bountiful foundation upon which I could build in this lifetime.

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INTRODUCTION

Given the widespread calls for more diversity and inclusion within the environmental humanities, the emergence of environmental justice studies, and the increasing legibility of a genealogy of Black political ecology scholarship, scholars have begun to pay more attention to the processes by which anti-Black violence, hierarchies of gender, and (post) coloniality co-constitute and mediate the instability of global ecosystems. My dissertation, "Repurposing Queens: Excavating a Black Feminist Ecoethic in a Time of Ecological Peril," has grown out of this long-nursed interest and articulates the ways race, gender, and decoloniality reconfigure traditional perspectives in the environmental humanities.

My project seeks to explore what emerges when we juxtapose the concerns of black feminist and environmental humanist discourse through an examination of four black-fem ecoactivists. These forward thinking and vigilant ecoactivists include Hazel Johnson (widely considered the "Mother" of the environmental justice movement and founder of pre-eminent environmental justice organization People for Community Recovery); science fiction author and theorist Octavia Butler; contemporary visual artist Wangechi Mutu; and Nobel Peace Prize winning scientist and environmental activist Wangari Maathai. I use their writings, art, and advocacy to show how they repurpose ecological wounds wrought by extant colonial and state violence to empower themselves and their communities. In each chapter, I focus on one 'Queen,' but the arguments present for one are typically very relevant to the work and/or impact of the others. Despite their working in different mediums, using different means, and with varying access to resources, a Black feminist ecoethic is what connects them. Relying on a pre-existing theoretical framework that privileged nationality, geographical region, age, ethnic background, or discipline/profession would have been insufficient for carrying out an investigation of this nature. Therefore, my project required that I build an original interdisciplinary framework that

both balanced ecocriticism and black feminist theory. Building and implementing this framework allowed me to most fully excavate the through-lines that animate the motivations and impact of Johnson, Butler, Maathai, and Mutu's work and practices.

Key Terms, Concepts, and Definitions

"Repurposing Queens" argues that black-fem writing, art, and activism maintains a varied yet consistent critique of an environmentally degrading colonial earth ethic rooted in anti-blackness, anti-femininity, and capitalist exploitation. Developing my central argument as well as the theoretical framework that led to it required that I use specific key terms and concepts that spoke to the shared preoccupations between black feminist discourses and ecocritical discourses.

Throughout my dissertation I'll often use the term *black-fem* in addition to "black woman" or "black female" which appears much more frequently in the black feminist intellectual tradition. As a singular compound noun, the first word "black" refers to an ontological marker of abjection that imbues humans, geographies, and other forms of materials with a bio/necro political function that both stabilizes the socio-political-economic order and exceeds the containment of that order's logics. The second word "fem" is rooted in a slightly less theoretical and more utilitarian queer-community based definition of "femme" that describes "1) a person who expresses and/or identifies with femininity 2) a community label for people who identify with femininity specifically through a queer and/or politically radical and/or subversive context and/or 3) a feminine person of any gender/sex."[1] My use of the term *black-fem* throughout this project is twofold. First, it is meant to refer to a variety of "affectable"

[1] (Stringer)

black subjectivities forged through the connective tissue of cisheteropatriarchy.[2] Second, the term is meant to mark the liminal spaces between the *distinct*—not conflated, categories of black woman, black female, and black (queer) femme.[3] In the readings that follow, I offer this language to critique the assumed central subject of black feminism—the black (heteronormative, homonormative, and/or heterosexual woman). Furthermore, I aim to mark and consider the intricacies of a broader range of feminine subjectivities with which a black feminist ecoethic is necessarily concerned as they struggle against various manifestations of a colonial earth ethic.

If a Black feminist eco-ethics is the hero of this project, a colonial earth ethic is surely the antagonist. A *colonial earth ethic* and/or *colonial earth ethics* describes practices, value systems, and ways of being that justify and/ or facilitate: taking action ("environmental" or otherwise) while armed with *ignorance* about local ecosystems; willingness to enact or ignore the intrinsic violences that accompany forced displacement of indigenous people, plants, and other materials; violations (including land theft) obscured by constantly shifting notions of "legality;" and the paradoxical hunger for ecological conditions limited by late capitalism's reliance on notions of scarcity, hoarding, and excessive consumption.

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[2] See Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[3] The term "black-fem" has been significantly influenced by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's offerings throughout the Black Feminist Futures Symposium conference at Northwestern University (2016), where she advanced several critiques of the under-theorizations and imprecise conceptualizations of *black queer/femme-ness* within black studies and queer-of-color critique. Additionally, the term "black-fem" materialized as a result of several conversations with my colleague Brittnay L. Proctor—conversations that have challenged my (re) formulations of gendered language. See Proctor's theorization of "the black feminine bottom." Further, for a discussion of the paradoxes, erasures, and necessities of "femme-visibility" see Amber Jamilla Musser's "Queering the Pinup History, Femmes, and Brooklyn," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 55–80.

A *Black feminist eco-ethic* and/or *black feminist eco-ethics*, then, are descriptors meant to capture 1) black-fem quotidian practices of decolonial insurgency (such as Black mothering, erotics, spirituality, and acts of empathy) and 2) alternative conceptualizations of ecological relationality irreducible to and often illegible under a colonial earth ethic, even as those conceptions are entangled in the grips of raced, gendered, and classed toxicities. Relatedly, the titular concept, *repurposing*, describes both a skill-set and an aesthetic method by which black-fem ecoactivists (working in whatever realms) rearrange and remake extant (material and cultural) colonial structures that regulate and ecologically degrade our present world. The inspiration for the concept draws, in part from Wangechi Mutu. When questioned about the motivations behind some of her collaborative creative work she explains: "We're (Wangechi and Santigold) both repurposing queens. We just love to take things, rework them, and then just put it in front of people, and they see it as if they've never seen it before. And it becomes the language with which to finally understand something they've never understood."(Bloomberg)

Sometimes repurposing is mentioned explicitly throughout my chapters, while other times it is implicitly present in my reading and analyses. In is important to note that throughout my dissertation whether explicit or implicit, I argue that repurposing is something all the ecoactivists/Queens master in their respective arenas. It is a fundamental method/skill set necessary for black-fems enacting black feminist ecoethics as they operate under, through, alongside, and in opposition to the colonial earth ethic that presently maintains a hegemonic control over the earth.

<u>But why Black feminism?</u>

Conventional wisdom suggests that environmental issues and social justice issues operate independently of each other. This line of reasoning underpins the assumption that

Black communities lack ecological awareness or that environmental issues remain irrelevant to the lives and concerns of Black communities. These reductive logics have many roots, one stemming from the ways in which strict disciplinary divisions have shaped (post) colonial knowledge production in the West. Within the record of Black feminist art, theory, and activism however, these epistemological reductions and divisions come undone as themes of class, race, gender, sexuality, and ecological relationality interweave. To that end, my dissertation engages literary criticism, visual analysis, and political theory to elucidate how colonialism and Western epistemologies both produce and obscure the interconnections and co-constitution of anti-Black violence, gender inequality, and environmental degradation.

In the face of intensifying climate change, "Repurposing Queens" argues and demonstrates the ways that Black feminist writing, art, and theory maintains a varied yet consistent critique of an environmentally degrading colonial world order rooted in racism, sexism, and capitalist exploitation. Black feminist theory has long offered indispensable theorizations of social injustice—chief among them "intersectionality" as a key analytic for understanding identity and material inequality. Black feminism conceptualizes the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender oppression and environmental studies insists on interconnectivity as central to a critique of our current anthropocentric (i.e. human-centered) exploitative uses of our physical environments. Yet environmental humanist scholars have been slow (or immobile) in their attempts to recognize Black feminist contributions to understandings of nature and ecology.

Now, more than ever before, mainstream media and the general public are paying attention to the environment and the ways our present world is deeply vulnerable to toxicity, pollution, and other forms of earthly harm. Ecocriticism, environmental justice studies, and the broader environmental humanities have expanded our ideas of how disciplines outside the hard

sciences cultivate crucial ecological knowledge and how we make sense of our relationship to nature. Unfortunately, these efforts to disrupt and thwart environmental degradation are governed and therefore undercut by impoverished colonial logics. For example, several powerful environmental organizations make calls in their mission statements and press releases for the belated inclusion of *some* gendered, raced, and indigenous bodies and cultural practices into their mostly white and wealthy offices and efforts. They do not, however, challenge the uneven funneling of the earth's material resources to primarily white and wealthy people and communities. If white supremacy, coloniality, and capitalism as intertwined phenomena cause ecological peril, we need alternative ecological ethics to challenge these norms, guide our critiques and offer solutions. Without such perspectives, we in the West will remain blind to our complicity in self-inflicted ecological harm.

Revisiting the Ecocriticism's Commitments

Ecocriticism—which sits at the intersection of environmental studies and cultural studies—has been anxious about its race and gender homogeneity since its inception and subsequent coherence in the early 1990s. Despite Rachel Carson's 1962 text *Silent Spring* often being identified as the origin of the mainstream environmental movement in the United States (which set the stage for the emergence of ecocriticism and the broader environmental humanities), in its early years, the field fixated on masculinist early twentieth century nature writing and ecoliterature from transcendental writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.[4] The result of these trends carried an implicit fixation: that the *reform* of colonial, capitalist white Liberal society could ameliorate widespread environmental threat

[4] (Buell)

while presuming that a white Liberal subjecthood was a universal and ubiquitous sociopolitical position.

While it was true that ecocriticism had retained a "puzzling" lack of diversity despite its claims of not only urgency but also universality—ecocritics never claimed to be wholly ignorant of their problems. According to Cheryl Glotfelty in what is now the widely read introductory text, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1993), she remarks "[ecocriticism] has been a predominantly a white movement" and that "[ecocriticism] will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice, and when a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion."[5] There are many reasons why an assessment like this was troubling, and though Glotfelty was just one scholar, lingering in this moment helps to illuminate a set of suspicious presumptions. Firstly, prominent Black scholars and writers had already been making explicit connections between issues of social justice and the environment—from Nathan Hare's 1970 essay "Black Ecology" in *The Black Scholar* to Alice Walker's "Not Only Will Your Teachers Appear, They Will Cook New Food for You" in her 1989 collection, *Living by The Word.* Furthermore, the belated inclusion rhetoric that is exemplified but not limited to Glotfelty's statement also, ironically, worked to uphold the centrality of whiteness within ecocriticism. Glotfelty's assessment first assumed that there was somehow a separation between the "environment and issues of social justice" despite the fact that—given their co-constitution—the "environment" and "issues of social justice" have never been disentangled. Secondly Glotfelty's assessment also made the assumption that

[5] Cheryl Glotfelty, "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

ecocriticism—understood as a set of concerns about land, sociality, science, power and their relationship with verbal art[6]—was not already "multi-ethnic." A "diversity of voices" already existed and these voices were producing a healthy tradition of Black ecoliterature in particular. At no point were producers of ecoliterature or even scholars of color *waiting* passively to be "encouraged to contribute to the discussion" about these sets of concerns.

In recent years, a host of scholars—noting the lack of diversity within ecocritical discourse—have begun to wonder aloud about this dynamic. Kimberly Smith's book, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations*, begins by highlighting the fact that environmental studies is thought to be an upper middle-class white movement that focuses on issues that readily concern upper middle-class whites directly. As recently as the year 2000, Smith was ruminating about the fact that, "There were no Black writers on [my] syllabus, and it probably wasn't coincidental that there were no Black students (or many minority students at all) in [my] class."[7] Smith's realization is unsurprising, given the paucity of representation of Black writers (or Black students in the majority of classes on the university level in the United States to this day), but as Smith goes on to write, "If a major goal of environmental studies was to prepare students to tackle the most pressing environmental issues, we were missing an important part of our audience and an important part of the conversation."[8] Smith focuses primarily on the Black male contemporaries of figures like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Wendell Berry who are more readily identified with the "traditional" environmental movement and/or a tradition of nature writing. For Smith, the Black male contemporaries that comprise her Black foundations are W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T.

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[6] (Ruffin)
[7] Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007). 1.
[8] (Smith) 2.

Washington, George Washington Carver, Alain Locke, Jean Toomer, and Langston Hughes. She argues that their work belongs in the canon alongside the aforementioned white thinkers. She also, quite rightly points out that the Black writers are often not acknowledged for their thoughts on environmental consciousness or nature writing because of the way they are canonized as race-men and are discussed only rarely outside of that context. For example, with du Bois' essay "Of Beauty and Death" in mind, which features a dramatic depiction of one of the first national parks, Acadia, Smith argues that, "Still we won't find this passage in our standard chronicles of American nature writing. Indeed, we don't read this essay as an expression of progressive environmentalism at all; we read it as discourse on social justice."[9] Smith touches on a very important point here, in that she recognizes the ways in which issues of social justice become over-determined in the secondary scholarship on the Black intellectual tradition. Because ecocriticism has historically been construed as a field that can somehow operate independently from issues of environmental justice, the over-association of Black writing with issues of social justice renders those very same texts illegible to the community of scholars in ecocriticism. While this is an important point to highlight on the part of Smith, in her attempt "to listen to some of the voices that didn't make it into the standard histories of American environmental thought" she still reifies the notion that there is an assumed center of “ecocentric values” that need only be widened—not reconfigured—in order to make room for and better listen to a diversity of voices.

Sarah Jaquette Ray explores this tension in a more sustained way in her book *The Ecological Other*, arguing that,

[9] (Smith) 2.

> As much as we need ecological subjects in the world, they are often defined against an 'other,' much like 'the West' is imaginable only over and against 'the East,' as in Edward Said's formulation of 'the other.' Unlike ecological subjects, whose aim it is to save the world from ecological crisis, ecological others are often those from whose poor decisions and reckless activities the world ostensibly needs to be saved.[10]

Ray confronts and explores the relationship between environmentalism and colonial imperial conquest showing the ways in which discourses of "otherness" color our ideas about who is fit to save the world from "ecological crisis." According to Ray, the motivation behind illuminating the function of the environmental other is ultimately for the purposes of moving toward a more inclusive environmentalism. But given the pains she makes to detail the West's various "environmental others" that can never successfully adhere to an ethics of white liberal subjectivity, *and* her assertion that, "The emergence of an environmental movement 'on the heels of imperial conquest' suggests a relationship between these projects,"[11] it seems odd for her to continue to be committed to relying on a framework of inclusivity. Ray also relies on "nature" as a privileged metonym for environmentalism, but does so in a monograph that details the ways in which imperial violence has co-constituted conventional wisdom regarding the ethics of "nature" and "environmentalism." While her arguments are compelling, the political stakes of her project remain inattentive to subjects for which inclusion rhetoric remains insufficient.

What Ray does make clear, however is that our frameworks need to be rigorously challenged. Ecocritics Sandy Alexandre and Kimberly Ruffin have both tried to focus more intently on moving toward re-configuring notions of nature, the pastoral, and the bucolic—

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[10] (Ray) 5.
[11] (Ray) 11.

particularly as all these sites have been over associated with brutalizing anti-Black racial terror within the Black popular imagination. Alexandre draws our attention to the "strange fruit" that populated southern trees during the long (and on-going) lynching era. In her book, *Properties of Violence*, Alexandre explains how claims to a pure and pristine "pastoral" have been rooted in reinforced ideals of white space rendered white by the use of racially motivated murder. Alexandre illustrates this point in order to emphasize the fact that Black people cannot find ecological sanctuary and be "purified" through pastoral aesthetics (as many ecocritics or environmental organizations suggest) because of the ways in which the pastoral has been associated with the most heinous instances of Black death. I would put even more pressure on Alexandre's argument to suggest that not only are Black subjects unable to engage with a notion of pastoral reconciliation in the same way that white folks can, but also that the very sanctuary and feelings of reconciliation to which white subjects have access is only possible and/or legible because of the brutalizing backdrop of anti-Black violence.

Kimberly Ruffin uses a related, though slightly different lens to capture Blackness and the aesthetics of nature. In *Black on Earth: Black Ecoliterary Traditions* she offers the "burden-and beauty paradox," and uses this model to help to better explain Black subjects' relationships with non-human life and the environment. As she explains,

> Incidents of environmental othering exemplify one-half of what I call an ecological paradox for African Americans. I define this as an "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox," which pinpoints the dynamic influence of the natural and social order on African American experience and outlook. For instance, an ecological burden is placed on those who are racialized negatively, and they therefore suffer economically and environmentally because of their degraded status. Simultaneously, however, the

> experience of ecological beauty results from individual and collective attitudes toward nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils.[12]

For Ruffin, negative experiences with or in nature—what she calls "environmental othering" or "ecological burden"—while important, is not the only experience of ecological awareness Black people have. Deep appreciation and celebration—what she calls "ecological beauty"—are experiences that are simultaneously present in Black lives and are crucial to undercutting or disrupting the effects of "racism and its related evils." Ruffin's burden-and-beauty paradox moves us closer to capturing the complexity of a "Black" experience of the environment. She offers a way to account for the historical and on-going pain associated with the environment that Black folks have had to contend with as a result of chattel slavery and lynching, without entirely dismissing the recuperative effects that natural or pastoral aesthetics might offer. Ruffin's contribution is valuable in that it seeks to restore Black voices to an historical record of ecoliterature that often erases them, but also carves out room for an engagement with the land that might undercut the ecological-burden that its routinely associated with it.

"Repurposing Queens" builds on and yet diverts from Ruffin and Alexandre. This divergence is rooted in a suspicion about the existence of an "ecological beauty" that can function outside what we deem "ecological burdens." A paradox implies consistency, but as Ray and Alexandre point out, our notions of ecological subjectivity or environmentalism are rooted in whiteness and the violent disciplinary force of colonial and capitalist epistemological and spatial practices. Rather than looking at the ways in which an ecological burden has influenced the "natural and social order on African American experience and outlook" on the environment, my project asks how Black and feminine subjects as "ecological others" and their material

[12] (Ruffin) 2.

burdens have constituted, *not merely influenced*, the natural and social order of various raced, classed, and gendered spaces and subjectivities. Furthermore, I build upon and depart from Ruffin to question ecological beauty's relationship to anti-Black violence, hypothesizing that anti-Black violence is the fulcrum upon which notions of ecological beauty are discerned as we understand them through a colonial earth ethic.

Toward a Black Feminist Ecoethic

Throughout my dissertation, the primary analytic through which I mobilize my analyses both explicitly and implicitly is *repurposing*. This analytic derives from and functions as the tie that binds the work of the Hazel Johnson, Octavia Butler, Wangari Maathai and Wangechi Mutu. As I noted earlier, *repurposing* describes the skill set and aesthetic method by which black-fem artists and writers rearrange and remake extent material and cultural colonial structures that regulate and ecologically degrade our present world.

Regarding its function as a distinctly black feminist aesthetic innovation, *repurposing* developed alongside the study of contemporary black feminist cultural studies scholars such as Lamonda Horton-Stallings, Amber Musser, Christina Sharpe, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, and Zakiyyah Jackson—all of whom have argued that black feminist art, theory, and praxis privileges black feminine creativity and improvisation in order to promote survival and create new modes-of-being in spite of the over-exposure to death and disease that black feminine subjects routinely experience. Additionally, repurposing draws on the theories of scholars working at the intersections of Queer-of-Color Critique, Geography, and Ecocriticism such as Mel Chen, Vanessa Agard-Jones, and Tiffany Lethabo King. Chen, Agard-Jones, and King have identified settler colonialism, whiteness, heterosexism, and ableism as central to our spatial and ecological arrangements in the West.

Regarding its function as a distinctly black feminist skill set and method, *repurposing* developed alongside the study of sociologists Dorceta Taylor and Dorothy Roberts in addition to political theorists Cathy Cohen and Shatema Threadcraft. These scholars have all argued that black women's labor and political theorizing remains an indispensable yet overlooked feature of significant social movements—including the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, #BlackLivesMatter, and the modern environmental movement. *Repurposing* excavates intellectual and physical labor carried out by black women leaders in the service of black feminine identified people, by highlighting the ways these leaders—like Hazel Johnson and Wangari Maathai—made creative use of state mechanisms routinely used to police, control, and harm black bodies to instead empower and strengthen and protect black feminine identified people and the "natural" environment.

I put quotations around the word "natural" above because some ecocritics have begun to seriously question whether or not nature is still useful as a privileged metonym in environmental discourse. In his book, *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton argues that,

> Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first to theorize this transformation of actually existing women into fetish objects. *Ecology without Nature* examines the fine print of how nature has become a transcendental principle.[13]

Along a similar vein, my project examines the ways environmentalism has treated Nature—rendering it out-of-reach while imbuing it with the nearly irrefutable potential to govern notions of ecological subjecthood. Nature has become an artificial, complex, aspirational, and

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[13] Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, First Edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009). 5.

supremely powerful aesthetic and political ideology. Often, the term works to obscure the quotidian, sinister, and often-violent logics of heteropatriarchy and capitalism that underscore the concept. Given the violent logics that ecocritics Sarah Jaquette Ray, Jeffrey Myers, and Sandy Alexandre have critiqued in their work, *Repurposing Queens* follows Morton's cue to deeply consider the possibilities enabled by a discursive move beyond "Nature" as a privileged metonym. In a moment of clarification, Morton explains that his book,

> …Hesitates between two places. It wavers both inside and outside ecocriticism…It supports the study of literature and the environment. It is wholeheartedly ecological in it political and philosophical orientation. And yet it does not thump an existing ecocritical tub. It does not mean to undermine ecocriticism entirely. It does not mean to suggest that here is nothing 'out there.' But *Ecology without Nature* does challenge the assumptions that ground ecocriticism. It does so with the aim not of shutting down ecocriticism, but of opening it up.[14]

Conversantly, *Repurposing Queens* hovers both inside and outside environmental studies, honoring the urgency of the political stakes of studying culture and the environment—but at times likely appearing to wander into the territory of undermining the field. I view this undermining as a necessity, lest this project function as an accomplice to limiting disciplinary divisions, settler colonialism, and anti-Black violence. *Repurposing Queens* peers out from the edges of the environmental humanities, Black feminist theory and visual studies to, as Morton might say, "challenge the assumptions that ground ecocriticism" for the purposes of "opening it up" to something new and potentially unrecognizable.

Chapter Breakdown

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[14] (Morton, *Ecology without Nature*) 9.

"Repurposing Queens" confronts four problems that obscure the legibility of a Black feminist ecoethic under extant environmental studies frameworks delimited by a colonial earth ethic. Problem one results from a misrecognition of the impact of Black-fem environmental justice labor and organizing. To address this problem, my first chapter, "What's Justice got to do with it?: Hazel Johnson and a Case for Black Feminist Ecoethics," explores the discursive and historical record of Hazel Johnson and her organization People for Community Recovery. This chapter asks how PCR's archives challenge our understandings of the concept of "justice" as it pertains to black and feminine subjects working to stabilize their communities through an attention to intentional emplacement despite massive ecological assaults. This chapter argues that in order to glean the significance of black-fem eco-activism, we must first complicate and scrutinize the ways that we make sense of the very bedrocks of something we call 'environmental justice.' Johnson's work and legacy, demonstrates the productivity of considering "environmental justice" for black communities as a practice of ethics, rather than merely a formal judicial destination.

In my second chapter, "Red and Wounds in Wangechi Mutu's Fungal Queendom," I address a second problem in environmental studies that confines conversations about race and the environment to environmental justice studies frameworks. Sociologists and legal scholars who rely on Eurocentric categorizations of race, gender, and sexuality are over-represented in environmental justice studies. As a result, I argue many scholars tend to reify vertical hierarchies of race and gender, which have historically contributed to on-going environmental degradation as well as the erasure of Black subjects in environmental studies conversations. By contrast, my second chapter illuminates Wangechi Mutu's use of blood imagery, animal images, actual Kenyan soil, Black protagonists of several unspecified genders, and images of fungus.

Fungus is an often-overlooked organism of myriad genders whose existence is fundamental to the stability of our global ecosystem. I hone in on fungus in order to draw our attention to the invisibility of several Black genders including Black women, Black (queer) femmes, and their connection to environmental degradation. Additionally, Mutu's provocative use of red (blood) and fungal imagery invites us to think through the ways Black women and femmes create new ecologies from toxic wounds.

In my third chapter, "Black/African/Indigenous Wisdoms in Wangari Maathai's Green Havens" I turn to Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* to unearth the inherent feminist principles that underpin Maathai's theories of political ecology. This chapter asks what role feminism plays in Maathai's articulation of earth ethics. At first glance, her texts suggest that feminism, democracy, and environmental degradation operate coincidentally alongside each other. A deeper look reveals African feminist principles as fundamental to her diagnoses of environmental harm and her articulations of more sustainable futures. Maathai details her use of democracy and democratic principles to advance her environmental politics, but I contend that her use of democracy remains inextricably rooted in a woman-centered ecological ethic. As a black-fem activist working from within a patriarchal state, I argue that Maathai's African feminism provides an opportunity to re-conceptualize Western notions of feminism (including some forms of Black feminism) to further her primary goals of transforming the political and physical lives of Kenyan women and the Kenyan nation she deeply loved.

The fourth and final chapter, "Butlerian Erotics: Rethinking Femininity and Hierarchy," confronts environmental studies' preoccupation with formal notions of justice tied to state recognition and legal redress. This preoccupation leaves discussions of other productive paths to ecological awareness for Black subjects neglected. Despite a tradition of eroticism in Black

women's nature writing or "ecoliterature," many scholars have overlooked the ways that Black erotics offer pathways to ecological awareness. I argue such alternatives destabilize western verticalized hierarchies. Therefore, in my third chapter, I turn to Octavia Butler's novels *Xenogenesis/Lilith's Brood* series to investigate the connections between erotics and ecology at play. Throughout *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, I argue that in Octavia Butler's gendered depictions of erotic relationships between humans, flora, fauna, minerals, and extraterrestrials, Butler refuses the notion that sites of eroticism are always already harmful to Black subjects. Instead, she defamiliarizes interactions that stabilize or complicate entanglements between humans, plants, animals, and other organisms. In doing this, Butler invites readers to consider the ways that gender retains the power to both reinforce and/or undermine the hierarchies that currently stabilize the colonial earth ethic, that we as humans, have so much trouble looking beyond.

Chapter One:

What's Justice got to do with It?:

Hazel Johnson and a Case for Black Feminist Eco-ethics

In the photograph above, the day is February 16, 1994, and the diverse crown of smiling… ("they" reads awkwardly) all look on as President William J. Clinton signs Executive Order 12898,[15] ushering in a new era of environmental justice—an era that has simultaneously been marked by hope and mired in failure. At the federal level, the order was the most significant response to the problem of environmental injustice, demanding that all government agencies make "environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations in the

[15] (US EPA)

United States."[16] The mostly black and brown figures surrounding Clinton represent dozens of local communities that contributed much of the research and labor that went into the intention behind the order's signing. One of those local communities is Altgeld Gardens in Chicago, Illinois. Their fearless leader, the late Hazel Johnson is Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement and founder of People for Community Recovery—one of the first environmental justice organization founded in a housing project in the United States. In the photo, Johnson gleams in a honeyed-yellow dress. She stands in the Oval office which represents the highest governmental authority in the United States and Johnson, despite her centrality in the larger environmental justice movement, is out of center and on the cusp of the margins. She looks onto Clinton's desk resolutely and observantly while wearing a look of pride and gentle calm. Her facial expression carries a smile, yet that smile is slight and slightly reserved as if to silently say, "we'll see."

At the time the order was signed, it represented an enormous achievement on the part of grassroots environmental justice advocates working tirelessly to find ways to hold state and federal agencies accountable for the environmental racism and classism that plagued low-income and minority communities. The order carried with it the promise of hope in eradicating environmental injustice because every federal agency would be staffed with working groups required to implement environmental justice initiatives, and strategize in collaboration with grassroots environmental justice organizations, and because agencies would be required to make appropriate space in their budgets for these initiatives.

In this current era of environmental justice, the state of environmental political discourse has certainly changed. The United States went from having only four states with

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[16] (US EPA)

environmental justice laws or executive orders to having all 50 states implement some form of legislative action that directly addresses environmental justice. The number of people of color environmental organizations has grown from 300 and 3000. The academic field of environmental justice studies has grown from one text in 1990—Robert Bullard's *Dumping in Dixie*[17]—to literally hundreds of texts, syllabi, and curricula devoted to the study of environmental justice. Moreover, dozens of environmental justice leaders have been nationally recognized, demonstrating its growth from localized grassroots efforts to an internationally recognized movement.[18]

All this said, despite the hope and promise of the executive order, it is both tragic and predictable that 23 years after the order was signed, low income and minority communities continue to bear the ever-intensifying brunt of overexposure to toxicity across the nation and the globe. The tragedy of the EO 12898's legacy is relatively clear, but my concern here is its predictability and what that predictability teaches us as we live and die in the era of environmental justice. Many scholars locate the failure of EO 12898 in its lack of implementation due to lack of funding and federal indifference to the experience of low-income and minority communities. Despite much lip-service from organizations like the Environmental Protection Agency and its Office of Civil Rights, as recently as 2014, zip code—inextricably tied to race and income—is the most significant predictor of health and exposure to toxics. Additionally, of the $10 billion funds raised from environmental funders between the year 2000 and 2009, "just 15 percent of the environmental grant dollars benefitted marginalized

[17] (Lewis)
[18] (Bullard)

communities, and only 11 percent went to advancing 'social justice' causes, such as community organizing."[19]

As they track these failures, scholars and activists often frame the narrative of EJ successes and failures in a logic that acknowledges the importance "milestones" while simultaneously insisting that grassroots organizers and agencies of the federal government still "have a long way to go" before seeing environmental justice realized. I view these dynamics from an alternative point of view, in order to consider the ways in which the environmental justice movement and its goals as a political project seem to stand in contradiction with the possibilities allowed by the liberal, modern, democratic state that is a central emblem and stabilizer of a colonial earth ethic. In this era of environmental justice—marked by celebrations and declarations of growing and increasingly diversified environmental leadership, activism, and scholarship, we've also seen intensified, brutal negligence and intentional victimization of already toxic bodies and toxic communities.[20]

This chapter argues that environmental injustice—as it constitutes itself in innumerable instances of environmental racism, environmental sexism, and environmental classism—is a *condition* of a colonial earth ethic and that we subsequently need more precise conceptualizations for framing the successes and failures of the era of environmental justice ushered in by the signing of EO 12898. Moreover, environmental justice efforts and the environmental justice studies archive has historically operated under a conceptual and theoretical hegemony that emphasizes notions of accountability, legal reform and redress, and inclusion and recognition rooted in liberalism and civil rights. This hegemonic notion of environmental justice studies often obscures notions of justice that "exceed formal meanings of

[19] (Bullard 6)
[20] (D. Taylor)

justice" that "reject the very logics of (state) administration of justice and instead assert sovereignty of selves, communities, lands, and living in ways that are right."[21] That said, a black feminist ecological ethics that captures a set of concerns, practices, and political aims that counter and exceed the logics of state power as they are propped up in the environmental justice studies archive can be instructive and useful. This chapter argues that in order to center the significance of Hazel Johnson and black-fem eco-activism in general, we must first complicate and scrutinize the ways that we make sense of the very bedrocks of something we call 'environmental justice.' Johnson's work and legacy articulates a black feminist ecoethic in that it demonstrates the productivity of considering "environmental justice" for black-fem communities as a practice of ethics, rather than merely a judicial destination.

Considering Critical Environmental Justice

Sociologist David Pellow has been committed to exposing the limits of environmental justice studies and ushering in a new "critical" environmental justice studies that seeks to explore those limits. In his essay, "Toward a Critical Environmental Justice Studies," he outlines the concerns of this new framework which includes advocating "multi-scalar methodological and theoretical approaches to studying EJ issues in order to better comprehend the complex spatial and temporal causes, consequences, and possible resolutions of EJ struggles."[22] Additionally, critical environmental justice studies "urges a deeper grasp of the entrenched and embedded character of social inequality—including speciesism and state power—in society and therefore a reckoning with the need for transformative (rather than primarily reformist) approaches to realize environmental justice."[23] I build on what Pellow calls

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[21] (Tuck and Yang)
[22] (David N. Pellow 223)
[23] (David N. Pellow)

for here and in the pages that follow, I stage a discussion that takes a deeper look into "the entrenched and embedded character of social inequality."[24] While Pellow's insights animate a significant part of my own critique, where we differ is in our fidelity to the environmental justice studies framework altogether. Though I have tremendous respect for the theoretical work environmental justice scholars have produced and the labor that environmental justice advocates have undertaken, I argue that we need to decenter the discourses of justice (in addition to decentering empirical/Eurocentric notions of race, class, and gender) in order to shift our attention to alternative ethics. My decentering of justice discourse will be introduced in this chapter and rehearsed further in subsequent dissertation chapters. As I continue, I further illuminate the ways in which black women cultural producers—activist Hazel Johnson, author Octavia Butler, visual artist Wangechi Mutu, and activist Wangari Maathai—have "repurposed" extant tools, quotidian practices, cultural tropes, and political strategies in their work, to fashion alternative ecological ethics that "occur below the threshold of formal equality and rights."[25] The result of these sites of repurposing allow the recognition of moves to transcend the hegemony of rights and justice discourse.

Colonialism and Slavery in the Environmental Justice Archive

In many texts, scholars root the environmental injustice we see today in colonialism and highlight the Environmental Justice Movement (EJM), as one of many social movements aimed at alleviating the deep and ongoing injuries people have sustained globally under colonial rule. For example, in his book *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago*, Pellow notes that environmental injustice "is deeply rooted in the history of exploitation of Third and

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[24] (David N. Pellow)
[25] (Hartman 14)

Fourth World peoples by those in the First world."[26] He makes this point in order to explain the ways in which environmental injustice has historically been reinforced through divisions induced by colonial rule including racism, ethnocentrism, classism, and intra-racial and intra-ethnic political divisions. Furthermore, he contends that, "These divisions are the core of what drives environmental racism, and they must be among the future targets of the movement for environmental justice."[27]

Conversantly, EJ scholars emphasize environmental injustice's intimate ties to U.S. slavery. For example, in their text *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*," Cole and Foster draw a direct line from racially discriminatory zoning practices to slavery explaining that, "In a major region of the country—the U.S. South—rural areas have populations that are disproportionately African American because of the historical influence of slavery on population settlement and distribution."[28] By pointing this out, Cole and Foster highlight the fact EJ grass-roots struggles are the product of a slavery's indelible mark on the US's racialized spatial practices. Moreover, environmental decision-making processes—including discriminatory zoning laws and policy—become sites of contestation that are not about abstract and ahistorical notions of "justice," but are about coloniality, slavery, their continued impacts, and their relationship to the very possibilities of universal ideals we hold dear in the West—including notions of justice and the promises of its interconnected ideologies liberalism and freedom.

Entrenched and Embedded: Environmental Injustice and the Modern Liberal State

[26] (David Naguib Pellow) P. 80.
[27] (David Naguib Pellow)
[28] Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*, First Edition (New York: NYU Press, 2001). Pp. 73.

Several thinkers in anti-colonial discourse have helped us to understand the effects of one of the most recognizable emblems of a colonial earth ethic—the modern liberal democratic state. Many people knowingly or unknowingly ascribe to the tenets that shape and define? this predominant governance system in the West, so it's necessary for me to take time to hover in the space of its implications. Liberalism is one layer of the bedrock upon which we build democracy in the West, and central to the constitution of liberalism is the ideology of freedom. As Orlando Patterson, somewhat defiantly points out,

Nearly everyone in the Western world worships freedom and will declare herself willing to die for it. Like all intensely held beliefs, it is assumed to be so self-evident that there is no need for explicitness. Clarity on something so charged and sacrosanct might even be undesirable, for the virtue of a vague idea is that everyone can safely read his or her own meaning into it.[29]

While surveying most radical calls for social justice, it's quite clear that refuting this assertion is next to impossible. In lay discourses, if people don't already feel like that are *free* liberal subjects guaranteed protection from injustice and inalienable rights, chief among their main goals in life would be the acquisition of such a status. Commonly held views of democracy support the notion that the liberal-democratic system under which we operate is the best route for ensuring "freedom" for all. This view is even held by scholars, such as Francis Fukuyama who spends his book *The End of History and the Last Man* explaining the superiority of our current political moment and our inability—conceptually—to improve upon liberal democracy's basic model for ensuring opportunities for emancipation.[30]

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[29] (Patterson, *Freedom*)
[30] (Fukuyama)

Other scholars have taken a different approach to exploring the roots that hold a colonial earth ethic together. While most view subjugation in direction opposition to freedom, Orlando Patterson attempts to unpack and reveal the often-obscured implications of freedom as a conceptual ideal in the Western imagination. Patterson writes,

Originally, the problem I had set out to explore was the sociohistorical significance of that taken-for-granted tradition of slavery in the West. Armed with the weapons of the historical sociologist, I had gone in search of a man-killing wolf called slavery; to my dismay I kept finding the tracks of a lamb called freedom. A lamb that stared back at me, on our first furtive encounters in the foothills of the Western past, with strange, innocent eyes. Was I to believe that slavery was a lamb in wolf's clothing? Not with my past. And so I changed my quarry.[31]

Patterson's quest for a historically informed tracking of slavery ended up being a recognition of slavery's ties to emergent notions of what we comfortably call and worship, freedom. His book argues freedom is engendered from the experience of slavery.[32] Moreover, Patterson argues that, "People came to value freedom, to construct it as a powerfully geared vision of life, as an exult of their experience of, and response to, slavery or its recombinant form, serfdom, in their roles as masters, slaves, and nonslaves."[33] The suggestion of freedom as a "wolf in lamb's clothing" remains an incredibly hard pill to swallow for most, but it is an idea that is very worthy of our reflection if we take seriously Pellow's critical environmental justice studies concerns about the "entrenched and embedded character of social inequality."

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[31] Patterson, pp. xxii.

[32] (Patterson, *Freedom*)
[33] (Patterson, *Freedom*)

In addition to Patterson, David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity* is useful in facilitating this kind of discussion. According to Scott, we must move from vindication and heroism when it comes to how we access and respond to historical events. Instead we must recognize the ways in which the problem of modernity—understood through his lens as tragedy—reorganizes, constrains, and *conscripts* the very options available for resistance and the limits and conditions of emancipation in the first place. Scott begins his study by warning us about the dangers of "recasting the colonial past"—something that environmental justice studies scholarship often does in order to historicize present-day instances of environmental racism, classism, or sexism.[34] Scott explains that Western power is often understood as a force that obstructs the pathways of colonial subjects and (I would extend this to descendants of enslaved subjects as well). These obstructions serve to morally distort, materially dispossess, physiologically and physically dehumanize colonial subjects. Furthermore, Scott notes these obstructions are perceived to *exclude* colonial subjects from equal access to sovereign power.[35] This narrative is recognizable in the work of such emblematic theorists as Frantz Fanon, W.E.B du Bois, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and countless others.

Scott also points out that this narrative renders colonial power as "something to be overthrown, to be overcome, in order that the colonized can progressively retake possession of their societies and their selves."[36] This last assertion is very crucial because it is rooted in an idea of vindication and heroism and characterizes much anti-colonial scholarship attempting to redress what is often perceived to be the problem of modernity and the modern racial state.[37]

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[34] (Scott 8)
[35] (Scott 118) Emphasis mine.
[36] (Scott 118)
[37] (Goldberg)

Scott stages his critique of anti-colonial scholarship by first laying out the popular rendering of the problem of modernity—a problem rooted in the necessity of vindication for colonized subjects. Scott explains that many anti-colonial scholars are preoccupied with insisting that colonized subjects are in fact modern subjects—as a counter to the Western philosophical record which figures colonized subjects outside of the political-spatiotemporal moment we call modernity. According to Scott, anticolonial scholarship steadfastly insists that colonialized subjects occupy the underside of modernity but are not outside of it. This said, many theorists—Fanon[38] and du Bois for example[39]—imbue colonized subjects with what Scott calls an "essentialized oppositional desire" in their writing in order to "affirm the humanity of subaltern."[40] Rather than proving anti-colonial heroism, Scott investigates and how modernity created an assemblage of conditions that define the ways in which freedom and power are recognized and enacted in our spatiotemporal moment. His investigations encourage other anti-colonial scholars to 1) look to alternative conceptualizations of colonial history 2) accept the impossibility of reducing the historical record to a report about all-powerful "winners" and victimized "losers" and 3) to consider more grounded critiques and imaginings of new forms of governance outside our current metrics.

I contend that there is a parallel to the dynamic that Scott lay outs that is rehearsed in environmental justice studies scholarship. David N. Pellow describes the Environmental Justice Movement as a "movement composed of people from communities of color, indigenous communities, and working-class communities who are focused on combating environmental injustice—the disproportionate burden of environmental harm facing these populations."[41]

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[38] (Fanon et al.)
[39] (Bois and Bois)
[40] (Scott 114)
[41] (David N. Pellow)

Pellow is also careful to explain that, "For the [Environmental Justice] EJ movement, social justice is inseparable from environmental protection."[42] This is a very important distinction—particularly because it distinguishes the Environmental Justice Movement from the Modern Environmental Movement—the mainstream movement in the United States inaugurated by Rachel Carson's publication of *Silent Spring*.[43] The Modern Environmental Movement, though it often announces itself as a proprietor of universal political ideals, historically has not privileged the issues of social (in)justice that often plague members of communities of color, indigenous communities, and working-class communities.

Environmental Justice Studies grew concurrently with and out of the Environmental Justice Movement. As early as the 1970s, scholars began to connect questions of class and race to questions about the environment and to critique the central tenets of the modern environmental movement.[44] Furthermore, as more and more social justice leaders in local communities were successful in drawing attention to their "toxic communities"[45]—Warren County, NC, Love Canal, NY, and Altgeld Gardens, IL being among the most notable—their actions "sparked the discourse of environmental racism and the growth of Environmental Justice Studies."[46] From the advent of the Environmental Justice Movement, Pellow explains that Environmental Justice Studies has grown in scope as "scholars and other researchers have documented the reach of environmental racism/inequality in the United States and around the globe, as well as the social movement that has emerged to highlight and challenge this

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[42] (David N. Pellow)
[43] (D. E. Taylor)
[44] see (Hare)
[45] language borrowed from Dorceta Taylor's *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).
[46] (David N. Pellow)

phenomenon."[47] More often than not, the researchers of which Pellow speaks were sociologists and legal theorists and, given their disciplinary/methodological constraints, they were necessarily reliant on Eurocentric/empirical categorical notions of race, gender, and class. They were also motivated by the urgent task of finding tangible evidence to support their suspicions that race and class dictated exposure to air pollutions and other toxic materials. The work that scholars like David Pellow, Robert Bullard, Beverly Wright, and Dorceta Taylor have been producing over the past forty years has laid a firm foundation for other scholars and activists to continue building and refining Environmental Justice scholarship using the cold hard facts that undeniable illustrate the links between socio-economic disenfranchisement and environmental harm.

In her 2002 study "Race, Class, Gender, and American Environmentalism," Dorceta Taylor explains and historicizes the processes by which "In the United States, race, class, and gender have had profound impacts on people's environmental experiences, which in turn has had significant impacts on political development, ideology, and activism."[48] One of these impacts has been the much-needed praising of women's leadership in the Environmental Justice Movement. Without empirical evidence that people that identify as black women or women of color were and continue to be on the front lines devising strategies and fighting for environmental justice, we would not know that Hazel Johnson, for example was not an anomaly, but was a significant figure among many significant black women and women of color credited for the development of the movement. Environmental Justice Studies has distinguished itself even further from modern environmental studies and its scholarly progeny by taking the time to credit and specify the essential labor women of color have contributed to the movement.

[47] (David N. Pellow)
[48] (D. E. Taylor)

At the risk of belaboring my point above, in the in the volume *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*, "Robert Bullard and Damu Smith highlight the fact that "women of color have been on the front lines of the environmental justice movement doing groundbreaking work to make environmental justice a part of daily life" and that "these leaders and thousands of other women of color are the unsung heroes of the environmental justice movement."[49] Smith and Bullard then—rather than treating these women as case studies—go on to provide a platform for them to explain their lives, motivations and successes as grassroots community organizers in their own words. These black women and women of color include Margaret Williams of Pensacola, Florida's Citizens against Toxic exposure (CATE), Emelda West of New Orlean's "Cancer Alley," Susana R. Almanza and Sylvia Herrera of Austin, Texas' People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources (PODER), Gail Small of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Country, Cassandra Roberts of Anniston, Alabama, and Margie Eugene Richard of Mississippi's Concerned Citizens of Norco.

In Luke R. Cole and Sheila R. Foster's *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*, they begin their text by highlighting the leadership of Kettleman City, California's Esperanza Maya and her years-long struggle against the company Chem Waste. Kettleman City was already being exposed to toxic waste as the result of a dump being placed dangerously near the community in the 1970s when Chem Waste began the process of placing a toxic waste incinerator at the existing dump site.[50] As a result of Maya's legal savvy, tireless organizing, and membership in an impassioned and persistent community, Maya and the residents of Kettleman city were successful at blocking the building

[49] (Bullard and Smith)
[50] (Cole and Foster)

of the incinerator that would have further denigrated their quality of life and intensified their exposure to toxicity.

Even more recently, Antoinette M. Gomez, Fatemah Shafiei, and Glenn S. Johnson detail the environmental justice work of Atlanta's Virginia Humphrey's and other prominent black women environmental justice leader in Atlanta. In their study, Gomez et al situate Humphrey's work within a legacy of black women environmental justice work—a legacy which includes Dr. Beverly Wright, Executive Director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice (DSCEJ), Susana Almanza of (PODER), Sayokia Kindness of the Turtle Clan in the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin Mining Organizer-Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), Dana Alston of the African American Environmentalist Association, and Margaret Williams of CATE.[51] What Gomez et al, provide by framing their study within a genealogy of black women and women of color environmental justice theorists and organizers is restorative intellectual labor by that counters trends in? modern environmental studies where "poor women of color are virtually invisible in the environmental literature or portrayed as 'ordinary citizens' with little interest of knowledge of environmental issues or political experience…despite the fact that in many cases women of color were founders or served as the heads of local organizing efforts."[52]

Finally, in *Garbage Wars: the Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago*, David Pellow encourages us to return to Hazel Johnson and her many accomplishments "as more than a local neighborhood activist" but a member of the environmental justice vanguard who's "reputation and influence extend throughout the Americas."[53] Pellow notes that Johnson and "People for

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[51] (Gomez et al.)
[52] (Gomez et al.)
[53] (David Naguib Pellow)

Community Recovery has put the Southeast Side of Chicago on the radar screen for activists and policy makers around the united States who are concerned with about environmental racism."[54] Pellow uses Johnson's work, PCR's development, and insidious Chicago-land environmental struggles to build his discussion of the movement for environmental justice, its consequent evolution, and environmental racism's clear comparability to and roots in colonial violence. As a result, Pellow arrives at three central conclusions regarding environmental justice. Firstly, that the movement is about exposing the "correlations between hazards and populations" in addition to "the power dynamics that produce these inequalities and the power of the grassroots to challenge and reverse them." Secondly, that environmental injustice is produced, not just from racism, but from class dynamics, political power, and other intra-racial divisions. Thirdly, Pellow concludes that, "until we understand how and why certain environmental organizations unsound development in communities of color, we will never truly understand environmental racism and therefore be ill-equipped to move toward environmental justice."[55]

In this review of the environmental justice studies archive—understood here as a parallel to the kind of anticolonial scholarship Scott critiques in *Conscripts*—my intention is to highlight and praise the ways in which scholarship in the environmental justice studies era should be lauded for intentionally highlighting the often-overlooked contributions of women of color, poor women, and especially black women. But, given Scott's critiques of anti-colonial discourse, the environmental justice archive also invites us to reconsider its tendency to emphasize (and therefore confine) the positions of women of color and minorities to the underside of modern environmentalism. To drive the parallel home, while anticolonial

[54] (David Naguib Pellow) PP. 68
[55] (David Naguib Pellow)

scholarship has been preoccupied with affirming the humanity of the subaltern, environmental justice studies has been preoccupied with reinforcing notions of essentialized oppositional desire on the part of black women and women of color environmental leaders.

Scott warns us about latching onto this understanding of modernity and colonial power because of the ways that it delimits more generative perspectives. Essentially, according to Scott, arguments that begin with this essentialized oppositional desire are to blame for catalyzing imprecise debates about agency and resistance in anticolonial scholarship. Though Scott "is sympathetic to this oppositional desire to affirm the humanity of the subaltern," he asserts that these problems cannot hold the same weight they once did, and my arguments fall in line with is critique. Furthermore, Scott demonstrates that what he deems the "problem space" we occupy is not what we think it is. Instead he notes that

Where the anticolonial story was concerned to show that European power was never total and that the colonized always resisted, always made their own history, what is at stake here is not whether the colonized accommodated or resisted but how colonial power transformed the ground on which accommodation or resistance was possible in the first place, how colonial power reshaped or reorganized the conceptual and institutional conditions of possibility of social action and its understanding.[56]

Generally, environmental justice studies has been concerned with showing that ecological ethics were never just about white interests and that black-fems, people of color, and poor people have always authored their own agendas.[57] Thinking laterally with Scott, I contend that what is at stake for more productive conversations about ecological ethics is not whether or not black-fems, women of color, and poor people have had their own environmental agendas

[56] (Scott 119)
[57] (D. E. Taylor)

(because they always have), but rather how the hegemony of justice and rights discourse (here understood as conscripted by state power and modern environmental ethics) in environmental justice studies has shaped the conceptual and theoretical conditions of possibility for understandings of black women's ecological ethics.

A critical look at Michel Foucault's handling of race also gives one pause when considering ways in which environmental injustice—especially environmental racism—has been conceptualized hegemonically within an environmental justice studies operating under a colonial earth ethic. In his series of lectures *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault argues that "racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States" and that "as a result, the modern State can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism at some point, within certain limits and subject to certain conditions."[58] Foucault goes on to explain that racism "is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die."[59] Put differently, the modern state cannot function without an organizing principle that pre-determines what (and who) must live and die. Thus, in the modern state, civic liberties (or civil rights) are not guaranteed for everyone—as only some are guaranteed protections. But as Foucault reminds us, the very bedrock of the emergence of the popular sovereignty—a key component of the modern liberal state—is not about the *exclusion* of some subjects but is about the perpetual death of some subjects as they are *included*.

Anti-colonial understandings of exclusion are usually intimately tied to understandings of racism. Highlighting Foucault's account of popular sovereignty's essential relationship to race and racism is important here. Foucault writes, "The war that is going on beneath order

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[58] (Foucault 254)
[59] (Foucault 255)

and peace, the war that undermines our society and divides it in a binary mode is basically a race war."[60] For Foucault, race and the warfare that *race equally produces and is produced from*, is the paradoxical quagmire that he sets out to disentangle. In his account, racism—not warfare against an external force—is the conduit through which society reorganizes the distribution of power within itself.

This is the problem of popular sovereignty which gives rise to the transition from: "'We have to defend ourselves against other societies,'" to "'We have to defend society against all the biological threats posed by the other race, the sub race, the counter race that we are, despite ourselves, bringing it into existence.'"[61] Identifying groups from which society must be defended, according to Foucault becomes race and racism's "new" function within emergent modern states establishing popular sovereignty. Racism stabilizes the political body around a common enemy who can be ideologically rendered outside even the possibility of being a sovereign subject.

Going even deeper, in addition to giving rise to societies that perpetually attack themselves, the conditions for those attacks become crystallized through various strands of biopower. Foucault continues,

> So you can understand the importance—I almost said the vital importance—of racism to the exercise of such a power: it is the pre-condition for exercising the right to kill. If the power of normalization wished to exercise the old sovereign right to kill, it must become racist. And if, conversely, a power of sovereignty, or in other words, a power that has the right of life and death, wishes to work with the instruments, mechanism, and technology of normalization, it too must become racist. When I say 'killing,' I

[60] (Foucault 59)
[61] (Foucault 62)

> obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on.[62]

In other words, one population's strategic and frequent exposure to various forms of death, ensures the vitality of the sovereign, "normalized," social and political body (put simply, in this country, black death ensures white life). Armed with this knowledge, and recognizing the ways in which 1) popular sovereignty, freedom, citizenship, humanity, liberalism, and justice have come to function and stabilize our current political system and 2) the violent and perverted effects that these conceptual ideals have had on the lives of colonial subjects, I maintain that we must necessarily take a very long and hard look at the strategies we devise for "justice" and "emancipation" as we use or abandon these ideals to signal our desires for more desirable ecological practices beyond a colonial earth ethic.[63]

Hazel Johnson, Altgeld Gardens and Normalized Exposure to Death

The life and legacy of environmental justice activist Hazel Johnson is instructive for thinking through the dynamics outlined above. Additionally, her work represents an invitation for us to resituate and reframe the extant environmental justice frameworks that have thus far been insufficient for a deeper recognition of the method and impact behind her work. The bulk of Johnson's life preceded EO 12898, but the influence of her legacy began in Altgeld Gardens, when she founded the non-profit organization People for Community Recovery in order to quite literally, recover her ecologically ailing community.

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[62] (Foucault 256)

[63] See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) for another multi-faceted consideration of the possibilities for freedom in the wake of slavery.

As "Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement," Johnson was one of the first nationally recognized people to begin organizing around the connected issues of racism and pollution. Having migrated from a heavily polluted and nearly all-black region in New Orleans known as "cancer alley" to a comparably toxic Calumet Region in the Midwest, Johnson knew quite intimately the connections between racism and pollution.[64] Johnson often described her community using her self-fashioned neologism the "toxic doughnut," because of the way Altgeld Gardens and other adjacent all black communities in the Calumet region "are sitting in the center surrounded by steel mills, landfills, chemical companies, and treatment plants."[65] Johnson was also quick to point out that the pollution that plagued her community was and remains a "racial and not economic" issue.[66] When Johnson made this statement, people were all too familiar with blaming the poor for their own disenfranchised situations (not much has changed there) and the modern environmental movement had not deviated at all from espousing anti-poor sentiments. Despite the fact that her community was both black and primarily low-income, Johnson was one of the first to explicitly call out pollution and toxicity as a racial problem. While her assertion slightly resists more recent findings in environmental justice studies that elucidate the *interconnections* between race, poverty, and toxicity, in the 1980s and 1990s, Johnson was joining a small but persistent group of activists and scholars breaking new ground by exposing the environment as yet another frontier sullied by racism.[67] Furthermore, her observation propped anti-blackness as the most significant polarizing factor that determined one's exposure to environmental harm.

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[64] (Ramirez)
[65] (Johnson)
[66] Johnson.
[67] (D. Taylor)

As Hazel Johnson's work and PCR's legacy has been recast, the anticolonial concern (here understood as environmental justice scholarship) has been preoccupied with thrusting Johnson into an environmental justice movement narrative that fits squarely into the kind of vindicationist norms that Scott outlines and critiques.

I find it important to insert a disclaimer here and say that although? I am critiquing many of the ways that environmental justice studies and discourses carries the potential to reinforce a colonial earth ethic, my argument is in no shape or form an indictment of Hazel Johnson, People for Community Recovery or the brave work they've done and that PCR continues to do under Cheryl Johnson's (one of Hazel Johnson's daughters) leadership. I acknowledge and celebrate that fact that in People for Community Recovery's own words, "With perseverance, tenacity and dedication, PCR continues to be a positive force not only within the Altgeld Gardens community, but within the Environmental Justice movement at large."[68] My critique, however, aims to broaden the scope within which we are naming our environmental problems and proposing our justice-oriented solutions. Given that the environmental justice archive routinely reduces the discussion of black ecological ethics to struggles and successes tied to state power, and that state power has never been invested in the vitality and well-being of black subjects, put simply, the practice of black-fem environmental justice efforts requires much more recognition and understanding!

I am ultimately, most interested in demarcating the often-illegible impact of black women's ecological labor that exceeds formal notions of justice. Considering the illegibility of this impact allows us to 1) deeply consider the ways in which modern environmental ethics has conditioned our pathways of resistance (limiting them to legal redress within the modern

[68] ("History of People for Community Recovery")

democratic state) 2) scrutinize environmental justice studies' preoccupation with affirming the existence and recognition of black women's leadership (but primarily in ways legible to legal redress efforts within democracy), and 3) acknowledge that as emblems of a colonial earth ethic, modern liberal states (democratic or otherwise) stabilize themselves by mechanisms of race, racism, and some communities constant exposure to death (ex. the toxic Altgeld gardens community which even before steel mills, landfills, chemical companies, and treatment plants moved in was built on a former garbage dump[69]). These considerations beg us to imagine different frameworks that exceed the (im)possibility of "overcoming" and "resolution" given our extant political structure and the EJ movement's normative responses to this impossibility.

A Case for Black Feminist Eco-ethics

Moving from justice to ethics, also means moving from abstract and unspecified universal principles of justice to questions of morality, empathy, and care that are usually anything but "universal." Without tending to the histories that produce the discourses around some of these ideals, they are also, like freedom, manifestations of a colonial earth ethic attempting to disguise itself as something else. Feminist philosopher Virginia Held proves instructive here. She writes,

Among the clearest positions feminist moral theorists take is that such a dismissal of women's moral experience is unacceptable. In taking such experience seriously, much feminist moral inquiry has developed what has come to be best described as the ethics of care…Caring well should be a moral goal, and basic caring relations are a moral necessity. The values involved in the practices of caring need to be understood. Caring as an actual practice should be

[69] (Altgeld-Carver Alumni Assoc)

continually evaluated and improved. To bring about such improvement, radical transformations may be needed in the social and political context in which caring takes place.[70]

Following Held, I agree that caring well should be a moral goal and that we should interrogate and challenge the dismissal of women's labor rooted in morality. Held's conception of care ethics includes a commitment to overthrowing the hierarchy of gender without replacing men with women at the top; caring for distant others by means of respecting rights and being attentive to their specific needs; caring for the environment "in which embodied human beings reside;" carrying out these goals by means of nonviolent and democratic "persistence;" calling for values of justice when and where appropriate, and keeping a particularly close eye on the most central of concerns—care for children.[71]

Held's notions of care ethics provides a workable foundation, but her insistence that "Caring as an actual practice should be continually evaluated and improved" and that "to bring about such improvement, radical transformations may be needed in the social and political context in which caring takes place,"[72] encourages suggestions for remodel. First, Held's conception of gender needs to be expanded for this project as there are certainly more genders within the "hierarchy of gender" than the ones she refers to, understood here as cis men and cis women. Second, I too have concerns about destabilizing the hierarchy of gender which compounds black subjects' subjugation. Third, Held's conception of the environment is largely anthropocentric. Ecocritic Kimberly Ruffin reminds us that the term "environment" carries connotations that separates human bodies from everything else resulting in anthropocentric/biocentric binaries."[73] The "anthropocentrism/biocentrism binary" that Held

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[70] (Held 61)
[71] (Held 66)
[72] (Held 61)
[73] (Ruffin 17)

clings to comes forth most strongly when she states that care ethics "must include that the environment in which embodied human beings reside in well cared for."[74] Though her assertion acknowledges the necessity of caring for earthly space that is routinely damaged in the name of capitalist expansion, national security, and other masculinist mechanisms of dominance, a black feminist ecoethic seeks to move toward a notion of ecological relationality that exceeds the constraints and concomitant problems of anthropocentric/biocentric binaries and thusly, human exceptionalism.

Held also advocates caring for distant others by means of respecting rights and being attentive to their specific needs. As scholar like Christina Sharpe have noted—particularly in her delineations of the purposes of "wake work"—there are some subjects for whom formal notions of justice and "rights" simply do not apply equally.[75] When Held contends that "the ethics of care will strive to achieve these transformations in society and the world nonviolently and democratically" she reveals the limitations of her vantage point and makes clear that her notion of care ethics can really only be discerned as "transformative" from within the vacuum of white liberal feminism.

For Held's notion of care ethics to be remodeled we must first acknowledge its ontogeny from within white liberal feminism and to contend with the fact that white liberal feminism has historically cohered as a result of the dismissal, erasure, and misrepresentation of black subjects—including black women, and black gender conforming folks. Where Held roots her ethics of care in women's moral experiences, a significant aspect of my articulation of repurposing is that it facilitates a care ethics from the perspective of black-fems.

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[74] (Held 66)
[75] (Sharpe)

To reiterate, a black feminist ecoethic refuses the kind of anthropocentrism present in Held's notion of feminist care ethics, and instead gestures toward a more harmonious? ecological relationality between humans and many other forms of materials—including nonhuman, animals, plants, animals, minerals, microorganisms and fungi. I also maintain, however, that a black feminist ecoethic troubles, yet does not entirely dismiss ecological hierarchies which value the experiences of human. I will return to and expand on this point in my fourth chapter.

Finally, Held's exaltation of caring for children is also proves useful—but only if the concepts of family, kin, progeny, and parents are loosened from biocentric, heteronormative colonial earth ethical models. Held positions the caring of children as the meeting point between justice and care. She writes,

One possibility I have considered in the past is that justice deals with moral minimums, a floor of moral requirements beneath which we should not sink as we avoid the injustices of assault and disrespect. In contrast, care deals with what is above and beyond the floor of duty. Caring well for children, for instance, involves much more than honoring their rights to not be abused or deprived of adequate food; *good care brings joy and laughter*…if there is anything, that sets near absolute constraints on our pursuit of anything, including justice, it is responding to the needs of our children for basic, including *emotional care.*[76]

Taking Held's above observations as my departure points, I view Held's unspecified articulation of justice here as a parallel to a notion of justice that Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang identify as a "general sense of moral and ethical righteousness; a specific legal sense referring to the fair administration of punishments and rewards."[77] Tuck and Yang also point out that these

[76] (Held 71) (emphasis mine)
[77] (Tuck and Yang 4)

"accepted meanings of justice do not necessarily satisfy, at least toward delivering their own promises of justice" and that they "may fall apart at their seams when we pay close attention."[78]

If we only consider environmental justice as a judicial destination, Altgeld has been a victim of federal failure to deliver its own promises of justice. Executive Order 12898 being signed by Bill Clinton with Hazel Johnson by his side, and even President Barack Obama who once worked closely with Hazel Johnson, served as president. Yet material improvements in Altgeld have remained largely stagnant and moving forward, conditions are likely to continue to decline in our current era of environmental justice.[79]

But her far-reaching successes shine when we take into account that Johnson's organization, People for Community Recovery, began because she was intimately connected to the lives and well-being of the people around her and was especially concerned about the quality of life of the children in her community. According to Cheryl Johnson, her mother Hazel "thought the organization would give people an opportunity to have a voice on quality-of-life issues," and that "She thought they would take kids on field trips and host community parties — little did she know."[80] Cheryl Johnson's "little did she know" remark refers to Hazel Johnson's astonishment after finding out that "her neighborhood had the highest rates of cancer in the city and that "the 190-acre Altgeld was surrounded by about 50 documented landfills, and that there were more than 250 leaking underground storage tanks in an area defined by the Bishop Ford Expressway on the east, the Calumet River on the west, 130th Street on the north, and 144th Street on the south."[81] Johnson became motivated to find out why her neighborhood had such high instances of cancer after the cancer-related deaths of four young girls in her

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[78] (Tuck and Yang 4)
[79] (Wan)
[80] (Trice)
[81] (Trice)

community. According to Cheryl Johnson, the death of these children shifted Hazel Johnson's focus and shook her out of numbness to the news of cancers that so regularly plagued the members of her community.[82] As Johnson herself notes,

That is the reason I got really concerned about the community, because I looked around and saw so many other of my neighbors dying of cancer or respiratory problems, and children coming here with some types of deformities. We have seven girls in our community with brain tumors, except for one of them whose brain was protruding from her head. They all died between three and seven years old. It is hard to see a victim suffering, especially infants.[83]

For Johnson, the ailments suffered by the children in her community coupled with her knowledge of Altgeld's proximity to toxic pollution, catalyzed her desire to educate and mobilize her community around issues of environmental injustice. Her fight for these children and her community certainly emanated from what Held calls "moral minimums" which refer to "a floor of moral requirements beneath which we should not sink as we avoid injustice of assault and disrespect."[84] But, for a community constructed atop a garbage dump and intentionally surrounded by ever-intensifying toxics that produced founding an organization that continues to further a practice of black feminist ecological ethics through its toxic tours and programs like the Altgeld Garden's Environmental Justice Photovoice Club moves beyond a moral minimum into the realm of extraordinary.

Life in Altgeld has persisted. The community continues to fortify itself in spite of, or perhaps because of President Obama's neglect and the federal government's paradoxical commitment to environmental "justice." Resident Theresa Hollins "raised 10 children in

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[82] (Trice)
[83] (Johnson 514)
[84] (Held 71)

Altgeld—her own, plus foster kids and a few left to her by relatives and neighbors."[85] Hollins is one of several community members invested in the care of the community and especially the children of Altgeld. When asked why she and her family have not left Altgeld, Cheryl Johnson responded, "I love the social fabric of the community. This is my sense of security"[86] and with caring mothers like Theresa Hollins around, it becomes easy to make sense of the security Johnson to which Johnson is referring. Though numerous reports have detailed the ways in which material conditions have not improved in Altgeld, and though I have no interest in minimizing the urgent action necessary in that community and other similarly victimized communities throughout the nation and the world, with this project, my primary concern is contributing to a discourse committed to centering the sustainability that strengthen the "social fabric" of communities like Altgeld. In addition, I am interested in providing language to describe, celebrate, acknowledge and even critique the kinds of ethics present when formal notions of justice are occluded, and black care becomes the primary means by which harmonious relations between humans, other humans, and other forms of materials are sustained. Cheryl Johnson has not left Altgeld because it is a community worth fighting for beyond—to repurpose Held's language here—"moral minimums," and because of the good care that "brings joy and laughter."[87] Key features of Johnsons work and legacy are emblematic 1) of black-fem quotidian practices of decolonial insurgency (especially such as Black mothering and acts of empathy) and 2) of alternative conceptualizations of ecological relationality (like community emplacement) irreducible and often illegible under a colonial earth ethic that insists on a pattern of environmental extraction and abandonment.

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[85] (Wan)
[86] (Trice)
[87] (Held 71)

I take my cues from Eve Tuck here—especially in my analysis of Altgeld residents—because of the ways in which the community has been over-studied and over-neglected. In her piece, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," Tuck specifically critiques the damage-centered research that has plagued the First Alaska and Native American communities—research that encourages subjects to focus on recount solely on their assaults, their disrespect, and their pain. To carry out a project like mine, it is impossible not to make references to the toxicities of Altgeld, to the ethical impossibilities of Octavia Butler's wearied black-fem protagonists, to the maimed and disfigured figures in Wangechi Mutu's visual planes, and to the sexist attacks Wangari Maathai sustained while developing women-led tree nurseries. But my study embraces the challenge of avoiding being reduced to a "finger-shaped bruise" on black-fem "pulse points."[88]

Tuck offers "desire-based frameworks" as an alternative that I find useful for this dissertation. Tuck identifies desire-based frameworks as one "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives."[89] A careful look at the photos, memoirs, and reflections compiled in *History of Altgeld Gardens, 1944-1960* a book assembled by the Altgeld-Carver Alumni Association, reflects the legacy of joy that Altgeld residents have found in their neighborhood and especially in each other.[90] Every photo of loving embraces between family and friends, every prideful boast of community empowerment, every happy reminder of enriching educational experiences at Carver high school, and every written memory of picnics and community gardens reflects the richness of black life lived in Altgeld. At the same time, the mentions of cancer, brutal gang violence, insidious drug addiction, and

[88] (Tuck 412)
[89] (Tuck 416)
[90] (Altgeld-Carver Alumni Assoc)

other trappings of life in the "projects" are not excluded from the book. An interesting characteristic that comes forth however, is the repeated exaltation and praise of women's affective, pedagogical, administrative, and activist love and labor—a feature that I would like to give more attention as I close out this chapter.

Black Feminist Eco-ethics through Coalitional Fem Politics

In her now canonical essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," political theorist Cathy J. Cohen asks whether or not queer activism and theory retains the potential for building a new, more inclusive, and liberatory political framework. As she explains,

> I'm talking about a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work. Thus, if there is truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin.[91]

I have begun the work of queering Held's notions of care ethics above taking many cues from Christina Sharpe's discussion of "wake work," in the process particularly given the onslaught of cancer-related deaths in Altgeld.[92] But, after a dig through? People for Community Recovery's archives, I also insist that the history of Altgeld provides a picture of a joyful and exuberant community that has been ecologically sustained as a direct result of the black-fem work carried out in that space. Black women formed the majority of members of important community organizations including the Altgeld-Carver Alumni Association. Black women—single and married—were heads of the many tight-knit Altgeld families. Moreover, in reflections from

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[91] (Cohen 438)
[92] (Sharpe)

students in the neighborhood, mothers and grandmothers are overwhelmingly credited for helping provide the affective and material salve that allowed many children and adults to avoid the certain death and decay wrought by wanton drug use and violence in "the Gardens."

Reading these glowing depictions of black women, exceeds colonial earth ethical representations that cast black women as wasteful and irresponsible "environmental others" misrepresented, erased and blamed, ignored and neglected in mainstream media and federal legislative efforts.[93] Especially when thinking about the fact that many of the residents profiled in *History of Altgeld Gardens, 1944-1960*, were the recipients of public assistance and were living in "the projects." In fact, after her husband died of pollution-causing cancer, Hazel Johnson herself lived for a significant portion of her life on public assistance—forgoing a salary from her organization People for Community Recovery and devoting all of her time and what could have been financial compensation to her environmental justice teaching and activism.[94] As a counter-narrative to popular notions of black women on welfare being "lazy," interestingly—Johnson's highly-praised and nationally recognized role as the progenitor of the Environmental Justice Movement was significantly facilitated by her position as a "Welfare Queen."

Given her blackness, her femininity, her dependence on public assistance, her life in a housing project, and her unmarried status (though presumably her unmarried status is a result of her being widowed), Johnson's subject position calls into question what Cohen calls "a monolithic understanding of heterosexuality."[95] Furthermore, her these elements of her subject position can be read through a lens of "nonnormative heterosexuality" tied to popular notions of "the underclass" and the on-going demonization of the welfare system.[96] Johnson and many

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[93] (Ray)
[94] (*Hazel Johnson People for Community Recovery Archives*)
[95] (Cohen 452)
[96] (Cohen 455)

other black-fem staples of Altgeld, in addition to fitting into a categories of nonnormative heterosexuality, also comprise communities that Cohen warns us not to overlook in our desires for coalition and building new frameworks of liberatory politics. As Cohen explains,

Because of my multiple identities, which locate me and other 'queer' people of color at the margins in this country, my physical protection and my emotional well-being are constantly threatened. In those stable categories and named communities whose histories have been structured by resistance to oppression, I find relative degrees of safety and security.[97]

Following Cohen, I argue that the work that Hazel Johnson accomplished was a direct result of her subject position as a black woman. She worked from within the relatively stable category of black woman. I further argue that Johnson also worked within relatively stable communities—Altgeld Gardens and the organization she founded, People for Community Recover and that both Altgeld and People for Community Recovery are both "named communities who histories have been structured by resistance to oppression." That said, for me as a black-fem scholar—and many other black people occupying multiple identities and space in the margins—Altgeld, PCR, and many black community organizations like it provide relative safety and security.

While it is important to recognize the transformative potential of black women's work for a conception of a black feminist ecoethic, mere recognition is not enough. As Cohen notes,

> only by recognizing the link between the ideological, social, political, and economic marginalization of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens can we begin to develop political analyses and political strategies effective in confronting the linked yet varied sites of power in the country.[98]

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[97] (Cohen 450)
[98] (Cohen 482)

Unlike Cohen, who uses bulldaggers and punks to flag queerness, I intentionally center femme queer identity and gender formation because of the ways in which care-labor is often taken up or falls into the responsibility of queer identified femmes. Moreover, my concern here is thinking through the interconnections between ideological, social, political, and economic marginalization of several black subjects for the purpose of articulating a black feminist ecoethic focused on desiring and building more harmonial ecologies.

Though "black women," "black female," and "black femme," are terms meant to designate distinct genders and sexualities under black subjecthood, they share transformative potential in the "Man vs. Human struggle "to rethink our understandings and practices of ecological relationality. [99] These practices seek to unveil our complicity in our poisoning, but without taking on the even heavier and more intensified toxic burden of internalized self-hatred, misplaced emancipation-induced blameworthiness,[100] and state-sanctioned self-neglect. Moreover, my hope is that by articulating a black feminist ecoethic, we might build on the already present work of black-fems that make a daily practice imagining and working towards more harmonial, respectful, and sustainable relationships with ourselves and our "other" community members occupying rich and varied arrays of material forms.

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[99] (Wynter 261)
[100] (Hartman)

Chapter Two:

Red and Wounds in Wangechi Mutu's Fungal Queendom

Figure 1: One Hundred Lavish Months of Bushwhack (2004)

Dimensions: 68 1/2 x 42" (174 x 106.7 cm)

© 2017 Wangechi Mutu

With Wangechi Mutu's 2004 piece, "100 Lavish Months of Bushwhack," we enter a world of blackish cloud-like gloom. The cloud grows into a lighter gray, giving way to a

spotlighted protagonist—commanding our gaze with her size and elaborate bodily adornments. Curled animal printed-horns frame our protagonist's head while a skirt of flora or of exaggerated pubic hair seems to gesticulate around her waist. The skirt bears an uncanny resemblance to what might either be vegetation or fungal spores emerging from the bottom of the plane. It remains unclear if the skirt has a vitality of its own, or if the protagonist's dance-like gesture—with bent elbows and a raised heel—is responsible for the skirt's movement. While a small motorcycle functions as a decorative ankle bracelet on the raised foot, three other small motorcycles seem to take the place of where the lowered foot might be—that is if it wasn't a mass of splattered red blood. Similar splatters—emanating from yet another small motorcycle—crown the figure's head. The vibrancy of the red and the sites of what appear to be wounds indicate both dazzle and danger for the viewer. But danger from who and what? Where we might find hands, the figure wears (or is composed of) hippopotamus mouths. This is possibly a reference to a voracious yet vegetarian appetite—as hippos are very hungry, if misunderstood herbivores.(Theophile et al.) Her very skin or cat-suit, in its paled pinkish-yellowish-brownish coloring takes on the hues and appearances of fungi that catalyze the decay of various organisms. And after absorbing all these competing and intricately snitched-together symbols, our eyes are finally free to settle on a smaller and much darker figure, enmeshed in the grayed-gloom of the background. The figure is ornamented in floral and supporting the weight of the striking protagonist. The obvious, if simple question is—what exactly are we looking at?

Most of Mutu's work begs this question. She as travels from collages, to paintings, to sculpture, video, and performance, Mutu is constantly insisting on a reformulation of our understanding of humanity's relationship to the "natural" or more-than-human world. She was born in Nairobi, trained at Cooper Union for the Advancement of the Arts and the Yale University School of Art and has spent most of her adult career in New York. Though the

impact of her work travels far beyond her social identity, her unfixed Black/African-diasporic consciousness is impossible to miss as it often manifests in her majestic and transformative work. Art and its histories have long held the potential for transforming ways of knowing, ways of thinking, disrupting fixity, and radically confronting hegemonic intellectual traditions. As ecocriticism and ecotheory's epistemologies continue to contend with their uneven conceptualizations of the interconnectivity of race, gender, coloniality, and ecological crisis, a guiding question for this chapter is "what is the *function* of black-fem art and its epistemologies in a time of ecological crisis?" Or, more to the point of my engagement with Wangechi Mutu I ask, "what kinds of problems or questions rise from ecotheory's epistemologies when we place occluded black-fem bodies at the center?"

This chapter explores Wangechi Mutu's strategic use of the color red particularly because of the ways in stands-out amongst the soft water color of her other chosen hues. This chapter probes the ways that red aids her illumination of the interrelated ecological wounds of several kinds of bodies. These bodies include human bodies, bodies of land, and certain political bodies that are routinely occluded from epistemological understandings of ecology. Through Mutu's intellectual and artistic contributions, including her interviews, her essay "The Power of Earth in My Work," and her collage paintings, "One Hundred Lavish Months of Bushwhack" (2004), "Your Story My Curse" (2006), and "Funkalicious fruit field," this chapter offers a reading that can travel from medium to medium—just as Mutu does. The readings also linger on the ways that Mutu heavily layers images and materials that have largely come to simultaneously signify grotesquery, excessiveness, surprise and beauty."[101] These "excessive" images and significations include but are not limited to non-white bodies, non-male bodies,

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[101] The idea of "excessiveness"—particularly with regard to Black female subjectivity draws from (Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*)"

severed limbs, a mosaic of iridescent hues, highly constructed physical terrains, many pools and splatters of bright red (blood), and (mottled, spongy) flesh.

In turn, I argue that Mutu offers an aesthetic method of questioning and comprehension that simultaneously confronts the wounded grotesqueries that emerge as a result of environmental degradation while affirming alternative "excessive" metrics of beauty and being conjured by vulnerable and maligned ecological subjects "in the Anthropocene."[102] Most crucially, this chapters turns to Wangechi Mutu to 1) reveal how her art challenges the containment, innovation/production, and ableism authored by a colonial earth ethic and to 2) reveal how Mutu enacts red, woundedness, and depictions of mottled flesh to alternative subjectivities enabled by a black feminist eco-ethic beyond mainstream environmental studies' normative impulses toward resolution and/or reconciliation.

Thinking with Fungi and Black Femininity

Mutu's preoccupation with fungi and her extensive mycological expertise is particularly important. When asked specifically about the role mushrooms and fungus play in her paintings, Mutu responded:

> Mushrooms are mysterious because they pop up in the forest, the way toadstools emerge in European fairy folktales. Fungus was one of those things that played into my sense of the grotesque, but they reference so many different things...I thought they were almost like a migrant culture that exists in the most decrepit parts of the city, and what

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[102] Alan C. Braddock and Renée Ater, "Art in the Anthropocene," *American Art* 28, no. 3 (September 1, 2014): 2. The term Anthropocene has been widely debated in recent years and has spawned many terms including the capitalocene, the plantationocene, and the chthulucene. I leave these debates bracketed in this chapter and mark that my use of the term generally aligns with what Braddock and Ater explain as "the growing scientific consensus that Earth has entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, distinguished from the preceding Holocene by the fact that humans since the nineteenth century have become the primary drivers of environmental change on a planetary scale."

> emerges are these fascinating people and interactions. They're also in-between, in that they're not really plants. In some cases, fungus is actually closer to animal because they eat food. They don't make food, which is one of the big separations between the plant and animal kingdoms. Also, the way they reproduce is closer to the most basic and primitive animals, a sort of asexual spooring. I like the idea that they are a little alien family found in the middle of these two massive kingdoms. (Enright 25)

Mutu points out a few characteristics of fungi that form the bedrock of my development of fungal eco-consciousness. First, she names the element of surprise or unexpectedness associated with the emergence of mushrooms; not only in the way they "pop up in the forest" but also in the way—though over-associated with British folklore—they "pop-up" in her own work. This follows a recognizable pattern in Mutu's catalog, whereby she references principal themes in Western portraiture, but often in ways that destabilize or repurpose their logics.

Mutu also illuminates fungi's ability to survive in the most hostile conditions. As she notes, this sets the scene for compelling and specific interactions between organisms that can often go unnoticed and under-affirmed because of their intimacy with decrepitness, danger, or decay. Further, Mutu instructs us on the challenges of fungi classification. The organisms that we easily classify are the ones that fit neatly into the plant or animal kingdoms. Fungi however—only understood to be distinct from both kingdoms in recent history—exist in excess of these normative classifications. Finally, Mutu highlights fungal reproduction. Reproduction represents yet another paradigmatic way we classify organisms. Her quote references asexual spooring and the association of such spooring with primitivity. Though she only highlights asexual spooring here, fungi reproduce in about five distinct ways—four more

than the narrative of heteronormative sexual reproduction we routinely attribute to plants and animals.[103]

These above characteristics, coupled with Mutu's consistent fixation on visualizing black-fem subjectivity, to understand the ways "matter and meaning"[104] shift when black-fem bodies and fungal bodies are juxtaposed or collapsed onto each other. I engage the spore, fruit, rust, and smut visual cues collapsed onto (what can be read as) black-fem bodies to think through the ways that both organisms, forged within this planet's most hostile environments, pop up suddenly and in seemingly unexpected places in ecological discourse by virtue of being the center of Mutu's paintings.

Upon further investigation, though mushrooms (the fruiting body of a fungus) make them themselves known in obvious ways above ground, they are always part of a deeper network of fungi playing an essential role in stabilizing the ecosystem.[105] As Paul Stamets explains, by being "mycomagicians, disassembling large organic molecules into simpler forms, which in turn nourish other members of the ecological community," fungi function primarily as "the interface organisms between life and death."(Stamets 1) Across the Black diaspora, when considering the systemic overexposure to death and disease that black-fem subjects experience,

[103] For more on fungal reproduction see Roy Watling's *Fungi*, ed. Jonathan Elphick, 1st edition (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 10.
[104] Language here references ideas advanced in Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2007).
[105] As I began thinking with fungi, Michael Rice's "What Lurks Beneath: How Quantum Fungi Can Show Difference Differently.," accessed June 13, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/23655747/What_Lurks_Beneath_How_Quantum_Fungi_Can_Show_Difference_Differently helped me to consider the many ways mycology could be regarded as feminist knowledge production.

describing them as "the interface organisms between life and death" functions as a particularly tragic and yet appropriately precise descriptor as well.[106]

As a student of black feminist theory, while delving deeper into mycological history, it became clear to me that early-modern sentiments toward fungi and notions of black femininity bore an uncanny set of similarities. Put simply, in the history of the West, both fungal bodies and black female bodies have discursively been associated with devilishness and grotesquery quite simply because of their cosmetic or anatomical "difference" from other organisms. Moreover, these narratives, despite hundreds of years of research, have continued to shape scientific, cultural, and political biases that foreground academic and lay discourses about black femininity and about fungi.[107] Given these paralleled cultural histories, this this chapter acts as a ground for thinking with fungi in ways that might help productively engage the repurposing aesthetic in Mutu's work.

Repurposing always keeps us primed to consider the kinds of information that a black-fem standpoint offers. For example, after recently winning the esteemed 2017 Anderson Ranch National Artist Award, Brooklyn based, Nairobi born Wangechi Mutu took the opportunity to insist,

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[106] For a brief overview of the health disparities suffered by black women in the United States from an environmental justice perspective, see (Switalski) See also Jackie Ricciardi's "Too Many Black Women Die From Breast Cancer. Why? | BU Today | Boston University," *BU Today*, April 24, 2017, http://www.bu.edu/today/2017/black-women-breast-cancer-research/. See also Zahra Barnes' "8 Health Conditions That Disproportionately Affect Black Women," *SELF*, accessed June 1, 2017, http://www.self.com/story/black-women-health-conditions. For an overview of Kenyan women's health vulnerabilities see Dr. Waithera's *Don't Sleep African Women: Powerlessness and HIV/AIDS Vulnerability Among Kenyan Women* (Pittsburgh: RoseDog Books, 2011). See also (*Environmental Health Perspectives – Modern Environmental Health Hazards*)

[107] See Roy Watling's *Fungi*, ed. Jonathan Elphick, 1st edition (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 19 and Paul Stamets' *Mycelium Running* for a cultural and ecological history of fungi. See (Willis)

> Art is my way of speaking about things that are *unspeakable*, it is my truest voice and my strongest form of resistance. It is such a privilege to be recognized in these times for doing what I most love doing, it gives my work more urgency. I know we can do better for one another and for our earth, and I am deeply committed to using creative means to bring attention to violence and inequality against women and to the parallel destruction of our Earth.(Cascone)

Her remarks succinctly capture her most pressing political concerns that recur in her interviews, statements, activist and creative work. Additionally, Mutu is arguably one of the most prominent living artist-intellectuals to repeatedly and consistently center *black-fem* subjects and bodies in her conceptualizations of our troubled earth ethics. [108]

Elsewhere, Mutu has noted that, "Women's bodies are particularly vulnerable to the whims of changing movements, governments, and social norms. They're like sensitivity charts—they indicate how a society feels about itself."(Firstenberg) For Mutu, black women—even as they are camouflaged under the normative gender category of "women" in Mutu's statement—chart society's prescriptions of itself, despite universalizing narratives that speak otherwise. Mutu's work also destabilizes normative understandings of black female-ness and black woman-ness rooted in a Eurocentric cisheteronormativity that Arielle A. Concolio has explained "relies upon a biological authenticity of sex and gender that produces the trans/cis and the homo/hetero binaries." (Concilio 464) Though Mutu does not flag blackness specifically as she notes the parallel between "violence and inequality against women" and to the "destruction of our Earth," (Cascone) in her Anderson Ranch statement specifically, in

[108] In addition to being the recipient of dozens of awards across the globe, Mutu's prominence has developed as a result of her work almost single handedly holding up the Kenyan art market. See ("Kenya's Art Market Isn't Exactly Booming")

almost all her interviews and statements, blackness, black femininity, and the black female body are recurrent and centered fixations.

The Function of Black Feminist EcoArt?

For a black feminist critique of modern environmental movement to be effective, we first need to further understand black women's bodies as unspeakable sensitivity charts within modern society.(D. E. Taylor) In her chapter, "The Idea of Black Culture," black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers closes in on her definition(s) of black diasporic culture as both "*statement* and *counterstatement*, that would both undo alienation and constitute its own standpoint." As she further elucidates its function in our post-Obama present, she asserts "that black culture, having imagined itself as an *alternative* statement, as a *counter*statement to American culture/civilization, or Western culture/civilization, more generally speaking, identifies the cultural vocation as the space of "contradiction, indictment, and the refusal." [109]

But the unspeakability of violence against black women specifically, is an issue within black diaspora critical culture as well—as popular understandings of blackness often denote static definitions. For Black diaspora theorist Michelle Wright, in her most recent book, *The Physics of Blackness*, this derives from epistemological understandings of blackness that have become yoked to a Black linear progress narrative that "implicitly reformulates that [black] collective into an ever narrower and more homogeneous membership."(Wright 25) This homogenous membership often leaves the experiences, lives, and offerings of non-male black subjects unacknowledged, undetected, and therefore unspeakable. Wright takes up and problematizes the predominance of what she terms the Middle Passage Epistemology, its insistence on blackness as a qualitative value (a "what") and the ways, "Blackness, as a vaguely

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[109] Hortense J. Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (2007): 7–28.

biological 'what,' takes on an eerie resemblance to those anti-Black discourses that first claimed Blacks were indeed a 'what'—a distinct sub-human species 'marked by nature,' as [Thomas] Jefferson opined."(Wright 25) Blackness as a vaguely biological "what" continues to shape modernity's derivative epistemologies—including ecology/ecotheory. This point relates to and underscores ecocritic Jeffrey Myers' reading of *Notes on Virginia* in his book, *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature.* Concerning Jefferson's *Notes*, Myers exposes the text for its articulation of a racial-ecological hegemony whereby the security of the industrial Anglo-American empire—and/or a colonial earth ethic—is hinged upon the control, utilization, and exploitation of "all elements of the natural world" including bodies of land, flora and fauna, and black and native people.(Myers 114)

In her essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," —Denise Ferreira Da Silva makes clear what is usually rendered invisible under predominant frameworks for understanding power, capital accumulation, and "post" colonial violence by producing an account of Blackness that makes obvious its function as an onto-epistemological category. Moreover, her account of Blackness is constructed for the purpose of challenging the "authorized and justified total violence (of the police and the courts), to reclaim, to demand the restoration of the total value the colonial architectures have enabled capital to expropriate from native lands and enslaved black (and African) labor." [110] It is also crucial for Silva to begin with racialized slavery in order to highlight the processes by which slavery—and our lack of attention to its ongoing economic effects—produces many of the material inequalities with which we now find ourselves grappling desperately and anxiously. Silva continues,

[110] Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 82.

> Beginning with slavery is crucial precisely because a most profitable effect of the tools of the scientific reason, which produce the Category of Blackness, is precisely the occlusion of the relationship between the enslaved labor and the owners as a sort of juridic arrangement that does not belong in capitalist relations, which are mediated by contract—and which it does not capture through the juridic concept of property. For in the same statement that articulates how slavery allows for the expropriations of the total value produced by chattel labor, Karl Marx disavows any consideration of how enslaved labor, as producer of surplus value that is the blood-nourishing capital, participates in the accumulation of capital.(D. F. D. Silva 83)

Here, Silva makes clear what is usually rendered invisible under predominant frameworks for understanding power and the effects of colonization by producing an account of capitalist space-making that names the West's reliance on enslaved black labor and exploited African bodies of land. Silva discerns a bio/necro-political relationship where black blood onto-epistemologically nourishes capital and capital, in turn, nourishes environmental degradation. The colonial history Mutu offers in her chapter, "The Power of Earth in my Work," punctuates Silva's point. Mutu details the history of Gikuyu people in Kenya being violently displaced from lands they had owned for almost a thousand years and interned by the British in "labor camps, barbed-wire villages, and prisons." This internment came as a result of British desires for an expanded colonial empire embedded in the ideal climate and sumptuous agricultural soils that characterized Kenyan bodies of land in the late 1880s. Furthermore, as scholar-activists like the late Wangari Maathai have noted, the result of colonial invasion and capitalist-driven (post) colonial instability in Kenya, has been deforestation and a significant loss of usable soil. This continues to trouble Kenya's material and political landscape and many other colonized bodies

of land throughout Africa in that have suffered paralleled fates.[111] As Mutu and Silva show, Black (African) bodies and Black (African) blood become the fundamental salve through which environmental degradation is sustained. This degradation is propagated within the confines of "colonial architectures" which included racialized slavery and colonial internment/imprisonment. Following Da Silva, colonial architectures are materials, ideologies, and phenomenological devices—like for, example the Category of Blackness—that enable capital to extract value from indigenous regions and/or from enslaved African labor.(D. F. D. Silva 82)

In the analyses of Figure 1: "100 Lavish Month of Bushwhack" and Figure 2: "Your Story My Curse," then, aim to speak the effects of the ever-intensifying amalgam of environmentally damaging "colonial architectures" that require black blood and woundedness. In both paintings the mottled, rust-like, skin of the black-fem protagonists entrapped in either soil or flora signals proximity to disease and death as rusts cause disease and decay in various organisms.(Hudler 15) Further, the allure and alarm of Mutu's placements of red in these aforementioned painting and the final painting I discuss Figure 3: Funkalicious fruit field," can be read as black blood lubricating the damage of a colonial earth ethic capitalist space-making, and functioning as the salve by which earthly harm continues.

Silva's insights also outline the reasons why the relationship between the black-fem subjectivity and world/earth ethics are impoverished. Most frameworks, including Marxism, that critique power and capital occlude (because of the disavowal of slave labor and colonial total violence) the ability to think, let alone speak the function of the black-fem subject. This comes out even clearer when Silva writes,

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[111] For a narrative that details the ongoing colonial assault on various environments in Kenya, see Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Anchor, 2007).

> Toward a Black Feminist Poethics, with Hortense Spillers, we must face slavery 'as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding' and 'think of the flesh, as a primary narrative. That wounded flesh, the inscriptions of the calculated violence registers what the Category of Blackness hides, living-dead capital profiting from expropriated productive capacity of enslaved bodies and native lands. Her confronting question, questions Time and the World it sustains. Framed in a position that refuses the World of Man, pre-posed by (before and toward) man born in the world, the Feminist Black (racial) Critic becomes in material affectability (relationality, contingency, immediacy). With the gift, the black feminist Poet moves on ignoring the past and future, the old and new, asking the of the World, toward the End of the Subject's apprehension of it, interrupts the desperate reaction—of the questioned.(D. F. D. Silva 91)

Silva's declarations here, in many ways provide the blueprint for this chapter's readings of Mutu's repurposing as method of questioning and comprehension that must first acknowledge black-fem bodies as wounded by living-dead capital, as evidence of primary and on-going high crimes, and as harbingers of more-than-Worldly transformation. Silva draws on Spillers to recognize black woundedness as a standpoint and mode of knowledge that registers the racialized violences that Blackness obscures within and through colonial architectures. Most crucially however, Silva points to a method—a "gift"—by which the black-fems can question very structure of the "World of Man" and the colonial earth ethics to which he clings; and repurpose her wounds to look *through* (not adjacent to or on the margins of) Man's apprehension of the World right into a Black feminist eco-ethical elsewhere.

Reading Mutu's Red and Wounds

Reductive stereotypes that organize social relationships touch nearly every aspect of modern society and ecotheory is no exception. In Figure 1: *One Hundred Lavish Months of Bushwhack*, the title alone as well as a cursory glance at the beguiling protagonist hearkens stereotypes about blackness and femininity—stereotypes that obscure our ability to discern the ways that race, gender, and environmental pollution reinforce each other. Mutu has spoken publicly about her distain for stereotypes, but rather than "attacking stereotypes head-on," through her work she has explains her tendency to "mine stereotypes for their weak foundations and produce figures that are distillations of [her] own issues, beliefs, perceptions, and personal stereotypes."(Firstenberg 143) The striking term 'bushwhack' immediately conjures stereotypes about Africa. A synonym for Bushwhack is "guerillas." "Guerrilla" is a sister-term to bushwhack and as late Kenyan satirist Binyavanga Wainaina notes in his essay, "How to Write About Africa," it carries significant racialized and gendered weight in pervasive imaginings of African life.[112] The dark gray that engulfs the centered protagonist might be read as smog, acid rain, or other forms of ill-contained earthly pollution and immediately signals a bleak and ominous environment. On the one hand, this image could be read as a depiction of a stereotype that paints African fem-bodies (human bodies), as always already victims of an unruly and aggressive African (body of land). This land is barren, scorched, ecologically degraded and sedimented in the past in by uncivilized "bush" people or hyper-violent and destructive, power-mad guerillas.

But etymological considerations of the term "bushwhacker," invite us to examine this work simultaneously as a recapitulation *and critique* of multi-layered ideas and familiar tropes. If

[112] See ("How to Write about Africa") In this chapter Binyavanga Wainaina satirically exposes the stereotypes that dominant the popular imagination about Africa—including the term 'Guerillas'—a synonym for 'Bushwhacker.'

Africa as a privileged geographical reference point is considered alongside other spaces and times, "bushwhacker" can also refer to fighters in the American Civil War. Several recent monographs—including *Bushwhackers: Guerrilla Warfare, Manhood, and the Household in Civil War Missouri* (2016) by historian Joseph Belien Jr., *The Ghosts of Guerilla Memory: How Civil War Bushwhackers Became Gunslingers in the American West* (2016) by Matthew Hulbert, and *Extreme Civil War: Guerilla Warfare, Environment, and Race on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier* (2016) by Matthew Stith, and B*ushwhacker Belles: The Sisters, Wives, and Girlfriends of the Missouri Guerrillas* (2016) by Larry Wood—have been written exploring the ways in which bushwhacker ideals are intimately tied to constructions of white masculinity in the continental US. Yet the protagonist's feminine adornments—a high-heeled shoe, pink lipstick, a thickly embellished skirt, and what appears to be either exposed shapely legs or skin-tight bottoms—suggest that the figure is feminine-identified. The implications behind "bushwhack" or "bushwhacker" here can of course be read as a benign description of travel through dense landscape of flora and fauna, but from an academic perspective by invoking 'bushwhack' in the title, it invites references to western notions of whiteness, guerrilla war-fare, and violence wrought by colonial ideals. The polyvalent, yet almost always masculine notions of "bushwhacker" also ask the viewer to question what symbolic and material "colonial architectures"[113] our protagonist is battling. These colonial architectures include but are not limited to the toxic white masculinity detailed in the aforementioned historical monographs as well as the toxic black masculinity, essentialist stereotypes about uncivilized African-fem bodies, and decontextualized narratives about African bodies of land satirized under Wainaina's critique of stereotypical western writings about Africa.

[113] (D. F. D. Silva 82)

In addition to the title registering a battle or violence of some kind, the red of the protagonist's wounds guide the viewer's overwhelmed eye in "Bushwhack." Using Cut-and-pasted printed paper infused with Mutu's signature use of watercolor, synthetic polymer paint, and pressure-sensitive stickers on transparentized paper; the panoply of materials wrestle for our attention until red—which could either be ink or paint—beckons us, focusing our attention on a wound on the left side of the protagonist's head. This wound has transformed the body's material into a mass of blood splatters, and yet their bodily gestures are not attempting to tend to or cover presumed trauma. The brightness of the red calls to mind images of fresh blood spilled, signaling new pain, new violence, and new traumas suffered. The time and cause of the wounds, however, are entirely up for debate, but wounds this protagonist has sustained may also result from the fact that in order to facilitate colonial, capitalist space-making, black-fem bodies—as Nicole Fleetwood has explained—must continue to be hypervisible and rendered "excessive" so as to justify their violent state-sanctioned containment.[114]

The exact causes remain irresolvable—suggesting the simultaneity of multiple causes—but what is for sure is that the gravity of the wounds we witness in this piece are undeniable. Yet our protagonist's face does not convey anguish. Instead the figure wears an expression that might best be described as a placid side-eye—variations of which can be found on several figures in Mutu's oeuvre. The side-eye, it is a colloquial term that originated within black diasporic culture and describes a collection of facial expressions and gestures that subtly convey or disclose sentiments of dissatisfaction, discomfort, or contempt from within the confines of a highly surveilled and/or dangerous physical position. Given the history of black women's highly surveilled physical positions and exposure to vulnerability within settler-colonial

[114] (Fleetwood, "Excess Flesh: Black Performing Hypervisibility")

landscapes, plantations, prisons, White houses, and other colonial structures, it makes sense black-fem subjects have conjured gestures that allow them to express themselves, protect themselves by averting their gazes, and communicate with other knowing subjects all while maintaining enough relative safety to survive.

Figuring Fungal Flesh

Figure 2: Your Story, My Curse (2006)

Dimensions: 101.5 x 109 in (257.81 x 276.86 cm)

Copyright: Wangechi Mutu

Mutu's use of the side-eye continues into her 2006 piece, "Your Story, My Curse." In this diptych, three figures take center stage and discerning who or what might be the protagonist is much more of a challenge.-The protagonist shapes the reader's concerns of the text, marks out the main themes, frames the narratives, marks who the reader should identify with, and guides the direction(s) of the reader's empathy. Identification and empathy are difficult to place and process in this diptych. On the left side, we see two figures—a larger one

enmeshed in the bottom of the plane, bent at the waist, with a slightly curved back signaling what appears to be a very uncomfortable position. Her eyes shoot the viewer a side-eye, but this one does not retain the same knowing glance of the protagonist in "Bushwhack." The side-eyes of the figure in "Your Story," appear to be pleading with the viewer—begging for an empathy that cannot be afforded from within the logics of her confinement. By contrast, the slightly smaller figure that sits atop of her does not appear bothered at all. She rests her buttocks, back, and legs nonchalantly atop of the lowered figure. She also wears a side-eye, but hers retains the placidity discussed earlier, daring the viewer to question what could be read as a problematic relationship between the two—as she is literally using the lowered figure's entire body as a recliner.

While the reclining figure relaxes atop the lowered one, her foot seems to be balding the lowered figure's head while her own head is adorned with an elaborate, amalgamated crown of birds, fish-heads, gold twine, and silvery feathers. Protruding from the lowered figure's bent lower body are brown flora or perhaps spores that spiral upward, supporting the weight of the seated figure. But the brown spores, also grow outward into the right diptych, appearing to be nourishing a much smaller centered figured. Though no less monstrous than the figures to their left, this figure has legs-splayed, care-free gait of an innocent, playful and possibly oblivious young child. The skin of all three figures is multi-colored and all intensely reminiscent of earthly fungus of all kinds. Though the vegetation in Mutu's work is often read as flora, thinking about the entire image as representative of fungus deepens our reading of the relationships between the figures.

In both figure 1 and figure 2, what can be read as fungal flesh maps onto all the figures Mutu renders, inviting question about how she achieves the visualization of mottled fungal flesh that resembles these simple yet bewildering organisms. Her inventive use of materials

includes ink and mylar—crucial elements of her controlled yet spontaneous process. When asked how her figures come into being and how they retain the mottled flesh that calls fungal imagery to mind, Mutu has explained,

> That happens within the lines that I want the drawing to be in. But if it pools beyond a certain point, it creates a river and sometimes you don't know where it will go. It might go from the belly down to the knee and if you leave the work for five hours, when you come back, you realize the knee has turned into two legs or something…Most of the work in my show, "Yo•n•I," at the Victoria Miro Gallery in London this year was overpoured so that it could become what it wanted to be in the end. I call it "determining." I allow the chemical and natural qualities of the material to decide how it wants to lay on the paper. For example, in A dragon kiss always ends in ashes, the figure was almost perfectly placed on the paper and when I came back, her face had opened up. So, this dragon or serpent that she's kissing actually created itself overnight. That kind of thing is important because being an artist wouldn't be interesting if I knew everything. I'm intuiting some of the stuff I'm working on, absorbing from the culture, and I haven't processed it. So I'm far more likely to be honest and unedited. If I know everything about the result, I might as well be doing graphic design. Also, you can get really good at your own thing and you start making work that bores you, and when you're bored with your work, then people get bored with it too. So I try to keep this element of surprise. I don't know and understand everything, even things that I care about, *so I want to know what this process can teach me about life, about the work and about myself.* (Enright 5)

In order to facilitate, repurposing as a skill-set, Mutu has to trust the agency of the materials during her creative process, especially because of the way her process invites an unexpectedness

that helps her to understand interactions between materials that she might not otherwise know. When asked how a central idea or aesthetic in one of her collages comes to be, Mutu has explained a process that she calls "determining" where, though she is the mastermind of her vision, the figures that emerge from her unique process retain enough agency to surprise her by bringing themselves into being. The combination of her intuition, command of materials, and humble curiosity allows Mutu to assist her protagonists in bringing themselves into being—and to in some ways, author their own ambiguous existences.

Though discerning the protagonist is difficult, we might settle on the lowered figure particularly because her relationship seems to ground and connect all the other figures and materials in the diptych. She is connected and likely of service to what appears to be the more privileged figure that reclines on her. Her body and the materials that protrude from her where her genitalia might be are literally nourishing the child-like figure that skips playfully behind her. Her legs are enmeshed into spore-like materials that protrude from the ground beneath her, and though bloodied wounds aren't fastened to the three centered humanoid figures themselves, bloodied woundedness seem to agitate the material at the bottom of the plane. Interestingly, the largest figured is literally embedded in the materials at the bottom of the diptych and though the other figures are connected to this bloodied material by virtue of the lowered figure, their entrapment in the dulled brownish red is much more intimate.

In this piece, Mutu collapses human bodies and fungal bodies. In doing so, this piece can be read as a visualization of how critical black-fems are to the stabilization of extant structures of power and the damage—enacted by dulled blood—those structures cause to earthly shared material resources. Critics typically read the skin of Mutu's protagonists as diseased flesh, which is incredibly generative for thinking through public and women's health concerns. Another reading however might consider black-fem flesh as fungus or as the kind of living

decay that fungus enables gives way to other perspectives as well. This alternate reading draws attention to the ways that we overlook black-fem contributions in environmental conversations precisely because of the processes of gendering and racialization that continue to instrumentalized black-fems. It draws attention to the ways in which black-fems, like fungi stabilize the entirely of the global ecosystem because of their role as harbingers of transformation and the earth chief "recyclers" of organic (and much some inorganic) material. These points require our reflection, especially as we contend with the fact that ideas about fungi within the early sciences and have led to gross misrepresentations, general lack of knowledge, unhelpful assumptions, and denigration that persists to this day. We have a robust knowledge of the harm stereotypes have on people, but we pay less attention to other kinds of organisms, misunderstood in the western cultural imagination that play in irreplaceable role in in managing waste and decay on the planet, and that might, and Paul Stamets insists, offer keys to stabilizing our increasingly damaged earth.(Stamets)

In this Figure 2 specifically, but also many others, Mutu displaces familiar *optical euphemisms*[115] for black femininity (black breasts, black buttocks, black genitals) to make room for alternative optical-euphemisms of black femininity (gaudy fashion, animality, or enmeshment in waste and earthly material such as banana peels, soil, trees, flora, fungus), that brings the non-distinctions between different material bodies into focus. The wound-induced vulnerability that derives from various mechanisms of environmentally degrading colonial architectures in Figure 2 makes clear the indispensability of routinely occluded black-fem bodies to the stabilization of the economic and material order on earth, the multiple functions black-fems miraculously and painfully perform (including mothering while serving privileged

[115] I conjured the term *optical euphemism* to refer to reductive, visual placeholders that reinforce stereotypical understandings of various subjects—in this case, black-fem subjects.

others for example), and the routine wounds and intensified exposure to environmental toxicity to which black-fems are routinely subjected because of their onto-epistemological functions in a world governed by colonial earth ethics.

Speaking Wounded Knowledges and Knowledges from Wounds

The subject of racialized and gendered woundedness is a recurrent theme in the black feminist intellectual tradition (see Farah Jasmine Griffin's "Textual Healing," Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Carol Henderson's "Scarring the Black Body," and Venetria Patton's "Stigmata.") These black feminist theorists spotlight creative representations of black women carrying wounds—psychic, ancestral, and physical. They reveal the racialized and gendered woundedness instantiated by the Atlantic slave trade and how it ontologically marks the bodies of black and feminine subjects.[116] Their offerings inform my own theorization of black-fem woundedness as an irresolvable ontological problem within manifestations of ecocriticism/ecotheory that fail to contend with the colonial earth ethic that can often undergird it. By imbibing their scholarship, these black feminist theorists invite us to consider the foreclosure of resolution, reconciliation, or "being healed" as a point of completion. I find it important to note that my use of the phrase "being healed" is different from black feminist notions of "healing"—processes crucial for the continuance of black-fem led communities and life.

As I consider the unspeakable ways-of-being that shape black-fem ecological knowledges depicted in Mutu's work, I rely heavily on Farah Griffin's elucidation of "textual healing." Griffin writes,

[116] See Venetria Patton, "Stigmata: Embodying the Scars of Slavery," in *Imagining the Black Female Body - Reconciling Image* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 59–76. See also (Griffin) See also (Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book") See also (Henderson)

> Healing does not pre-suppose notions of a coherent and whole subject. The body is not a 'given concrete one can call on or return to in order to recover a truer self'…the healing is never permanent: it requires constant attention and effort. I am using the term healing to suggest the way in which the body, literally and discursively scarred, ripped, and mutilated, has to learn to love itself, to function in the world with other bodies and often in opposition to those persons and things that seek to destroy it. Of course, the body never can return to a pre-scarred state. It is not a matter of getting back to a 'truer' self, but instead of claiming the body, scars and all—in a narrative of love and care. As such, healing does not deny the construction of bodies, but instead suggests that they can be constructed differently for different ends.(Griffin 524)

With this offering, Griffin performs the careful work of explaining the ways in which healing is a process by which self-love is learned and is a politically-motivated project meant to thwart the effects of material and discursive wounds. It is through care, Griffin argues, that constructed bodies—even onto-epistemologically wounded Black bodies for example—can agentially reformulate themselves to achieve alternative self-fashioned purposes.

The idea of black-fem woundedness as an ontological condition of a colonial earth ethic forms the portal through which I enter into ecological epistemologies and join Sarah Jaquette Ray when she queries in her book *The Ecological Other*, "How did it come to be that connecting to nature and cultivating an environmental ethic require having a fit body?"[117] She poses this question to explore the ways in which the myths of masculinity, ableist exploration, and conquest continue to hold exalted credence in the environmentalisms of the West. Ray also asserts that,

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[117] Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (University of Arizona Press, 2013): 36.

> If environmental literature and adventure culture promote the notion that connecting to nature is a corporeal act, an act that requires a complete, whole, preferably fit body, and if environmental and adventure discourses convey the message that modernity, especially technology, has severed our connection to nature, then alienation occurs at the level of the body, *since the problem is that modernity's technologies have compromised the body's ability to perceive and thereby appreciate nature.*[118]

Ray's insights offer fabulously fertile ground for thinking through the ableist, exclusionary practices that uphold many—albeit, not all—dominant forms of environmental ethics. When we center black-fem subjectivity however, an alternative set of questions and problems emits from her formulation. As many black feminist theorists from Deb Willis to Hortense Spillers to Dorothy Roberts to Patricia Hill Collins have pointed out, black-fem bodies and the images that control them have been brutally instrumentalized to serve a wide range of political, economic, and cultural ends. In the argument above, Ray is likely referring to the non-human bodies of trains, televisions, and computers as examples of objects/materials blamed for compromising our ability to perceive and thereby appreciate nature as modern subjects. What Ray elides however, is the ways in which certain human bodies are wounded by processes of racialization that blacken and gender them, transforming them into bio/necropolitical technologies barred from or thought to lack the capacity to perceive and thereby appreciate nature in normative ways. Among other reasons, this happens because of the ways in which black-fem bodies are always already construed as compromised or contaminated in order to reinforce the "normalcy" of white femininity and white masculinity.[119] In the above quote, Ray lays out these shortcomings in mainstream environmentalism and the ways in which

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[118] (Ray) (pp. 37)
[119] (Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*) Pp. 110.

environmentalism's reliance on corporeal experience is flawed and delimited. On this point, we very much agree. Rather than displacing the notion that "relating to nature is a corporeal act" entirely, her critiques implore me to think through the processes of racialization and gendering that condition a body-led ecoethic that some subjects while others do not.

Ray joins a group of scholars with intentions of broadening and the loosening the logics of ecological epistemologies from being relevant or available to only certain kinds of (able) bodies. In the volume *Prismatic Ecology*, contributors attempt this inclusion by widening the scope and spectrum of colors through which we might discern ecological thinking. For example, Lovino and Opperman write,

> The first step here is to extend ecological discourse beyond the monochromatic language of green (which, said incidentally, is imperceptible in the eyes of many humans suffering from Daltonism, or the inability to distinguish red from green). To do so, *Prismatic Ecology* engages a sensuous conversation with the readers, taking them progressively 'beyond': beyond standardized discourses about the color of ecology and beyond colors themselves, showing how unilateral and incomplete is a world perceived only through human eyes.[120]

The impulse to move "beyond" the constraints we routinely tie to the category of the human is useful; particularly in this case given the over attention to the color green as an optical euphemism for all things "sustainable"—is admirable. In theory this opens up ecological discourse to aspirational post-humanness where our speculative theories can at best take us into utopian futures, or at the very least give us an almost clairvoyant eye that might help us to better conceptualize our present crises.

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[120] Serenella Lovino and Serpil Oppermann, "Onward," in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2014): 330.

Theorist Zakiyyah Jackson challenges unquestioned assumptions however when she asks in her essay "Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement 'Beyond the Human,'" "What and crucially whose conception of humanity are we moving beyond? Moreover, what is entailed in the very notion of a beyond?"(Jackson 215) It is with Jackson's question in mind that I return to Lovino and Opperman, who go on to note that,

> The ecologies in this book are therefore post green and post color, which is another way of saying that the fate of ecology is to multiply, and to become postman. But, to become postman, the discourse of ecology must try to become human first. *Prismatic Ecology*, in fact does not aim to neutralize the human eye. Quite the opposite: it wants to enrich the spectrum perceived by the human and make us aware of it, in ecological terms. It wants to explore the role colors have in building not only the green rhetoric of ecological discourse but also human imagination about life, place, elements, processes, and changes.[121]

It is interesting, then, that an entire monograph—which engages discourses of humanism, post-humanism, and color—engages very little sustained dialogue on the role of race in ecologies epistemological formations.[122] The volume, in all in creative queries performs exactly what Jackson cautions against as she argues that, "far too often, gestures toward the 'post' or the 'beyond' effectively ignore praxes of humanity and critiques produced by black people, particularly those praxes which are irreverent to the normative production of 'the human' or illegible from within the terms of its logic."(Jackson 216) More often than not, the contributors

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[121] (Lovino and Oppermann) 330.

[122] Bernd Herzogenrath's "White," in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1–21 does mention the obvious whiteness of ecocriticism, but quickly moves away from any sustained critique of those implications in his discussion of whiteness.

to *Prismatic Ecology* theorize from within the normative universalizing logics that Da Silva has explained and critiqued across her body of work.[123] Moreover, their conceptions of "post-greenness" as *progressive* obscures/erases the traditions of black-fem subjects that have long-been pushing against the thresholds that delimit what Jackson has termed our "euro(andro)(anthropo)centric" understandings of ecology.[124]

I agree with Jackson, that black (feminist) ecological epistemologies present in black-fem cultural productions, have always been post-green or at least have operated in excess of it. Black-fem bodies have functioned as universality's foils and have thusly never able to "properly" embody whiteness/Europeanness' logics of reason, containment, order, and purity *or* greenness' aspirations for ecological reconciliation. To *really* become post-Man, the discourse of ecology must first acknowledge and renounce its seemingly innocuous ignorance of certain processes of gendering and racialization that decenter and occlude the kinds of ethics discerned in excess of (white and green) ecological discourse. Like the contributors in *Prismatic*, I do not aim to neutralize the ways that humans perceive color—and I especially do not aim to neutralize wounding markers of race and gender. Ultimately, though I chart the aesthetic and bio/necro-political conditions of trauma for certain bodies, my goal is not to strip already marginalized subjects of their agency. Instead I illuminate the ways that ecoactivists such as Mutu, for example, visualize a celebration and affirmation of the methods by which black-fem subjects in particular have conjured alternative and ways of knowing and modes of being from

[123] For a more extended discussion of the logics of "universality" see Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2007).
[124] (Jackson 217) Jackson uses the term "euro(andro)(anthropo)centric" to classify the perspective from which most extant conceptions of the 'human' and 'post-human' cling and derive.

their wounds, even as they are entrenched in and disproportionately exposed to environmental degradation.

Funking with the Fruit

In these readings and in the ones that follow, though critical, the goal is not to advance any correctives or omniscient claims about the exact or authentic meanings behind Mutu's work. Instead, this chapter puts Black feminist theorists into conversation with Mutu's visual and methodological cues, in order to understand that which is often obscured. This chapter mines Mutu's art objects for their theoretical contributions, and to excavate questions which often remain buried beneath what Huey Copeland as identified as "the very process of vision itself [as it] is deformed by race and racial will."(Copeland) Moreover, though she has repeatedly marked her concern for black women and the black female body in numerous interviews, Mutu has also observed people's tendency to reduce the figures in her work solely to depictions of black women.[125] These analyses, however, are meant to invite readers to (close) Mutu alongside a black feminist intellectual tradition insistent on—not just black women—but the reconfigurations of standpoints that fortify "the World of Man" and its racialized, colonial logics.[126]

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[125] Sarah Jane Cervenak, "Like Blood or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu's Resistant Harvests," *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016): 398.

[126] (D. F. D. Silva) For more extended discussions of "Man's" apprehension of the "World" see Alexander G. Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2014). Furthermore, Weheliye's work builds on and departs from Sylvia Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

Figure 3: Funkalicious Fruit Field (2007)

Dimensions: 92 x 106

© 2017 Wangechi Mutu

That said, repurposing as method and mode of looking contain and exceeds the ways in which blackness figures human bodies in addition to exceeding the methods by which a colonial earth ethic organizes space, time, and organisms. As Copeland notes, "Mutu's art might be said to challenge what Mel Y. Chen, following linguistic theory, calls the '*animacy hierarchy*, which conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of non-living material in orders of value and priority.'"[127] Here Copeland, by way of Chen, illuminates the function of Mutu's art as a conceptual destabilizing agent. This disruption of' 'animacy hierarchy' is arguably a feature in all of her work. In "Funkalicious Fruit field" however, Mutu

[127] (Copeland) 223.

provides a critique of animacy hierarchies by offering an exaggerated, depiction of flora, fauna, and vegetation that challenges most depictions of the "natural landscape" as well as patterns that have shaped the biological and natural sciences.

Mutu titles her above piece a "Funkalicious Fruit Field," and yet fruits such as apples, oranges, bananas, and berries seem a long way out of the frame. Here she constructs her field using the same kinds of materials used to render the fungal flesh in figures 1 and 2: ink, paint, mixed media, and plastic pearls—all collaged onto Mylar. Without repurposing, discerning the materials in "Funkalicious" as fruit might not be as apparent to some or most viewers/readers lacking an introduction into mycology. Moreover, the metaphorical and philosophical elasticity of *funk* as knowledge production might not be readily discernible without offerings from theorist L.H. Stallings who insists that, "funks exists as a philosophy that usurps the divide between eros (life) and *thanatos (death)* since its sustained by otherly human and nonhuman belief in the supernatural, *afterlife*, and *reanimation*."[128]

Chen and Stallings offer a different lens through with Mutu's earthly critiques take shape—critiques that depart from many critiques of Mutu's work and familiar conversations in the environmental humanities. For example, while other critics have paid much attention to female bodily distortions and the technological syntheses that accompany the gendered and raced mutilations displayed in her work, according to scholar Karen Milbourne, less attention has been paid to "land, earth, and trees" even as they "have long been a central, though overlooked, aspect of her work—both as a medium and as a subject."(Milbourne et al.) Building on Milbourne's critiques, it became hard to ignore the fact that even less critical attention has been to the ways in which Mutu engages fungus—an incredibly important component of land,

[128] (Stallings 3) Emphasis mine.

earth, and trees, a recurring feature in her work. This lack of critical attention seems even more jarring when keeping in mind fungal researcher Igor V. Grigoriev's notes that, "The kingdom Fungi represents one of the largest branches of the Fungal Tree of Life with more than 1 billions years of evolutionary history and more than 1.5 million species of which about 100,000 are known."(Martin)

Repurposing continues to be helpful here. As I explained in previous sections, repurposing as method/skill of questioning and comprehension acknowledges black-fem bodies as wounded as living-dead capital and as evidence of primary and on-going high crimes under a colonial earth ethic, but also as harbingers of more-than-Worldly transformation. With this skill, a black feminist ecoethic can be used to begin to and question very structure of the "World of Man," to look *through* (not adjacent to or on the margins of) Man's apprehension of the World right into a Black feminist elsewhere. Mutu's "Funkalicious" adds much needed texture to that endeavor, helping to think through a visualization of repurposing with of fungus as a guide. Fungus asks us to wonder about what is at the bottom, to explore what is enmeshed in the (literal and metaphorical soil) and asks us to acknowledge what organisms we're missing and what happens when we throw materials away. Even as Mutu centers black femininity in many of her pieces, she also rejects the normative ways in which black female artists are discussed and delimited, producing works that decenter a narrative of human exceptionalism and helping us to continue (re)considering the organisms and objects we routinely overlook.

"Funkalicious fruit field," extends her Mutu's critique of Man's World into the level of the bacterial and fungal. Splashed onto a blue-grayish backdrop, dozens of organisms of many sizes we might discern as "fruits" spiral and twine into each other across a fantastically rendered field. The fruits appear to be moving—swaying to an absent musicality that might be perceived if the "funkaliciousness" of the title is imagined to be filling the space of this

unfamiliar field. Some fruits—pinkish and brownish—protrude proudly from the bottom of the plane, while others more metallic and wood-like, wrap themselves into and around the taller fruits. These fruits which again, look nothing like any of the apples, berries, mangoes, or avocadoes one might pick from a tress or vine—only reveal themselves as that after but as a deeper gaze exposes their spongy flesh. The sponginess and hue of their bodies make them more readily detectable as the fruiting bodies of a wider network of mysterious fungus.

Stuck onto or into these enormous fungus-like organisms are small cut-out images of rhinoceros, leopards, cattle, and hyena. These are animals that, as Mutu has pointed out, receive a great deal of attention in narratives about Africa. Their size and spectacularity dominate the West's imagination of Africa as well as the 'endangered species" messages that color mainstream environmental ethics. Further, as Mutu notes, "There are many ways to describe how Africa has been colonized and modified and packaged and branded by the West, by Europe, and certainly by America. The image of Africa is much more abstract and problematic in America."(Hansen-Bundy) The African landscape, as it usually gets reduced to "simplified sound bites"(Hansen-Bundy) and distributed in the West, gives very little attention to the intricacies of the ways in which organisms interact with each other beyond the hierarchical order that is so easily packaged and sold. This is not to say that an attention to animals—endangered or not—is not important. Centering fungi, however, reveals some of the blind spots we cling to in our reductive thinking about "environment" in the West.

In his book *Magical Mushrooms, Mischievous Molds*, George Hudler provides an extensive, mycological and cultural history of fungi in the West. He begins his first chapter, "Classification and Naming" by unexpectedly detailing, in exquisite prose, the process by which earthly organisms use the sun's energy. Hudler then goes on to detail the process of photosynthesis—the process by which plants convert sunlight to useful energy. Photosynthesis

is of course, a base concept that almost none of us can escape high school biology. Hudler, however, situates photosynthesis within a wider narrative about the chain reaction of energy transfer. He writes,

> …The energy captured by plants is not used only to ensure their own future; the survival of almost every organism that is not a plant also depends on the work that plants do. Many organisms eat plants, thereby 'swallowing' the energy and releasing it for their own purposes through digestion and subsequent metabolic processes. Others eat animals that eat plants. No matter how long the chain gets, every link along the way uses some of the sun's energy, originally bound in plants tissues, to do the work need for its own growth and development. So long as the sun shines and plants keep rowing and trapping its energy and feeding the planet's herbivores, life ought to continue ad infinitum.(Hudler 4)

For many, this is where the story of the relationship between different kinds of organisms begins and ends. The narrative Hudler provides offers an explanation of the process by which earthly life is sustained, establishes plants as the bedrock of those processes, situates producing-plant and consuming-animals as other crucial elements of the process, and the description—rehearsed in many text books and common explanations of the "circle of life"—implicitly and explicitly privileges a narrative of on-going, if never-ending process (or progress) of production and consumption crucial to the maintenance of life on earth.

Hudler however, only adheres to this common narrative for a brief time in order to disrupt it—adding a crucial and often overlooked component to what he calls an "idyllic scenario." As he explains,

> Without some means to complete a cycle, the soil could eventually become so depleted that a lack of essential elements could bring new plant growth to a screeching

> halt…One way or another, spent plant material has to be reduced to a tolerable volume or we would find ourselves, our house, our roads, and our water courses totally overwhelmed by it…One must also cope with the bodies of all those animals who, though natural processes of their own, have reached the end of their useful lives…Obviously, since life has been continuous on Earth for millions of years, a means of making room for future generations and of recycling scarce resources to nourish their growth has been essential.(Hudler 4)

Mutu's "Funkalicious" opens a door for thinking through what is normally overlooked within and atop of the "natural" landscape and our ideas of it. While lush plants and fantastic animals crowd our ideas and engagement with nature and/or a circle of life—very little attention is paid to the essential processes by which organisms manage earthly waste.

By scaling up the size of these fruiting fungi, depicting animals as miniscule by comparison, and placing green material at the bottom of the diptych, Mutu asks us to consider the great recyclers—fungi—as the essential organisms stabilizing the life cycle rather the plants (the great producers) or animals (the great consumers). In "Funkalicious" there is a disorienting beauty to the ways in which the materials—flora, fauna, and fungi—become indistinguishable from one another—making visible an operation of transformed materials that, throughout the history of the natural sciences and certainly in lay discourses eludes most people. Like in Mutu's work, Hudler's text centers fungi—which in itself is a disruptive critical move. His justification for this is rooted in his insistence that the functions of fungi are arguably the most important in ecological life cycles. According to him,

> These seemingly fragile organisms possess a powerful array of chemicals known as enzymes that ooze out of the fungus body and, like two hands pulling apart Tinkertoys, systematically uncouple some of the bonds that hold atoms of organic molecules

> together. The reduced chemicals are then absorbed through the walls of the fungus cells, where they are further undone to provide nourishment for the organism's relentless growth.(Hudler 5)

Keeping Hudler's insights in mind while reading "Funkalicious," the sponginess of the pinkish figures lend themselves to the illusory fragility that fungal fruit seem to possess. The size and movement that Mutu imbues her fruits with however, speak to the power that Hudler observes as fungi change the atomical composition of other organisms' enzymes in order to replenish soils and provide fundamental foodstuffs for other organisms in need.

Mutu takes her visualization of organic life cycles a step further however, destabilizing the boundaries between organic material, inorganic material, and the ways in which fungus (in addition to more familiar tropes like a monster or a cyborg in new materialist studies), form the link between organic and inorganic material by way of fungal recycling. As Hudler further explains,

> Cellulose, pectin, and lignin—the stuff plant cells are made of—are particularly vulnerable to attack. But the fungus enzymes also go after flesh and bones, plastic and paint, gas and oil, and many other complex materials. And the best evidence indicates that they have been doing their recycling for a very long time—at least as long as the 400 millions years or so that land plants have been around, and probably closer to 900 millions years.(Hudler 5)

If we take these pinkish brownish figures to be fungal fruits and read their movement as a signal of a process, we can discern a snapshot in time of the recycling underway. By blurring the distinctions between seemingly inorganic metallic material, seemingly organic green, and browned wooded material, oils and gases captured in the bubbled bluish grayish background that engulfs the fruits, and attaching all these materials to fungi—Mutu spotlights an organism

and a narrative in the biological sciences that has rarely if ever received the kind of scrutiny that its importance demands.

Moreover, though the organisms depicted in "Funkalicious" are not necessarily human, given what Geoffrey Clough calls their "ancient lineage" in the diets, lives, and minds of humans, it is not surprise that the bloody blossoms that populate Mutu's other collages spring up, near the soil in this work too. This begs us to rethink and reconsider the connections between our human induced wounds and the wounds sustained by other maligned or overlooked organisms performing essential and yet misunderstood functions on our shared.

Repurposing Woundedness

Lest my reader think I aim to mark bloodied woundedness and challenges to survival as markers of disempowerment, I instead seek to reveal the way that Mutu's fantastic fungi, seductive reds and splattered wounds create, to borrow language from Spillers, a "space of 'contradiction, indictment, and the refusal"(Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture") of wounds as inherently disempowering.

Divergently, the protagonist's wounds in "Bushwhack" (figure 1), at the head and foot can easily be read as adornments. The blood at the head is proudly displayed like a crown and the blood at the foot, which might normatively be understood as a hindrance to mobility invites our considerations of non-ableist modes of being in the world. While wounded or even disabled, it is hard to argue that this protagonist is disempowered or lacks agency. Mutu—refusing the ableist sensibilities that proliferate in environmental discourse[129]—turns the normative logics of woundedness-as-disempowerment on its head. The centered figure's gesture does not stop at

[129] See Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (University of Arizona Press, 2013) for a critique of ableism in the environmental movement, environmental studies, and ecocriticism.

relative safety or mere survival, the protagonist's side-eye instead opens up to an awkward yet elegant bodily expression that could be dancing, fighting, or some combination of the two. The image refuses a definitive reading, but that refusal illuminates the agential yet precarious space between victim and aggressor when certain bodies fall prey to racialized and gendered ecological wounding processes.

To close, I offer some open-ended thoughts we might consider together about the nature of power, its relationship to certain bodies, and how we conceptualize earthly damage. Elsewhere Mutu has noted that, "Violent incidences are often fastened to images of privilege in my drawings…There is this tiny percentage of people who live like emperors because elsewhere blood is being shed."(Firstenberg 142) It is with these insights in mind that I want to turn our attention to the easily unnoticed smaller figure in the right corner of figure 1. If the larger figure wasn't confounding enough, the smaller figure brings even more questions into view.

The relationship between the two figures in Figure 1 is unclear—but the fact that the darker figure seems to be serving the lighter-skinned figure calls to mind centuries of racialized depictions of whiteness and blackness in the art historian's mind.[130]

[130] Critical conversations with Huey Copeland added significant texture to my understanding of the visualization of black servitude throughout the Western art historical canon. Moreover, Copeland's discussion of Mutu's destabilized hierarchies in Copeland's "Flow and Arrest," *Small Axe* 19, no. 3 48 (November 1, 2015): 205–24, doi:10.1215/07990537-3341789 catalyzed my questions about the relational ambiguity between figures displayed in Mutu's work.

Figure 4: Black Servitude throughout the Western Art Historical Canon

In the images in Figure 4, a white supremacist hierarchy—inextricably linked to black and brown exploitation and servitude and a subdued, darkened physical landscape is firmly in place, but in Mutu's pieces—particularly in Figure 1—we are left to wonder about whether this relationship is voluntary or mandatory. Is the relationship racialized, exploitative or mutually beneficial? Which figures and organisms constitute vulnerability and who is vulnerable to what? The smaller figure could be a victim of the larger one—positioned literally underneath the larger figure's white skinned foot—but the larger figure is the one that has or is currently sustaining serious wounds. The size and space between the two figures invites us to wonder whether or not the smaller figure is just slightly avoiding being stepped on by alerting the larger figure to their marginalized presence, or by contrast we might wonder if the smaller figure is supporting the larger figure from a position of disguised of camouflaged safety, hidden away from the amalgam of earthly damage I discussed earlier.

One of the most dazzling features of Mutu's work is that the relationships between various' bodies and materials are intentionally left ambiguous and allow the viewers racial/gender/spatial politics to (however uncomfortably) to make up their own mind.
To begin the chapter, I asked "what kinds of problems or questions rise from ecotheory's epistemologies when we place occluded black-fem bodies at the center?" In light of our difficulty to conceive of black-fem bodies at the center of most epistemologies—especially ecological ones—Mutu speaks wounded bodies and makes visible amalgams of racialization and gendering that conceal colonial engravings on exploited black bodies and bodies of land malformed into 'blood nourishing' capital. (D. F. D. Silva)

I want to end this chapter, and spill into the next with another question: if most epistemologies can't speak black-fem subjects despite the centrality of their woundedness to the destruction of earth, how might we continue to mine black-fem art, not for resolutions to poorly conceptualized problems, but for better understandings of our hopeful, yet damaged presents?

Chapter Three:

Wangari Maathai's Black/African/Indigenous Wisdoms

Dr. Wangari Maathai was the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her leadership with the Green Belt Movement (GBM). The GBM was an organization responsible for the women-led reforestation of Kenya from the late 1970's to the present. By the time she was awarded the coveted prize in 2004, the GBM had successfully galvanized thousands of Kenyan women to plant millions of trees throughout the region. This tremendous effort often overshadowed her other incredible accomplishments. She won a Kennedy scholarship to study in the U.S. in 1960 and became the first woman to earn a PhD in East Africa at what is now the University of Nairobi after receiving her master's degree from the University of Pittsburgh in the United States. She served as the chairwoman if the National Council of Women of Kenya from 1981 to 1987, founded Kenya's Green Party, and in 2003 was elected to Kenya's Parliament as the Assistant Secretary for Environment, Wildlife and Natural Resources. She wrote a number of published books including *The Green Belt Movement* (2004), *The Challenge for Africa* (2010) and *Replenishing the Earth* (2010) which detail the principles that underpin Maathai's theories of political ecology. While much attention has been paid to Maathai's collection of political and activist honors, far less attention has been paid to her strategic skills as a verbal artist—particularly as those skills manifested in her 2006 memoir *Unbowed.*

As Maathai begins her memoir *Unbowed*, she describes the events surrounding her birth. In her descriptions, she provides a glimpse into her entrance into an intergenerational family inclusive of several different life-forms taking many shapes. Most crucially, she uses her birth to foreground her embeddedness within and connection to the land. She writes,

> Two weeks into mbura ya njahl, the season of the long rains, my mother delivered me at home in a traditional mud-walled house with no electricity or running water. She was

> assisted by a local midwife as well as women family members and friends. My parents were peasant farmers, members of the Kikuyu community, one of forty-two ethnic groups in Kenya and then, as now, the most populous. They lived from the soil and also kept cattle, goats, and sheep. At the time of my birth, the land around Ihithe was still lush, green, and fertile.[131]

In matter-of-fact prose, Maathai introduces us to crucial elements of her birth. Before her mother is even mentioned, Maathai signals the importance of mbura ya njahl—the season of long rains. This season carries her mother, the local midwife, the mud-walled house, other Kikuyu women from her community, and, of course her, infant self. The passage also emphasizes the significance of this occasion being orchestrated and executed by women, more specifically, by Black women.[132] The short passage is grounding—and sets the stage for many others that follow which demonstrate two primary pillars that structure *Unbowed*: 1) the vital presence and activities of indigenous black-fems and 2) the physical environments—such as mbura ya njahl—*in which* and *with which* they form community.

I contend that Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* reveals the Black/African/Indigenous feminist principles underpinning the ecological ethic artfully embedded within her narrative. Additionally, I speak to the methods by which she embeds this critique—identifying a strategy of repurposing African indigeneity. But why, one might ask, would African indigeneity or Black (African) femininity need repurposing and what do either of those things have to do with ecologically sustainable futures? The answer to this question demands more investigation of architectures that undergird the colonial earth ethic governing our ecological present. For a colonial earth ethic to emerge and flourish in many colonized

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[131] Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism." 3.
[132] Kikuyus are among many ethnic groups in Kenya racialized as Black.

parts of Africa, indigenous populations and settlers alike had to ascribe to the belief that pre-colonial African indigenous governance systems[133] were backward, stagnant, unsophisticated, and uncivilized. They also had to believe settler/colonial governance systems were superior to and capable of offering indigenous people a gateway to a "better" life. Though colonial governance systems and the ethics, technologies, and architectures that accompany them have proven harmful, if not deadly to Black indigenous populations throughout history, these ideas persist to this day.

For example, in his 2014 *Guardian* article "Why has Africa fallen behind the rest of the world's economies?" political economist Kingsley Chiedu Moghalu claims that, "Africa has fallen behind because its people, despite their historical abilities in science, have not done this in an organized manner. The more the western world was able to invent and innovate in the past 300 years, the more "civilized" it became. And as Africa, in comparison, remained closer to nature and was dominated by natural phenomena, the more "primitive" and backward the continent seemed."[134] Though Moghalu recognizes western colonialism as an "evil epoch" that produced and reinforced a white-supremacist worldview and accompanying transatlantic slave trade, he implicitly praises (and ultimately insists African nations should replicate) the "constant pursuit of the economic and military advantage and superiority which scientific invention and technology" supposedly guarantee. Furthermore, Moghalu insists that these pursuits are an "essential component of a world-view that changes the realities on the ground."[135]

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[133] See Kyle Whyte's "The Dakota Access Pipeline, Environmental Injustice, and U.S. Colonialism" for an extended discussion of what I mean by indigenous governance systems.
[134] (Moghalu)
[135] (Moghalu)

Moghalu's perspective (a belief shared by many), implies that although colonialism was and continues to be harmful for not only black life but all life forms in the planet, somehow Africans must "do" colonialism better or on par with the West in order to save itself. The analyses offered in this chapter are meant to fuel an alternative perspective by continuing to make a colonial earth ethic and its harms clear. Moreover, this chapter recognizes a black-fem futurity rooted in African indigenous epistemologies and governance systems that must intentionally be excavated, lest those systems continue to be mischaracterized as ineffective, backwards, and primitive in order to legitimize the colonial earth ethic presently destabilizing the planet (while creating)[136] and then destabilizing Black life.

That said, this chapter argues that in Maathai's *Unbowed*, she repurposes Black/African/Indigenous knowledge by encrypting it in her narrative as a primary locus of her ecological ethic. That is anti-colonial, black-future oriented, and explicitly feminine—centered. Maathai employs a narrative form showing and occasionally telling us how colonialism (and the accompanying colonial architectures bolstering it such as patriarchy, blackness/antiblackness, capitalism, ethnocentrism, sexism, classism, etc.) slowly erodes the harmony and balance of a material environment held together and protected by Black/African/Indigenous-fems.

<u>Black/African/Indigenous</u>

Throughout this text, I will frequently use the fused term(s) Black/African/Indigenous. The debates around each individual term, as well as my specific fused arrangement of them,

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[136] My reference to the "creation" of black life here is meant to signal "Blackness" and "race" as ongoing projects of colonialism and modernity's invention. See (D. F. da Silva), Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.," and Crenshaw, Kimberle, et al., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement. New York: The New Press. 1995.*

require clarification. To explain my use of the term, I begin with theorist Temitope Adefarakan's discussion of Black and African feminist understandings of indigeneity. In their piece, "(Re) Conceptualizing 'Indigenous' from Anti-Colonial and Black Feminist Theoretical Perspectives: Living and Imagining Indigeneity Differently," Adefarakan details the ways that Black diasporic formations complicate many definitions of indigeneity that struggle to account for the ways and reasons continental Africans as well as Black persons of African descent are written out of indigenous discourse. According to Adefarakan

> Despite contentious debates over the distinct specificities of the terms "Black" and "African," they do over-lap, are highly interconnected, and therefore cannot be clearly demarcated as separate. Hence, I use these terms interchangeably as a political signifier in specific reference to the various and multiple Indigenous peoples of the African continent—to indicate both, those who were stolen away through the horrific European transatlantic slave trade, and those who remained on the African continent and were forced to undergo the atrocious traumas of colonialism and imperialism. In the spirit of unity and community, I also use these terms interchangeably as a counter-hegemonic and political identity to critically underscore the unique positionings and social locations of Indigenous Africans in Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, North and South America, and Asia. This is not to mobilize a conflated conception of "Africans" and "Blacks," where we are homogenized as one large monolith that exists absent of difference, rather, my aim is to discuss and theorize the complex nuances of Indigenous African life--wherever that may be—through usage of these terms as the larger

> politically unifying milieu under which Black/African people can be named and identified.[137]

Like Adefarakan, in this chapter specifically, I too occasionally use Black and African (as well as Kikuyu) interchangeably, depending on the specificity of the point at hand. Because of my investment in thinking through the relationship between ecological ethics and black-fem subjectivity, I too recognize the ways that Blackness and Africanness resist strict demarcation. My interchangeable use is not meant to conflate their definitions, but to signal the fact that these markers—constantly traveling somewhere between race and ethnicity and onto-epistemological subject position—are always already references to each other.

Where Adefarakan and I differ slightly however, is in the fact that I add the capitalized Indigenous in my preferred terminology, "Black/African/Indigenous." I make this move to further mark Black connectedness to land. I specifically arrange the capitalized Black/African/Indigenous as a descriptor in order to reference both the distinctiveness as well as interconnections between various Indigenous communities racialized as Black *on* and *beyond* the African continent. Finally, my method of deployment of these terms is done in the "spirit of unity and community" Adefarakan mentions and is meant to capture the "larger politically unifying milieu under which Black/African people can be named and identified."[138]

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[137] (Adefarakan 49)

[138] Adefarakan's delineation of "Blackness" and "African" form the roots of her larger pre-occupations with 1) exploring how and why indigenous discourses and definitions of indigeneity have excluded Black/African/Indigenous subjects, and 2) offering a multi-layered definition of indigeneity that reframes and is inclusive of Black/African/Indigenous communities alternative to dominant understandings of indigeneity that permeate the academy and activist circles. Some key elements of Adefarakan's layered definition of reframing of indigeneity include the recognition of difference across indigenous identities and geographical locations, a cosmological/spiritual world-sense rooted in the recognition of the interconnectedness of all being and materials, a Black feminist praxis cognizant of "patriarchy, White supremacy/racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism conceptualized as interlocking and mutually sustaining forces of dominance,"[138] and the inclusion of people still in residence on

This understanding of Blackness, Africanness, and Indigeneity forms the crux of my reading of Maathai's ecological ethics—but when we add understandings of Maathai's Kikuyu origins into the equation, even more complications arise. For example, in the passage preceding the one I opened this chapter with, Maathai offers even more information about her birth—its connection to the land and other elements that comprise her history, culture, and family. She explains:

> I was born the third of six children, and the first girl after two sons, on April 1, 1940, in the small village of the Ihithe in the central highlands of what was then British Kenya. My grandparents and parents were also born in this region near the provincial capital of Nyeri, in the foothills of the Aberdare Mountain Range. To the north, jutting into the sky, is Mount Kenya.[139]

Maathai could begin her narrative in many ways, but instead she decides first to embed herself, intergenerationally into her family as well as into her landscape—suggesting a coalescence between the two. She also decides to share her birthdate, one of many instances in the text signaling her privilege in relation to many of the Black/African/Indigenous women she worked for and alongside during her work with the Green Belt Movement.

Indigeneity signals a lack of privilege in many settler colonial landscapes in the West. Indigeneity in a Kenyan context however—especially for Kikuyus—does not always signal a lack of access to education, home and land ownership, gainful employment, healthcare, and political representation. In Kenya, racism, colorism, and white supremacy are organizing

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the lands from which they origi222nated and from which their specific world-sense emerges *in addition* to those displaced as a result of either enslavement by settlers or as a result of "the current movements of continental Africans who follow global capital as a result of 'globalization' (which in itself is simply a new form of imperialism)." (Adefarakan 37)

[139] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 3)

colonial architectures in the country's past and present social, political, and economic make-up. Kikuyus, however, though racialized as Black, have occupied a privileged place in Kenyan society for quite some time. Again, this is very different from many indigenous populations in settler colonial regions in the West where—due in large part to genocide—indigenous people do not make up the majority of the population.

I bring this point up for a few reasons. It is important to note Wangari Maathai—particularly in Kenyan society—was extremely privileged. Additionally, I'll note Kikuyu privilege (and Kenyan privilege broadly construed for that matter), often correlates to an alignment with western/colonial political investments and values, despite the fact that those values are rooted in anti-blackness, anti-indigeneity, and anti-femininity. For that reason, it is very strategic that Maathai illuminates a Black/African/Indigenous eco-ethic. As a member of the educated and politically powerful Kikuyu elite, Maathai was primed to benefit personally from all that it promised—and in many ways she did. But ultimately Maathai repurposed that privilege, in favor of investing in far more sustainable values. These values come out most clearly in her memoir.

The genres of "autobiography" and "memoir" call a cornucopia of styles, tones, and implications to mind,[140] but as Nwando Achebe notes, "In African women's autobiography, we

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[140] Scholars have discussed whether Maathai's *Unbowed* is more of an autobiography and less of a memoir. Ogaga Okuyade, in "Can the Earth Be Belted? Rethinking Eco-Literacy and Ecological Justice in Wangari Maathai's Unbowed: A Memoir.," settles on autobiography in order to point out that "…Maathai's narrative does not deal specifically with just her encounters with fellow humans; it equally deals with her observations about the relationship between humans and the other worlds—the wild, the landscape, and the aquatic. Interestingly therefore, the genre of the autobiography oscillates between two private poles—individuality and retrospection. Invariably, the unknowable authorial intent is revealed as the narrative begins to unfold, private lives intersect with the public, and the experiences of the "I" stand out from that of the communal. Autobiographical writings, therefore, map the trajectories of the self as autonomous and the self as relational." (p. 141)

witness writing which highlights African women's unarticulated positionality or situatedness on the inside or relative inside of their subject matter better than any other genre of writing."[141] Maathai began her memoir with a seemingly unremarkable presentation of the facts of her birth might initially seem easy to overlook. Yet there are many elements to glean from this moment. Maathai, her family, and her material environment are all included in this passage—the significance of their role in her life, presented as facts, not opinion, performs a resistance to settler histories that have and continue to erase and overwrite the existence and value of Black/African/Indigenous systems. The sharpness of her opening lines emphasizes the primary importance of all these family members and their role as Maathai writes herself into being in her memoir, her history. Her parents, the sky, her human siblings, Mount Kenya, her grandparents, and the foothills of the Aberdare Mountain Range—all introduced in this opening passage—are primary relationships forming her family. As Ogaga Okuyade notes, "The kinship between the Ihithe people and their environment is established from birth…The items for this inaugural ritual are derivable from the 'other' worlds—the soil, animals."[142] There is a sense of resolute pride as she begins with this information, informing the reader that her land has and will play an important role in her history and in the narratives she recalls.

In yet another initial passage, Maathai spends significant time honoring the Ihithe landscape through even more detailed descriptions:

> The seasons were so regular that you could almost predict that the long, monsoon rains would start falling in mid-March. In July you knew it would be so foggy you would not be able to see ten feet in front of you, and so cold in the morning that the grass would be

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[141] (Achebe 283)

[142] Achebe, "Twenty-Five Years of African Women Writing African Women's and Gendered Worlds."

> silvery-white with frost. In Kikuyu, July is known as mworia nyoni, the month when birds rot, because birds would freeze to death and fall from the trees. We lived in a land abundant with shrubs, creepers, ferns, and trees, like the mi'tiindii, mikeu, and mi'gumo, some of which produced berries and nuts. Because rain fell regularly and reliably, clean drinking water was everywhere. There were large well-watered fields of maize, beans, wheat, and vegetables. Hunger was virtually unknown. The soil was rich, dark red-brown, and moist.[143]

Because of her elaborate descriptions, the reader knows that Maathai's environment is anything but inert matter, particularly given that her Kikuyu/Indigenous descriptions of the mworia nyoni highlights the life cycles of the birds and their connection to seasonal changes. She details the connection between the varied green flora and the berries and nuts. She also details the connections between regular rainfall and abundant maize, beans, wheat, and vegetables the rain supports to a virtual lack of hunger. Contrast this point with the 41 million people in the United States—a "first world" Western nation—struggling with food security.[144] The passages here are not simply an aestheticized description of a landscape, but of rather ecology itself—understood as the study of the relationships between different organisms—represented verbally. Furthermore, Maathai displays her environment as a treasured entity with which she shares a cherished connection.

Though it does not initially seem so, there is so much subtext present in Maathai's memoir. To excavate this subtext, I draw from Aisha Beliso-De Jesus' 2016, article "A

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[143] (Maathai, *Unbowed*) 3.
[144] ("Hunger and Poverty Facts")

Hieroglyphics of Zora Neale Hurston" and especially her concept of a "politics of encryption."[145] Jesus explains:

> …Hurstonian hieroglyphics resists revelation and instead chooses a politics of encryption. Much of her writing includes cliff-hangers, leaving esoteric phenomena to stand on its own. This daring topography of silence is, I suggest, a formidable critique of colonial anthropology's assumption that it be granted access to all spaces. In the "poking and prying with purpose" of academic research, Hurstonian hieroglyphics of the flesh recognizes the colonial desires in ethnographic exoticism and refuses to reproduce ethnographic porn.[146]

Maathai's narrative mobilizes revelation, which comes out most clearly in her matter of fact prose. She also however, mobilizes encryption—which comes out most clearly in her narrative structure—in order to advance a critique of the colonial earth ethics operating as a looming antagonist throughout *Unbowed*. Similarly, Maathai offers cliff-hangers and narrowly-explained phenomena to stand on their own. Later in this chapter, I will say more about the relationship between these cliff-hangers and narrowly-explained Black/African/Indigenous belief systems as I recognize this technique as a formidable critique of the very same colonial and/or Western patriarchal gaze Maathai both *writes to* and *denounces*. As she moves between revelation and encryption, Maathai's Black/African/Indigenous critique at some points recognizes its complicity in a "wink, wink" fashion at the knowing reader while simultaneously seducing colonial desires for a "native informant" in other moments. As a result, Maathai produces a narrative that speaks on multiple registers to multiple audiences—audiences that perpetuate

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[145] (Jesus)
[146] (Jesus 293)

and are affected to varying degrees by the social, political, and environmental degradation put on full display in *Unbowed.*

A *Black Feminist Eco-Ethic* beyond Nation

I now turn my attention briefly to Rob Nixon, a leading voice in postcolonial ecocriticism and his field defining work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon was one of the first to give significant scholarly attention to Maathai's *Unbowed.* His decision to handle Maathai's work with the precision and respect he does is helpful. He demonstrates how Maathai's work centers vulnerable populations (i.e. low-income women and girls), explores the utility of the tree as a politically motivating symbol, speaks to *Unbowed's* tricky navigation of multiple audiences, and situates Maathai in a tradition of other notable women leaders in environmentalism like Rachel Carson.

In his discussion of Maathai, Nixon is most concerned with questions of risk, security, and the constantly shifting and in many ways (insufficient) notions of sustainability and National security. He argues, "What emerges from the GBM ascent is an alternative narrative of national security, one that would challenge the militaristic, male version embodied and imposed by Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi during his twenty-four years of authoritarian rule from 1978 to 2002."[147]I insert Nixon here, to recontextualize and extend many of the arguments he introduces, for the purposes *not* of reforming our ideas (or even our faith) in the (im)possibility of something called 'national security' under a colonial earth ethic, but of taking Maathai's *Unbowed* as a provisional departure point for considerations of a *Black feminist eco-ethic* beyond Nation, under nation, and/or in excess of nation, even as Kenyan national security

[147] Rob Nixon, "Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor," in *Slow Violence and The Environmentalism of the Poor*, n.d., 129.

was among her many concerns.[148] What does it mean to build Black-fem space/futures/life that, as Katherine McKittrick might say, "imagines black geographies as the sites through which particular forces of empire (oppression/resistance, black immortality, racial violence, urbicide) bring forth a poetics that envisions a decolonial future."[149] In other words, even as Kenya's "emancipated" present remains entangled in its colonial past, rather than thinking about how Maathai helps us improve our existing notions of security, how might Maathai's *Unbowed* help us repurpose what McKittrick calls "forces of empire" in order to conceptualize decolonial futures?

One very useful tool is Maathai's establishment of what Alondra Nelson has called a *usable past*, which she explains—quoting Ishmael Reed as "us[ing] the past to explain the present and to prophesize about the future."[150] Taking Nelson's explanation as a cue, I diverge from her slightly and argue that a *re-usable past* functions as a chief methodology of an Afrofuturist cultural production, it is conversant with what McKittrick calls for in her delineation of decolonial futures. Both McKittrick and Nelson here bolster my reading of Maathai as I argue that Maathai takes colonial conceptions of Black/African/Indigeneity; routinely characterized as backward, primitive, and/or (non)historical and repurposes it into a "re-usable past." In line with my explanation of repurposing, this re-usable past recognizes the connection between reverence for black-fem life and the sustainability of our physical environments while aiming to grow and protect black-fem futurity (and with it) earthly wellness and fullness. National security (or rather the inherent vulnerability of the nation-state, a vulnerability which gets obscured under the very term "national security") is a symptom of a

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[148] See Maathai's , *Replenishing the Earth.*, and *The Challenge for Africa* for more on her national security concerns.
[149] (McKittrick 5)
[150] (Nelson 7)

larger problem: that of the creation of black-fem life as a sustainer of a colonial earth ethic. Black-fem life functions, then, as an ontological and earthly wound. It carries a discursive and material construction and is reinforced under colonialism/imperialism.

So, I maintain that within Maathai's *Unbowed*, national security operates as a symptom to be treated on the way to comprehensive ecological project of decolonial refiguring and healing. In other words, my extension of and yet departure from Nixon's arguments is not invested in revealing Maathai's writing and activism for its service to the security of the nation—understood as both the literal Kenyan nation and as "the nation" as an ideological formation.[151] Securing the nation (and its borders and incessant warfare) is part of the biopolitical conditions that reinforce the destruction of the earth and the people most likely to be harmed in the processes of that destruction. This chapter is interested in how Maathai's work helps us look over, under, and through the nation. The readings look into her other concerns, which predated Kenya as a "nation" and reveal Maathai's investment in the proliferation of black life, black matrilineal reverence, and localized community-driven earth ethics.

Back to Black Feminism (but Really, we never left)

In terms of my method of analyzing *Unbowed*, I lean heavily on traditions and concerns outlined by black feminism and its tradition of literary criticism. When read through a black feminist lens, *Unbowed* operates as verbal art as well as political theory. This chapter pays close attention to Maathai's language, form, and style—in addition to a discursive analysis of the content. My method of reading Maathai's work aligns with the tradition of Black feminist literary analyses that treat narratives—specifically poetry, novels, and memoir—as a practice of

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[151] Stringer, "Trans and Queer Terms |."

theory. Here, I am thinking with Toni Morrison's criticism that "Black literature is taught as sociology, as tolerance, not as serious rigorous art form."[152] I am also thinking with Barbara Christian who powerfully noted that, "For people of color have always theorized-but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking."[153] Christian's landmark essay remains crucial for understanding the significance of a Black feminist practice of theorizing and its intervention into the frenzy of academic production aiming to emulate and reproduce what Christian identifies as "the Western form of abstract logic."

But my method also peers out from Black feminism which—in many if its iterations—is still a form of Western feminism. While it is not mainstream (i.e. white feminism or liberal feminism), Black feminism is often still limited by the metrics with which scholars conceptualize life in the West and is therefore tied to those specific histories. For example, though some manifestations of Black feminist literary theory produced in and through the West can be characterized as anticolonial or radical, it is very often tied to histories of chattel slavery and Middle Passage histories.[154] This does not make Western Black feminism any more or less valuable than other Black feminisms. To responsibly and ethically engage (western) Black feminism's utility or lack thereof across various contexts, geographical locations, and cultural/historical moments, we must recognize its limitations. This very dissertation is not

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[152] (Morrison)

[153] Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1988): 68.

[154] See Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015) for more on "Middle Passage Epistemology" and its theoretical limits.

exempt from these critiques of the limitations of a Western framing of Black feminism—particularly given my intentions to excavate and articulate a *black feminist eco-ethical* worldsense limited to texts written in English. I also rely on visual materials and examples (including writings and readings) that call upon, yet on some level exclude the kind of cosmological/spiritual indigenous forces that, as Adefarakan explains, lie beyond the scope of the visual.[155]

This is where methods and question informed by African (Black) feminisms become especially helpful. It occupies the fissure between Black feminist literary concerns (which often obscures its own weddedness to western frameworks) and post-colonial feminist criticist concerns (which often obscures the existence and/or centrality of Black/African/Indigeneity—not just race, broadly construed—to post-colonial conditions of life). Though many scholars recognize the usefulness of a sustained conversation between black feminism and postcolonial feminisms, there still remains stratification between the two discourses keeping them from recognizing the language and value of the other. For others, there exists no hard lines between colonial feminisms and Black feminisms. For a great deal of scholars however, in terms of citational practices, once must typically choose one or the other leading to very limited analytical engagement. For example, Wangari Maathai's identity and memoir can be legible with many discourses—post-coloniality, African feminist, Black feminist, Anti-capitalist—etc., and so it helps to engage these fields in ways that encourage connection rather than further stratification. Moreover, by stratifying these fields/discourses in the ways we often do, it shrouds the fact that all these discourses represent resistance to an over-arching problem:

[155] See Adefarakan, "(Re) Conceptualizing 'Indigenous' from Anti-Colonial and Black Feminist Theoretical Perspectives: Living and Imagining Indigeneity Differently," 36 for a more extensive critique on the limitations of Western notions of "worldview" that over-privilege the visual as a tool to facilitate an understanding of cosmology.

colonialism and the attendant logics, structures, and geographies that gridlock it into our global psyche.

Even as this dissertation critiques the side-lining of black feminist theory in Western ecocritical thought while demonstrating and performing Black feminism's wide-ranging utility, it is also meant to critique central tenets in Black and Western feminism. First, characterizing Black feminism as Western feminism draws our attention to the fact that all Western feminists are not White women and that feminism produced through the West (following Glissant who names the West as a project not a place[156]) remains tied to these frameworks. This is crucial as the struggle for ecological justice exposes the farce of material disconnection (not to mention connections between the local and the global) and hierarchy between different forms of materials. I argue that seriously engaging African feminist principles becomes necessary for a black feminist interested in ecological justice. If black feminists are serious about un/de/anti-colonial earth ethics, we must also contend with the ways that not only chattel slavery but also US imperialism seeps into and limits into our critiques and standpoints as thinkers and doers.

According to African feminist theorists Kathomi Gatwiri and Njoki Wane, African feminism pre-dated the introduction of Western feminist ideologies and under Wangari Maathai's purview, traditional pre-colonial village life was always already steeped in an intentional ecological ethics where reverence and respect for women and one's physical environment were interwoven into cultural practices and epistemologies. Disentangling reverence for women and respect for one's environment as Maathai presents this information would have made no sense. I take up this logic when critiquing western ecological criticism which only very recently began to conceive of the interrelatedness of cultural practices and

[156] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse.*

something separate we call "nature."[157] According to African indigenous feminisms, this is not exceptional, but logical—quotidian even.

Decrypting Unbowed

I will now turn my attention more specifically to various passages in *Unbowed* where Maathai begins to demonstrate the interrelatedness of reverence for women and respect for one's environment in the narrative. I began this chapter with Maathai's retelling of her birth, pointing to how the family she entered, is not only woman-led, but a family of life-forms that take many shapes. In the passages that follow, Maathai offers even more information about her birth—its connection to the land and other elements that comprise her history, culture, and family.

Earlier, I mentioned that in addition to her mother giving birth to her, so too does the mbura ya njahl, which she explains as the season of the long rains. This information is incredibly significant considering that later in the same passage she mentions that "the seasons were so regular that you could almost predict that the long, monsoon rains would start in mid-March."[158] Both consistency and seasonal predictability, therefore represent a touchstone of familial/ecological wellness. This touchstone allows Maathai to detect the increasing illness of Kenya's environment in her adult years because of her experience of its wellness during her youth. Unsurprisingly, inconsistent rainfall is a problem that has continued to plague Kenya and the horn of Africa in general.[159]

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[157] For more on the ways that contemporary ecocriticism handles the interconnectedness of "nature" and culture see Haraway's, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women.*, Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.*, (Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*), and (Heise)
[158] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 3)
[159] (Nyakairu)

Her encrypted critique of a colonial earth ethic continues to come out clearly, as her origin story is centrally about Black/African/Indigenous women, their connection to the earth, and the ways that cultural practices honor and reproduce that sacred connection in profound ways. Maathai writes,

> When a baby joined the community, a beautiful and practical ritual follows that introduced the infant to the land and the ancestors and conserved a world of plenty and good that came from that soil. Shortly after the child was born, a few of the women attending the birth would go to their farms and harvest a bunch of bananas, full, green, and whole. If any of the bananas had ripened and birds had eaten them, the women would have to find another full bunch. The fullness expressed wholeness and wellness, qualities the community valued. Along with the bananas, the women would bring to the new mother's house sweet potatoes from her and their gardens and blue-purple sugarcane (kigwa kia nyamuiri). No ordinary sugar-cane would do.[160]

The birth of Black children in Maathai's community is cause for celebration as "no ordinary sugar-cane will do." Other notable word choices are "fullness," "wholeness," and "wellness" as valuable attributes in her community. These valuable attributes are not measured by universal (i.e. white, colonial) standards of "health."[161] Instead, it is the measure of the bunches of fruits

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[160] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 4)

[161] See Jessie Daniels and Amy Schulz' "Constructing Whiteness in Health Disparities Research," in *Health and Illness at the Intersections of Gender, Race and Class* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 2006), 89–127. I intentionally write against universal notions of "health" because of the implicit racial biases that structure the discourse. According to Daniels and Schulz for example, "Over the past two decades, the body of research documenting and examining racial differences in health has grown exponentially…This literature has documented racial disparities in a substantial range of health outcomes, often comparing the health of one or more racialized groups to the health of "Whites." In other words, the search for explanations regarding the cause of racial disparities in health—and indeed, often the definition of racial disparities itself—is largely framed in terms of explicit or implicit comparisons of racialized groups to the referent group of White. Often unspoken and unexamined in these

specific to her region and the locally understood ideas of "fullness" that determine value in Kikuyu culture. As Njoki Wane notes, "Traditional knowledge tries to understand systems within a framework of wholeness rather than isolate interacting parts;."[162] It's no surprise then that the fullness of a fruit would be directly linked to the fullness of an expectant mother and her offspring.

I further insist on Maathai's explanation of wellness and fullness as an alternative to colonial notions of "health" because of the ways that "health" has been tied to histories of sexism, racism, heterosexism, etc. and continue to be used to police people's behavior and bodies. Even more notable are the ways black motherhood, black children, and the pragmatic and artful care of them both are inextricably linked to the care of the earth. Maathai continues her idyllic description and ritual celebration of Black/African/Indigenous life as she writes,

> In anticipation of the birth, the expectant mother would fatten a lamb that slept and ate inside her home. While the women gathered the ritual foods, the child's father would sacrifice the lamb and roast a piece of the flesh. The bananas and the potatoes would also be roasted and along with the meat the raw sugarcane given to the new mother. She would chew small pieces of each in turn and then put some of the juice into the baby's tiny mouth. This would have been my first meal. Even before breast milk, I would have swallowed the juice of green bananas, blue purple sugarcane, sweet potatoes, and a fattened lamb, all fruits of the local land.[163]

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comparisons is the category of Whiteness itself: what it contains or represents and just what a comparison to Whites tells us. Scholars examining the question of "Whiteness" have noted that, in contrast to other racial groups, Whiteness has often been defined by what it is not (Frankenberg, 1993; Fine, 1997)—not marked, not deficit, not raced.

[162] Wane, SpringerLink, and LINK, "African Indigenous Feminist Thought: An Anticolonial Project."
[163] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 4)

Maathai continues to employ stripped-down language to describe these ritual births and traditions which, allows the richness of the colors, flavors, and aromas to speak to the ways that holistic recognition of the sensorium is necessary for a productive connection to the environment. The passage accentuates the idea that the bananas, sweet potatoes, and sugarcane aren't the only fruit of the local land. Maathai, her parents, her grandparents, and every other being that enters and then contributes to her community also form the fruit of the land. Deeper still, Maathai illustrates a cyclical familial relationship—a social and material ecosystem--between herself, the foothills of the Aberdare Mountain Range near Nyeri, her parents, and her community. They are all of crucial importance for the sustenance and maintenance of the space.[164] After weaving these dynamics together, Maathai finally says outright, "I am as much a child of my native soil as I am of my father, Mutu Njugi, and my mother, Wanjiru Kibicho…Following the Kikuyu tradition, my parents' named me for my father's mother, Wangari, and old Kikuyu name."[165]

Wangari's name is both important and symbolic. Her name grounds the narrative not only in a twinned reverence for Earth and feminine persons, but also in a spiritual legacy of lost matrilineal power. As Maathai explains,

> According to the Kikuyu myth of origin, God created the primordial parents, Gikuyu and Mumbi, and from Mount Kenya showed them the land on which they were to settle: west from Mount Kenya to the Aberdares, onto Ngong Hills and Kilimambogo, then north to Garbatula. Together, Gikuyu and Mumbi had ten daughters—Wanjiru, Wambui, Wangari, Wanjiku, Wangui, Wangeci, Wanjeri, Nyambura, Wairimu, and Wamuyu but they had no sons… The daughters made the clans matrilineal, but many

[164] (Okuyade 144)
[165] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 4)

> privileges, such as inheritance and ownership of land, livestock, and perennial crops, were gradually transferred to men. It is not explained how women lost their rights and privileges.[166]

The way Maathai retells this Kikuyu spiritual legacy, the glorification of feminine-centered deities, and unexplained loss of matrilineal power in Kikuyu society, speaks again to the politics of encryption that Jesus explains. To reiterate, Jesus explains this method of narrative building includes "cliff-hangers, leaving esoteric phenomena to stand on its own," which creates a "daring topography of silence is [as] a formidable critique of colonial anthropology's assumption that it be granted access to all spaces."[167] Within the logics of the memoir, Maathai's chosen anecdotes show that colonialism inflects and infects Kenyan Nationalist notions of masculinity; which at many points Maathai illustrates as her enemy. Maathai spends less time and offers less of a detailed analytical response to the complexity of Kikuyu spiritually-informed gender systems. When Maathai writes, "It is not explained how women lost their rights and privileges," the line largely functions as a cliff-hanger that she never explicitly returns to for further explanation. Maathai leaves this esoteric phenomenon to stand on its own. But juxtaposed with the other moments in which she provides so much detail, this moment stands out.

Maathai's audience is primarily a Western one. As scholar Nwando Achebe notes, several prolific African women writers have "in one way or another, challenged flawed Western derived theoretical impositions upon distinctly African societies."[168] That said, one might also read Maathai's lack of explanation (or even lack of speculation about that lost matrilineal

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[166] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 4–5)
[167] (Jesus 293)
[168] (Achebe 277)

power) as a strategic gesture. Maathai could also be simultaneously acknowledge a key feature in the history of spiritually-informed Kikuyu gender systems while concealing that knowledge (to a certain extent) from a kind of Western scrutiny that routinely misunderstands and mischaracterizes Black/African/Indigenous gendered power relations. Because of the rich complexity of African women's writing, we, as readers benefit much more when more of thee dynamics are taken into account [169]

The details do flow freely, however as Maathai encrypts the details of her birth in ways that support an overarching perspective about the relationship between femininity, authority, and earthly entanglement. Maathai strategically encourages the reader to glean that every child—regardless of gender and including her parents and grandparents—meet the earth in this way. When welcomed to her community, new members are first and foremost surrounded by black women—the immediate ones in the child's community as well as black-fem deities permeating Kikuyu culture. She also very matter-of-factly states details about her home that could have easily been excluded. Maathai's depiction of her revelation about her mud-walled home with no electricity or running water is the first of many of her quick and subtle critiques of cultural practices that have come to dominate across the globe. Many people who are privileged with a certain kind of access to material resources take plumbing and electricity for granted but they often also conceive of these technologies as measures of civility, progress, etc. This moment in Maathai's narrative weaves a relationship between her mud-walled house, the black women that brought her into the world, and a lush environment with predictable rainy seasons.

[169] For more on this point, see Achebe's, "Twenty-Five Years of African Women Writing African Women's and Gendered Worlds."

These representations of rainfall and water are idyllic because they are an example of an alternative conceptualization of water availability not facilitated by "running water" as a taken for granted after-thought at best, or a horror show at worst given the "civilized" water practices exemplified by the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Flint Water crisis.[170] Both the Flint water crisis and the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline are direct results of a colonial earth ethic. The un/anti/pre-colonial earth ethics critique Maathai illustrates comes through most clearly when she explains that "rain fell regularly and reliably, [so] clean drinking water was everywhere."[171]

Colonial Earth Ethics

Though this seems like a small moment in the text that Maathai moves on from quickly, its significance cannot be overstated, given the fundamentality of water and the ways that a colonial earth ethic becomes painfully apparent when we center a discourse on water. Under colonial logics—and especially for black and/or displaced indigenous populations—water politics are extremely fraught. Fraught because of the ways that colonialism reconstructs our relationship with the natural environment—typically in ways antithetical to Black/African/Indigenous knowledges. What I refer to as colonial earth ethics are a set of practices and belief systems that are inherently unjust and invested in a logic of disconnection between material forms (i.e. disconnection between different kinds of humans and disconnection between humans and nonhumans beings of many shapes).[172] To reiterate, this ethic includes but is not limited to taking action ("environmental" or otherwise) while armed with ignorance about local ecosystems, willingness to impose or ignore the intrinsic violences that accompany

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171 (Maathai, *Unbowed* 3)

172 (Whyte 158)

forced displacement of indigenous people, plants, and other materials, violations (including land theft) obscured by constantly shifting notions of "legality," and the paradoxical hunger for ecological conditions limited by late capitalism's reliance on notions of scarcity, hoarding, and excessive consumption.

Our colonial earth ethic-informed interactions with water are so deeply ingrained in consumption and scarcity that we have nearly no frame of reference for other kinds of relationships with water that are sustainable. Most of what we have now is distant nostalgia, recounted from indigenous elders who've experienced the world differently and have been able to detect its rapid and heartbreaking shifts. For example, in yet another moment Maathai recalls, she explains the formative lessons her mother taught her about the interrelationship between different forms of materials (i.e. ecosystems) on earth and the reasons why each of those materials, in addition to the relationships between them demand both reverence and protection.

Maathai comes back to the symbol of the fig tree, again and again to intensify her insistence on the wellness of her local ecosystem, drawing from and extending the knowledges instilled in her from her mother.[173] She writes,

> When my mother told me to go and fetch firewood, she would warn me, 'Don't pick any dry wood out of the fig tree, or even around it.' 'Why?' I would ask. 'Because that's a tree of God,' she'd reply. 'We don't use it. We don't cut it. We don't burn it.' As a child, of course, I had no idea what my mother was talking about, but I obeyed her.[174]

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[173] Several others have written about the significance of the fig tree in Maathai's writing and work from a variety of perspectives. See Daisey, "Promoting Interest in Plant Biology with Biographies of Plant Hunters.," Schell, "Transnational Environmental Justice Rhetorics and the Green Belt Movement.,"(Wagner)
[174] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 45)

In this passage the reader experiences the reverence for the fig tree explicitly stated by Maathai's mother, who in various other passages in the narrative has been established as an authoritative figure and important source of information and care in Maathai's world. Maathai's mother describes the tree as a tree of God, and though young Wangari does not understand the gravity of what her mother is saying, she understands enough about the value of her mother's knowledge of the land and their relationship to it, that she heeds her mother's Black feminist eco-ethical wisdom.

In the passages directly following, Maathai begins to understand for herself, what her mother was referring to when she called the fig tree, a tree of God. How Maathai conceptualizes that information for herself takes on less of an evangelical tone while retaining just as, if not more of the reverence for the tree—particularly because of the tree's connection to life-giving water. She writes

> About two hundred yards from the fig tree there was a stream named Kanungu, with water so clean and fresh that we drank it straight from the stream. As a child, I used to visit the point where the water bubbled up from the belly of the earth to form a stream. I imagine that very few people have been lucky enough to see the source of a river. At the point where the stream came out of the ground, were planted arrowroots, and along the stream were banana plants, and sugarcane, which were typical food crops. Arrowroots, when cooked, provide a starchy tuber like potatoes, and grow only where there is a lot of water. At that time, they were planted all along the banks of small, slow-flowing streams. Their large, deep green, arching leaves provided a hideaway big enough for a small child such as me to sit underneath. When it rained the silver drops of water would dance on the broad fronds above me and cascade to the ground. We also

> used these leaves to fetch water from the river and drink it. The water looked clean and fresh against the sparkling green leaves.[175]

Maathai accomplishes so much in this lyrical passage. She begins by explaining how close the tree is to the Kanungu stream. Taking a moment to illuminate how clean, fresh and life sustaining it is. She lingers on the beauty of the stream and describes the unique experience of witnessing the very sources, not only of the stream, but the rivers that flow from the stream "where the water bubbled up from the belly." Maathai makes sure that the reader can almost hear the vibrating sounds of those bubbles as she goes on to show how the stream cradles so much other life including the lives of the banana plants, sugarcane, and arrowroot. Within her descriptions, the stream is at once an ultra-generous provider. It offers shade, drinking water, ambient sound, food, and soothing beauty. There is also a fragility present in her descriptions. She highlights how rare it is to see a river form and the reader cannot help but sense the delicacy of a such a space. That delicacy becomes all the more apparent as she describes how the stream and the fig tree continued to teach her about the ways that ecosystems stabilize themselves. Maathai explains,

> I later learned that there was a connection between the fig tree's root system and the underground water reservoirs. The roots burrowed deep into the ground, breaking through the rocks beneath the surface soil and diving into the underground water table. The water traveled up along the roots until it hit a depression or weak place in the ground and gushed out as a spring. Indeed, wherever these trees stood, there were likely to be streams. The reverence the community had for the fig tree helped preserve the stream and the tadpoles that so captivated me. The trees also held the soil together,

[175] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 45)

> reducing erosion and landslides. In such ways, without conscious or deliberate effort, these cultural and spiritual practices contributed to the conservation of biodiversity.[176]

The connections that Maathai makes here between cultural practices and the conservation of biodiversity resonate even further with the ways that philosopher Kyle Whyte describes the utility of what he calls "Indigenous governance systems." Following Whyte, prior to and in the face of settler colonial disruptions, indigenous people have multi-generational processes and methods of holistic and complex governance structures implanted and practiced in order to safeguard the cultural, economic, and political wellness of particular communities. These processes and methods that form indigenous governance systems, according to Whyte "operate quite differently than, say, those of the U.S. federal government, in operations ranging from the selection processes for leadership to the construction of gender and gender fluidity to environmental ethics."[177]

Whyte cites women's leadership and alternative understandings of gender formations as fundamental to Indigenous governance systems. As I continue to detail a Black feminist eco-ethic and its rootedness in indigenous epistemologies and cultural practices, feminine leadership and alternative understandings of gender remain a key feature. Indigeneity, Black women's leadership, and un-colonial understandings of gender are thrown into sharp relief in these passages. Maathai connects her dazzlement by the fig tree, the visible and invisible ecosystems it supports, and roots it all in her mother's teachings.

As the reader follows the symbol of the fig tree throughout the narrative, Maathai continues to illustrate the ways in which a colonial earth ethic disrupts the invaluable delicacy and necessity of robust ecosystems and the eventual destruction of the fig tree and the life-

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[176] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 46)
[177] (Whyte 160)

sustaining stream that accompanied it. Later in the narrative, Maathai recalls that when she returned to Nyeri as an adult, rather than the trees, bushes, and grasses that had filled the lands and forests, she found commercial trees and an abundance of tea and coffee crops. In the long run, these plants that caused silted topsoil were very harmful for the environment. As Maathai recalls,

> I…learned that someone had acquired the piece of land where the fig tree I was in awe of as a child had stood. The new owner perceived the tree to be a nuisance because it took up too much space and he felled it to make room to grow tea. By then I understood the connection between the tree and water, so it did not surprise me that when the fig tree was cut down, the stream where I had played with the tadpoles dried up. My children would never be able to play with the frogs' eggs as I had or simply to enjoy the cool, clear water of that stream. I mourned the loss of that tree.[178]

As Maathai recounts the destruction of the tree, she makes clear a key feature of a colonial earth ethic. Maathai explains that rather than having the deep reverence for the tree that her community had, the tree instead became a nuisance. Given the appreciation and utility Maathai details, the only way that this "tree of God" could annoy someone is if they had no knowledge of the balanced ecosystems the tree supported before their ignorance them taking action to have the tree destroyed.

Because of this lack of reverence, of course, the tree is removed. In her final comments about this location, however, she ends on a somber yet powerful note. Maathai writes,

> I profoundly appreciated the wisdom of my people, and how generations of women had passed on to their daughters the cultural tradition of leaving the fig trees in place. I was

[178] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 122)

> expected to pass it on to my children, too. Whatever the original inspiration for not cutting these trees, people in that region had been spared landslides, as the strong roots of the fig trees held the soil together in the steep mountains. They also had abundant, clean water. But by the early 1970s, landslides were becoming common and sources of clean water for drinking were becoming scarce. Ironically, the area where the fig tree of my childhood once stood always remained a patch of bare ground where nothing grew. It was as if the land rejected anything but the fig tree itself.[179]

Though the loss of the tree is tragic, Maathai takes up space in the text to honor the Black/African/Indigenous women-led community of people that protected and sustained the environment which cultivated her own ecological ethic and her eye for conceptualizing the roots of the problems (like water scarcity) invited by colonial earth ethics. She ends with the harrowing image of the bare patch of ground where the fig tree once stood. However, because she speculates that, "it was as if the land rejected anything but the fig tree itself," she leaves an opening. A powerful acknowledgement of the agency of the fig tree and the hands and minds of those that once revered it, even in the tree's absence.

The Persistence of Colonial Earth Ethics in the Age of Kenyan Emancipation

Unfortunately for Maathai and for the work that she'd struggle to carry-out with the Green Belt Movement, colonial architectures, ideals, and ethics persisted even after Kenya gained independence from British rule on December 12, 1963. As historian Cora Ann Presley notes, "Black dispossession and white privilege were the twin attributes of Kenya's colonial state and shaped the history of the country from the beginning of official colonialism in 1920 until its demise in 1963, when the independent Republic of Kenya was established."[180] Despite

[179] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 122)
[180] (Presley)

this independence however, contemporary Kenya continues to wrestle with the afterlife of a white supremacist British colonial past.

After earning her bachelor's and master's degrees in the United States, Maathai notes that she returned to Kenya in 1966 to find a very different country than the one she'd left. When she left Kenya, the country was struggling to secure its independence from the British, but by the time she had returned, there was an indigenous Kenyan president. Jomo Kenyatta was also a Kikuyu and under his leadership, the nation was rebuilding itself, its cultural practices, and its identity in the wake of independence. Maathai speaks of the ways that racial dynamics coalescing around anti-blackness and white supremacy had seemed—in part—to lift. She explains that when she needed lodging, it was no problem for her to stay at the New Stanley Hotel in downtown Nairobi, but that, "This would have been unthinkable before independence because of the color bar then in effect that stratified society into three racial layers: white, brown, and black. As black Africans, we would not have been allowed to eat or drink, let alone sleep, at the New Stanley."[181] This was a moment pregnant with hope and bursting with the energy of people excited to see their idealized society come to fruition. For Maathai, it was a moment that returned her to a desire for the idyllic society into which she was born, where land, community, and women-revered leadership characterized one's entrance into a new world.

By stark contrast to the Kikuyu community she entered in chapter one however, the Kenyan nation that she is reborn into after independence was deeply weighed down by its anti-feminine and anti-black colonial legacy. Though technically a "free" nation, it continued to subjugate people who were gendered and raced in particular ways. As Maathai illuminates,

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[181] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 99)

> After all the troubles that Kenya has had since independence, it is difficult to convey how exciting that time was. We felt that Kenya's destiny was in our hands. It truly was a whole new world, and yet, forty years on, in some ways the potential of political independence and the elimination of racial barriers have yet to be realized. My generation and those that followed failed fully to appreciate and take advantage of the great opportunities that that breakthrough presented. Instead, Kenyans have often engaged in retrogressive and destructive practices that continue to frustrate and retard the realization of the promise of that time.[182]

Maathai uses the joyousness of her family's excitement and the figure of the New Stanley hotel as symbols of progress that certainly signify a changed nation. And these changes, quite obviously brought about a widened capacity for enjoyment and pleasure for Maathai and the ones she loved. These pleasures did signify a changed state; one that now allowed black Africans into the New Stanley—am emblem of colonial rule and white supremacy that still stands to this day as Sarova Stanley Hotel.[183] It did not, as Maathai shows, signify a radicalized state where the previous colonial social order in Kenya was fundamentally transformed.

Maathai explains the color bar that stratified society, but never says that the color bar is ever displaced or dismantled. Instead, she explained that, "forty years on, in some ways the potential of political independence and the elimination of racial barriers have yet to be realized."[184] The New Stanley was an apt symbol because it demonstrated the limitations of desegregation that does little to dismantle what Katherine McKittrick has called "plantocracy logics."[185] Maathai's measured celebration and brief mention of the New Stanley reminds

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[182] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 100)
[183] (Hemsing)
[184] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 100)
[185] (McKittrick 9)

readers of the color bar and then with a touch of nostalgia proclaimed that, "After all the troubles that Kenya has had since independence, it is difficult to convey how exciting that time was." The statement captured the melancholy that accompanied her journey down into further radicalization when she realized that independence did not translate to the eradification of systemic inequality.

Kenya's Independence also gave way to further frustration for Maathai as she explained her readiness and subsequent blockage from preparing to "join in the building of our free country" given her feeling "a deep sense of pride at being Kenyan."[186] For example, in *Unbowed* Maathai recounts a moment where her first job offer is rescinded due to tribalism/ethnic discrimination. This isn't the first time Maathai mentions tribalism. Early on in the text Maathai explains of the Luos, Kipsigis, Maasais that she grew up around and that "except for the skin color we shared, we were as 'foreign' to one another as the British settlers were to us." She also recalls that she would "overhear the adults around me expressing their views about some of our differences," that "these ethnic biases, many of which were planted early in one's childhood, became amplified and were embraced by national political rhetoric." She further notes that these biases "are still used today to divide Kenyans from one another."[187] The last comment is a subtle gesture that both acknowledges and obscures her Kikuyu privilege. Because of these dynamics, conventional wisdom suggests that racism is not a problem in Kenya and that the "real" problem is ethnicity or tribalism. This ideology confuses some historical facts about Kenya's colonial history. A colonial history reliant on what Maathai refers to as a "stratified" society rooted, in anti-blackness. These stratifications disenfranchised black Africans most acutely while allowing white British settlers to own nearly everything during

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[186] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 99)
[187] (Maathai, *Unbowed*) 23

colonialism. Whites continue to maintain their monopoly on land ownership, to a large extent, in present day Kenya.[188] The persistence of Kikuyu privilege however, does not dislodge or erase the fact of white supremacy, which still shapes Kenyan society, and set a particularly horrifying stage for the antiblackness that is permeating an increasing Chinese presence in Kenya today.[189]

And the sexism—the sexism hit Maathai at every turn. In the classroom once she did finally get a job in the Department of Veterinary Anatomy, she recalls, "When I began teaching, all the students were male, and they found it difficult to believe that I had the qualifications to be their instructor in anatomy. I was a woman, after all, and in my mid-twenties, so not much older than them."[190] Her underrepresented gender and age should have been indications of her supreme intelligence and diligence. Instead, her students, of course, took her gender and race as an invitation to undermine her. Her gender also offered some members of her family an invitation to critique her unmarried status, despite her enormous academic achievements.[191]

Wangari Maathai does end up getting married and living what appears to be a relatively stable life as the educated wife of an aspiring politician, Mwangi Mathai. Her marriage however, does not last long. The disintegration of her marriage functions in the narrative as a consciousness building device. As her marriage ends, she also parts ways with Kenyan Nationalism's limitations and her radicalism deepens. Maathai's name change following her divorce becomes yet another of many instances of Maathai repurposing wounds wrought by

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[188] (Presley)
[189] (Goldstein)
[190] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 104)
[191] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 105)

colonialism (in this case colonialism's insistence on marriage as an indication of women as property) in the service of a Black/African/Indigenous ecoethic. Maathai explains,

> To add insult to injury, after our divorce Mwangi did not want me to continue using his surname and let me know it through a letter from his lawyer. I remember thinking to myself, "I'm not an object the name of which can change with every new owner!" And I had resisted adopting his name in the first place! As a way to deal with my terrible feelings of rejection, I got the idea of adding another "a" to "Mathai" *and to write it as it is pronounced in Kikuyu.* And so, I became "Maathai." The extra syllable also signified that although a part of me would always be connected to Mwangi and his surname, I had a new identity. Henceforth, only I would define who I was: Wangari Muta Maathai."[192]

In many ways, Maathai's divorce functions in her memoir as a breaking point. Until her divorce, she was content (or so she thought) to play multiple conflicting roles. Her desire to contribute to creating the best Kenyan nation that she could—not just for men or white landowners—but for the benefit of everyone, conflicted greatly with her expected gendered role. This meant that much of the GBM work she was doing was going to inherently be antithetical to her role as wife—particularly an a "good African wife."[193] At one point she explains that her divorce was, legally, her "fault" because it was always the woman's fault. In Maathai's memoir, post-colonial Kenya is a nation content to be a New Stanley hotel rather

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[192] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 147) Emphasis mine,

[193] See Ebila's, "'A Proper Woman, in the African Tradition.'" According to Ebila, "Maathai's autobiography demonstrates that the social construction of womanhood in African politics is influenced by socio-cultural and patriarchal ideologies that construct the ideal African woman as the docile one, the one who does not question male authority. Maathai's autobiography becomes a lens that can be used to view and question the social construction of womanhood versus manhood and the influence on gender power relations on women's participation in the politics of the postcolonial nation states in Africa."

than something entirely new. Gender parity then, which disrupts colonial logics, was ultimately a threat. As an emblem of the afterlife of colonial governance, her marriage and the dissolution of it comes to symbolize, among many things, the physical and psychological violence that marriage as an institution invited at the time.

But Maathai reconceptualizes the meaning of that moment. Maathai, instead chooses to sit in the gray of bearing witness to the evidence of colonial scars entangled in her surname. She repurposes the wound of Mwangi's rejection and abuse into something that serves her, her Kikuyu origins, and her larger GBM missions. This flourishing radicalism ultimately returns Maathai and her readers to reverence for and concerns about the lives and well-being of Black/African/Indigenous Kenyan women. These are roots she plants in the readers head at the onset of the memoir and returns to again and again.

As Maathai continued her career, she went on to soar to amazing heights and became the iconic figure she is today. But on her path to iconic environmental leader status, one should never forget her gendered and raced run-ins with the Kenyan government—and the kind of ecological subject and politics it created in Maathai. The nature of these confrontations often get obscured as a result of her icon status and her frequent comparison to other non-black environmental icons. Being a Black/African/Indigenous woman environmental leader is a specific experience that shaped not only Maathai's environmental politics, but also the kinds of resources she used to communicate her agenda. Sometimes, those resources, were her very body. While is it easy and even logical to focus on the symbol of the trees in Maathai's *Unbowed*, one must also pay attention to the symbolics of violence—emotional and physical—visited upon her Black/African/Indigenous body.

For example, on January 8, 1999, Maathai, members of the Green Belt Movement, and an ethnically and racially diverse cadre of Kenyan Parliament members, journalists, and human

rights activists gathered at the gate of Karura Forest to plant a tree on what was then public land under threat of privatization during President Moi's reign. Maathai found this to a particularly egregious instance of land-grabbing because, as she notes,

> For generations, Karura Forest had acted as a break between the winds off the savanna to the south and those descending from the highlands to the west and north. Its 2,500 acres of natural forest serve as a catchment area for four major rivers, while its dense undergrowth and canopy are home to many rare species of flora and fauna, including mihilgii trees, Sykes monkeys, bush pigs, antelopes, and hundreds of species of birds. Situated on the edge of Nairobi, Karura Forest serves as the lung of the congested metropolis.[194]

After arriving at the gate of this extremely important piece of land, the police stationed there told Maathai and her associates that they could not plant a tree on private land (though the land was not in fact private). After an extended period of verbal resistance to this information, physical violence began to ensue. Just as Maathai spends page after page delineating the dense symbolics of the fig tree, she also takes considerable space detailing the opposition she faced near constantly. The always already unjust and ever-violent threats upon which colonial earth ethics depend are constantly on the tip of Maathai's pens. She recalls,

> It is hard to know precisely when violence starts, but in a heated atmosphere, it can take an instant, like a coal bursting into flame. In this case, we suddenly found ourselves under assault from whips and clubs, and stones began flying through the air around us. When the blow came, I felt not so much pain as surprise, even though from the beginning the thugs clearly wanted to hurt or even kill us. I put my hands to my head

[194] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 268)

> and found it was bleeding. Strangely, my mind was very clear and calm. “Now, why would he do something like that?” I asked myself. “Why would he hit me?[195]

One simple answer to Maathai’s rhetorical question is: because he could. Historically Black/African/Indigenous people’s ontological position in the world invites physical violence (especially black-fem) subjects. There are various moments when Maathai acknowledges her experiences of violence but spares her audience extremely graphic details—perhaps in the spirit of resisting the kind of ethnographic pornotroping thrust onto Black/African/Indigenous people. [196]

In this particular instance however, Maathai provides her reader with a visual to live and leave with. This visual is not easily forgotten and is one that calls into question the comparison people make between Maathai and other non-Black/African/Indigenous environmental leaders. These white and non-black leaders are rarely subject to physical brutalization for merely existing, let alone for directly confronting the sheer might and violence of national law enforcement agencies. Maathai continues,

> By then, I realized I had a deep gash on the top of my head and blood was streaming down my neck. I was furious, not so much with the thugs as with the police. My head still warm with the blood, I reported the assault and told the officers that we knew who

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[195] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 268)

[196] My use of the term “pornotroping” follows Spillers's use of the term in, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Spillers defines the depiction of the violation of black bodies (visually, verbally or otherwise) for an astonished/dismayed yet erotically stimulated public as ‘pornotroping.’ Spillers details the process as follows “1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time-in stunning contradiction-the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness";4) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.”

> the attackers were. We offered to take them back to the scene of the violence, so they could arrest our assailants. If you can believe it, the police didn't move at all. Instead, they asked me to sign a formal complaint testifying to my assault. So, sign it I did: I took my finger and dipped it into the blood pouring from my head and wrote a red "X" on that paper-so they would know how I felt about what had happened and also be unable to avoid the evidence in front of them. After that, I went to Nairobi Hospital, where my doctor told me I was very lucky. If I'd been hit again, he said, I might well not have lived.[197]

Instances like this call to mind other environmental activists like Fannie Lou Hamer and the kinds of attacks they sustained. Hamer who is very rarely counted among those deemed an environmental leader, among many other things, was responsible for founding the Freedom Farm Cooperative in 1969 "to help Sunflower County [Mississippi's] most vulnerable feed, clothe, and shelter themselves."[198] On the road to gaining enough influence and capital to fund and maintain projects like Freedom Farm, Hamer has unabashedly noted that her work was not without significant sacrifice to the point of martyrdom on her part, pronouncing that "I've been to jail. And I've been beaten in jail till my body was hard as metal."[199]

Juxtaposing Maathai and Hamer's violent run-ins with the law, I offer a narrative of ecological ethics alternative to the upper, middle-class white liberal fantasies that often guide our engagement to and through environmental discourse. Hamer and Maathai's twinned narratives reveal a pattern: when black-fem subjects go up against the government, their efforts are often met with bloody ends. In addition, they have to bear the burden of the physical

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[197] (Maathai, *Unbowed* 269)
[198] (Brooks and Houck 104)
[199] (Brooks and Houck 129)

brutalization they risk and that violence also becomes embedded within their resistive of their environmental politics.

In the case of Maathai, she literally repurposes her wound wrought by colonial earth ethics. Her bloodied head wound could have easily been disempowering 1) because of the pain and seriousness of the injury and 2) because of the state-sanctioned attempt at erasure of the evidence of her assault. Instead the wound offers Maathai an agential yet precarious space where she takes her victimization and its evidence and makes it *visible* through a confrontational act of repurposing. Maathai creates a different outcome for herself, using the very incident that *should* have silenced her, to empower herself by marking her pain and marking the abuse/neglect of the government. As a result, Maathai subverts normative logics of bodily vulnerability, creating an affirmation of the knowledge (evidence) created by the wound, and affirming (making visible) the wound itself by drawing blood from it to accomplish all this simultaneously.

Chapter Four:
Butlerian Erotics: Rethinking Femininity and Hierarchy

Though ecocriticism and the broader environmental humanities is a fairly new field and has been slow to communicate the significance of black women's contributions, black women's Ecoliterature is as old as black women's literary discourse itself. Whether using plant and animal imagery to enhance character development or embedding ecological principles into a plot, black women writers have relied heavily on themes of ecology to illustrate black women's relationships with their various environments as well as the ways that black women conceptualize their environments alternative to colonial earth ethics privileged in Western academic discourse.

In 1892, Frances Harper aimed to elevate the status of newly-free black women while critiquing the horrors of US chattel slavery by writing that, "Iola Leroy had been taken as a trembling dove from the gory vulture's nest" in her novel *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted.*[200] In Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her protagonist Janie witnesses the blooming of a pear tree—an experience that guides a quietly powerful understanding of ecology. It also awakens her desire for an idealized erotic relationship. Hurston writes, "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation."[201] And in 1953, in order to communicate reverence for fauna and black women, Gwendolyn Brook's *Maud Martha* juxtaposed dandelions and her titular character to illuminate the gorgeousness of black women's (often overlooked)

[200] (Harper and Foster 39)
[201] (Hurston 13)

consciousness and beauty found in the quotidian. Brook's writes, "But dandelions were what she chiefly saw. Yellow jewels for the everyday, studding the patched green dress of her back yard. She liked their demure prettiness second to their everydayness; for in that latter quality, she thought she saw a picture of herself, and it was comforting to find that what was common could also be a flower. And could be cherished!"[202] For Brooks' Maud Martha, dandelions provide a gateway to an alternative understanding of her value rooted in everyday prettiness. Brooks' delineation of everyday prettiness, then elegantly articulates a beauty ideal that moves beyond the prescribed Western standards of Black femininity against which Martha struggles throughout the novel.

While these above texts tend to whisper their eco-consciousness, Alice Walker's 1988 collection of essays, *Living by the Word* explicitly exposes why a black-fem standpoint is so useful for illustrating an eco-ethic. Walker writes, "[Earth] is perceived, ironically, as other, alien, evil, and threatening by those who are finding they cannot draw a healthful breath without its cooperation. While the earth is poisoned, everything it supports is poisoned. While the earth is enslaved, none of us is free."[203] Walker's invocation of an enslaved earth informed my early understanding of the existence and effects of a colonial earth ethic that fails to recognize the earth as an entity requiring reverence and mutually beneficial symbiosis rather than inertia to be ignored at best or exploited at worst. Her assertion also encouraged me to investigate the ways that black women have theorized the roots and effects of the poisons that have worked to keep the earth and everything it supports enslaved. These interests that Alice Walker planted, bloomed in my engagement with ecoactivists, author, and social theorist Octavia Butler.

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[202] (Brooks 2)
[203] (Walker 147)

Though she is often referred to as the "Grand Dame of Science Fiction," Octavia Butler's prolific catalog of novels, short stories, and essays defy easy categorization. Her work continues to confound scholars and inspire myriad questions that animate multiple genres and disciplines, including but not limited to science fiction studies, gender and sexuality studies, African American literature, and ecocriticism. Butler began her writing practice as a child and in 1976, she published her first novel, *Patternmaster*. She then went on to publish a number of critically acclaimed and award winning short essays and novels including *Mind of My Mind (1977)*, *Survivor (1978)*, *Kindred (1979)*, *Wild Seed (1980) and Clay's Ark (1984)*, *Dawn (1987)*, *Adulthood Rites (1988)*, *Imago (1989)*, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995), *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and her final published novel *Fledgling* (2005).

Each of Octavia Butler's novels stand on their own as unique and compelling, yet they share a set of specific preoccupations. Unlike most science fiction novels, nearly all of Octavia Butler's protagonists are black female and/or black feminine young adults. Rather than a white male being a "default" subject position in her work, she returned again and again to Black-fem protagonists. Whether the narrative was about a centuries old west African priestess as in *Wildseed*,[204] a teenage leader of a new ecologically-informed religion as in *Parable of the Sower*,[205] or a 53 year old vampire as in *Fledgling*,[206] Butler was able use a Black-fem standpoint to conjure questions and often unsettle our Western understandings of nature, race, gender, home, animality/beastliness, family, and specific to the theme of this chapter, hierarchy and erotics. In the *Lilith's Brood* series specifically, Octavia Butler scrutinizes and troubles notions of hierarchy. This is of crucial importance given that hierarchies condition the ways that

[204] (Butler, "Wild Seed")
[205] (Butler, *Parable of the Sower*)
[206] (Butler, *Fledgling*)

different materials we recognize as human, alien, plants, animals, men, and women interact and that these hierarchical interactions become integral to the ongoing stabilization of colonial earth ethics. That said, this chapter argues that as hierarchical systems are introduced and defamiliarized throughout the *Lilith's Brood* series, Octavia Butler's 'uses of the erotic'—hereby referred to as Butlerian erotics—represent alternative understandings of hierarchies that at times reinforce a colonial earth ethic while also carrying the potential of uprooting and exceeding it.

Xenogenesis Series Overview

Lilith's Brood or the *Xenogenesis* series follows the life and offspring of a black human woman name Lilith Iyapo. In the midst of an apocalyptic war carried by out humans on earth, extraterrestrials called the Oankali save a small group of surviving humans. The Oankali preserve them and restructure the ecology of earth itself under a set of ethics that assume that humans left to their own devices will inevitably destroy themselves again—but next time entirely. This, the Oankali explain, is due a "genetic" contradiction in the DNA of humans. To be human then, is to be imbued with what the Oankali understand as a "'lethal' combination of 'mismatched genetic characteristics': intelligence and hierarchical thinking. The latter trait, which humanity shares with other terrestrial animals, is older, and is therefore served by the former."[207] Though the Oankali save the humans, the draconian means by which they "save," their need for human cooperation in order to preserve their own vulnerable race, and their wild fascination with humans creates points of contention between the Oankali and humans.

The first novel of the series, *Dawn*, is where we meet the protagonist Lilith Iyapo, just awakening aboard the Oankali living ship. After some 250 years of near-complete solitude

[207] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood*)

(which she experiences as only a few years) she learns that she is one of a very small group of humans preserved from a multi-nation apocalyptic war on earth. After becoming familiar with the very strange Oankali alien race and living ship, she also learns that 1) the Oankali have plans to breed with humans to ensure the survival of both species, 2) that this interbreeding process will take place over several generations on a newly restructured planet earth, and 3) that after the process is complete, earth will be nothing more than a hallowed out and uninhabitable shell of itself. Lilith also learns that she has been selected to awaken other humans, acclimate them to this grim reality and lead them into what many of them believe is the extinction of human life as they know it. It is no wonder then, that Butler's protagonist's last name Iyapo, is Yoruba for "many hard situations."[208]

Many humans regard the arrival of the Oankali as the end of human life as they know it—particularly because all the humans have been sterilized save for the ones that elect to procreate with Oankali. Some humans begrudgingly accept this new reality as the evolution of human life. This conflict is explored further in the second novel in the series *Adulthood Rites*. In *Adulthood Rite*s rather than the novel taking place on the living ship, the reader is introduced to the ecologically restored and restructured earth. On this new earth we meet Akin, a construct. Constructs are the offspring between humans like Lilith and the Oankali. Akin is considered very valuable to the sterilized human resisters living on earth because though he is half human and half Oankali, his physical appearance is very similar to that of a human child. While very young, he is abducted from his human and Oankali family and taken to a village of human resisters called Phoenix. As he comes of age in Phoenix, he comes to empathize with human resisters and when he matures, he appeals to the Oankali powers-that-be in order to secure a

[208] I'm thankful for many of my Yoruba-speaking colleagues for verifying this translation.

colony on Mars for humans to live free from Oankali interference. The novel ends with Akin and a group of human resisters preparing to settle on Mars.

In the final novel in the series, we meet protagonist Jodahs, another construct and another of Lilith Iyapo's offspring. By this point in the series there have been several half-human and half-Oankali construct children and all these children all genetically engineered/created by a group of Oankali that oversee the process called the ooloi. Jodahs is significant because it is the first half-human, half-Oankali ooloi construct. In line with ooloi biology and customs, Jodahs is neither female nor male and answers to the pronoun 'it.' At the time of its birth, there are not supposed to be any ooloi constructs in existence. Once its parents figure out that it was engineered to be a construct ooloi due to a mistake, it is immediately deemed dangerous. Because of this, it retreats from both humans and Oankali, and withdraws into the forest to grow and mature safely. In the forest, it has a chance meeting with a set of human siblings. These siblings, a brother and sister, come from a village of humans hiding in the mountains that happened to have escaped Oankali detection (and therefore sterilization) amidst and after the war. The three form a bond and Jodahs decides that it wants the siblings as its mates. After some convincing, the siblings' consent. Since the earth is still on schedule to be hallowed out by the Oankali following the process of Oankali and human interbreeding, Jodahs and the siblings must return to their village to alert their community of their fate and offer them the opportunity to join the human colony on Mars. The humans are initially very distrustful of Jodahs. It's only after using its ooloi abilities to heal all the deformities they've developed due to years of interbreeding that they begin to accept his presence and counsel. As the narrative ends, rather than settle on Mars, many of the humans from the mountain village choose to find ooloi mates. Their desire and ability to consent to find these mates brings considerations of hierarchy to a different place, with a more evolved understanding of the

humans and the contradictions that supposedly define them brought into further view to the Oankali. By complicating notions of hierarchy through the categories of 'human,' 'nature,' and 'erotics,' the series ends on a hopeful note by showcasing the ways that these categories are now operating under entirely different and potentially more hopeful logics than they were as the series began with Lilith confined by the Oankali.

Dissembling the Human

Throughout the series, Butler uses her prolific world-building skills to confront the ways that hierarchical colonial architectures like white supremacy, patriarchy, and certain manifestations of Christianity uphold one of colonial earth ethics' most troubling benefactors: the Western category of the Human. As Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie asserts, "Stories matter. Many stories matter,"[209] and by naming her main character Lilith, Butler immediately confronts the Christian notion that there is only one true origin story that places the story of Adam and Eve as parents of humankind of above all other origin stories. In lesser-studied rabbinical myth, Lilith represents a largely forgotten figure from the Bible. Although scholars have continued to argue over the truth of her presence, they nonetheless acknowledge that the conversation around her calls the validity of the Adam and Eve origin story into constant question.[210] Butler confronts widely accepted Christian origin myths by invoking Lilith. Given the ways that some forms of Christianity have been an accomplice to both capitalism and coloniality throughout history, this is no small decision. According to theorist Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "the current planetary crisis is above all a consequence of the human-centered logic that underlies modern Christological racial capitalism, a logic that produces categories of

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[209] (Adichie)
[210] Mashey Bernstein, "The 'Fatal Attraction' of Lilith," *Christianity & Literature* 42, no. 3 (June 1993): 455–64.

beings designated as animal or object, in the name of extracting value and labor-energy."[211] Tompkins draws a direct line between "Christological racial capitalism" and the justified exploitation/extraction of the earth and the people, places, and things that comprise it. Her delineation of the relationship between "the human," "Christianity," "race," and "capitalism" provides insights into the reasons why a colonial earth ethic specifies the kinds of hierarchies that, as I noted earlier, condition the ways that different materials we recognize as human, alien, plants, animals, men, women interact.

Another way that Butler confronts Western categories of the human is by making a black woman, Lilith Iyapo, the central subject that quite literally, births a new reality and a new future. In science fictions texts, as well as throughout most of the Western canon, white men are central subjects—with the vast majority of the literary and artistic representations of humanness being reduced to their experiences only. By centralizing black-fem subjects as archetypal rather than cursory however, Butler's work parallels the many interventions that feminist scholars—particularly from the mid-eighties up through the early 2000s—had been articulating. In addition to Butler, scholars like Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Roberts, and bell hooks among several others had been helping us to rethink liberal feminism's overreliance on a white subject to conceptualize the experiences of all women—especially black women.[212] By furthering and theorizing alongside these Black feminist intellectual projects, Butler contributed to a growing commitment by Black women scholars and writers to insist on the recognition of the black-fem subject's existence. These scholars have also insisted that the recognition of black-fem creative

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[211] ("Kyla Wazana Tompkins, 'On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy'")
[212] (Davis), (B. Christian, *Black Women Novelists*), (P. B. Christian), (Hull et al.) (Guy-Sheftall), (Collins), (Roberts), (Hooks, *Feminist Theory*)

and intellectual contributions to the various societies—in the West and beyond—in which they found themselves enmeshed, are both unique and significant to an overall understanding of societal ills and solutions.

Many of Butler's texts confront short sighted and shallow assumptions of anthropocentrism—or in other words—the idea that humans are the most important entities in the universe. In *Dawn* particularly, Butler confronts anthropocentrism by reducing humans to accessories of larger Oankali desires rather than sovereign subjects. This theoretical move helped lay the ground work for current black and queer-of-color scholars working to decenter Western theories of the human in what we now call new materialist, ecocritical, and Anthropocene discourses. As Kyla Wazana Thompkins so succinctly explains,

> New Materialism then is interested in relations between things, objects, phenomena, materialities, and physical bodies, as well as the relations between those things (things with each other) and humans (humans with things)… Given these interests, New Materialism is also interested in speculating about a world in which the human subject is not centered, or even central.[213]

Taking Thompkins' comment above into account, it might at first seem like Butler centering black-fem subjectivity by making a black woman archetypal might suggest that she's potentially at odds with new materialist concerns. Focusing on a black-fem subject, however, allows Butler to further explore humanity's struggle to evolve beyond its baser instincts. For example, after Lilith meets Jdahya—a kind of ambassador for the Oankali—she is panicked by his appearance. Butler writes, "…she had suddenly developed a phobia—something she had never before experienced. But what she felt was like what she had heard others describe. A true

[213] ("Kyla Wazana Tompkins, 'On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy'")

xenophobia."[214] By taking time to describe these reactions, Butler acknowledges the fact that even humans who are deeply discriminated against remain vulnerable to hierarchical feelings that manifest in all kinds of ways—especially fear.

Despite the baser feelings that connect most humans, viewed from another angle, the black-fem-centrism in Butler's novels also reminds us that black-fems have never been admitted to the Eurocentric categories of "the Human.'[215] I capitalize the word "Human," here to distinguish Eurocentric/colonial understandings of the 'Human' from Oankali understandings of the 'human' throughout the series and from indigenous knowledge systems—like the Kikuyu philosophies discussed in the previous chapter for example—that make sense of humanity in ways alternative to colonial logics.

In Butler's novels, the black-fem protagonists are often rarely Human, more-than Human, beyond Human, and yet they are proximal and embedded in Humanity. Just as Lilith's last name Iyapo signals her embeddedness in 'many hard situations,' her very presence invites questions about her 'Humanness' and her humanity. At one point in *Dawn*, after other humans begin to understand their fate, it impacts their willingness to trust Lilith as a leader with their best interest in mind and at heart. Butler writes, "Some avoided Lilith because they were afraid of her—afraid she was not human, or not human enough."[216] For many of the humans that she awakens, Lilith's proximity to the Oankali and her Oankali enhanced abilities make her a traitor and an accomplice. In many ways, responses from other humans begin to reflect—even as they

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[214] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 23)
[215] I capitalize the word "Human," here to distinguish Eurocentric/colonial understandings of the 'Human' from Oankali understandings of the 'human,' and from indigenous knowledge systems that make sense of humanity in ways alternative to colonial logics. For more context on this point see Alexander G. Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2014).
[216] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 180)

are distinct from—the ways that black-fems have historically been demonized for the compromises they to make in order to survive in the West. Put differently, pre-Oankali earthly hierarchies animated by racism, sexism, anthropocentrism, and xenophobia set the stage for the kinds of human-Oankali entanglements she is forced to navigate. These relations make the destroyed earth from which she came prior to *Dawn*, her life as a reluctant leader on the Oankali living ship in *Dawn*, as well her life the human/Oankali construct Earth in *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago* troublingly recognizable while also being extremely disorienting in its unfamiliarity.

Defamiliarizing Hierarchy, Interrogating Intelligence

In addition to all aforementioned ways Butler dissembles the human, one of the most fascinating and complicated ways that she confronts hierarchies is by making understandings of hierarchies and their purpose difficult to pin down. Different characters offer distinct understandings of hierarchy based on their experiences and societal standpoints. For example, in one early conversation in *Dawn*, Lilith learns that while Oankali value humans, the Oankali do not? see humans as evolved beings equal to themselves. The Oankali explain that humanity's inferior evolution is because of their reliance on hierarchical behavior. Jdahya, explains that "when human intelligence served [hierarchy] instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all…That was like ignoring cancer."[217]

On the contrary, Oankali rigidly believe that they do not exhibit hierarchical tendencies. Jdahya explains, "We're not hierarchical, you see. We never were. But we are powerfully acquisitive. We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, *use it.* We carry

[217] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 39)

the drive to do this…within every cell of our bodies."[218] Butler writes Jdahya's tone as so definitive that it's easy for the reader to accept his assertion as an absolute truth. The structure of Oankali society, however, calls his claim into question. For example, in many ways Oankali children—referred to as *eka*—do not have as much authority as Oankali adults. Throughout *Dawn*, as a human and as a newly awakened subject referred to by her Oankali adopted family as an *eka*, Lilith feels disempowered and almost immediately rejects Jdahya's understanding of Oankali society as non-hierarchical. As Butler explains,

> …[Lilith] did not like the ooloi. It was smug and it tended to treat her condescendingly. It was also one of the creatures scheduled to bring about the destruction of what was left of humanity. And in spite of Jdahya's claim that the Oankali were not hierarchical, the ooloi seemed to be the head of the house. Everyone deferred to it.[219]

Lilith's perceptiveness could be due to many reasons, but given that she is a black-fem, born into a pre-Oankali society that systematically disempowered black-fems while feeding them multiple narratives that refuted that very truth, it is no surprise that she is able to form a counternarrative primed to detect the holes in Oankali logic. If readers consider the significance of standpoint epistemology to Black feminist theoretical formations, Lilith's ability to form her own concept of Oankali hierarchical behavior comes into clearer view. Feminist scholar Jennifer Nash helps me to clarify this point further. Nash writes,

> Black feminism's long-standing investment in both the experiential as a rich episteme and the particular standpoint of black women reveals that the tradition has long treated black women as subjects who witness what is meant to kept invisible, unnamed, unseen.

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[218] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 41) Emphasis mine.
[219] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 48)

> In other words, black feminism has positioned and imagined black women as 'outsiders-within' who have a particular vantage point on how structures of domination operate to marginalize, constrain, and injure certain bodies. Black women are, then, witnesses who can see and even name forms of violence that other subjects cannot see, or simply refuse to see.[220]

In many ways, these dynamics that Lilith witnesses—mostly internally—precede Oankali awareness of characteristics they share with the most troubled parts of humanity. Her internal deductions and instances of witnessing protect her psyche from the harm of Oankali blindness and/or denials, and these processes ultimately give way to much more. As Nash insists, "…this act of witnessing, for self and for others, for naming what others seek to ignore or normalize, is, black feminists assert, a practice of love, of tenderness, and of political world-making."[221] Lilith roots her practice of love for humanity and for her children, for example, in her acts of witnessing that help lay groundwork for the kinds of radical restructuring of Oankali society that her children Akin and Jodahs ultimately spearhead.

Though they insist that their society is different from humanity because it is not hierarchical, perhaps a more accurate assessment would be that Oankali are different from humans because where humanity's intelligence served its hierarchical tendencies (as evidenced by the fact that most of our scientific breakthroughs are military led and funded), Oankali hierarchies serve Oankali intelligence. Butler demonstrates this by illustrating the ways that Oankali have genetically engineered their flora, fauna, and their very living ship into complacency in their service to Oankali people. For example, the Oankali explain that the ship

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[220] (Nash 119)
[221] (Nash 119)

is both plant and animal but possesses an intelligence that they keep dormant. Jdahya explains that the ship can be intelligent, but that

> that part of it is dormant now. But even so, the ship can be chemically induced to perform more functions than you would have the patience to listen to…the human doctor used to say it loved us. There is an affinity, but it's biological—a strong, symbiotic relationship. We serve the ship's needs and it serves ours. It would die without us and we would be? planet-bound without it. For us, that would eventually mean death.[222]

The kind of symbiotic relationship Jdahya describes above calls consent, love, and biology into question. Because the ship is described as "loving" the Oankali, it obscures the fact that its dormant intelligence structures its "free" will. Is the ship choosing its place with/alongside the Oankali or does its biological dependency reinforce the relationship? Or both? Or neither? These questions also encourage us, as readers, to take seriously the idea that what connects both these species is their fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between intelligence and hierarchy.

Though some may read the Oankali as the ultimate environmental conservationists and others read them as horrifying colonizers, our inability to resolve them as one or the other?, suggests that perhaps they are both. The Oankali are, I argue, deeply emblematic of a colonial earth ethic. Because they are extraterrestrials, the narrative puts just enough distance between our own colonial earth ethical practices and theirs to recognize the similarities. Butler writes them as gentle and benevolent, yet condescending and extractive subjects that have several fundamental misunderstandings of the humans with whom they are trying to somehow make

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[222] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 35)

community with *and* control at the most intimate levels. This dynamic appears often throughout all the novels. First in *Dawn* Lilith has to defend herself against sexual assault by another captive human because of Oankali misunderstandings of human rape culture.[223] This dynamic is also evidenced by the extreme anger and resentment harbored by the sterilized human resisters in *Adulthood Rites* that leads to Akin's kidnapping. By deciding to sterilize and confine humans, Oankali reveal themselves to be ascribing to a "colonial earth ethic" that, as I explain in chapter three, describes value systems and ways of being that justify taking action ("environmental" or otherwise) while armed with *ignorance* about local ecosystems. Because the Oankali are ignorant to human erotic and reproductive culture, they end up making decisions and taking actions that hurt the humans involved and even injure themselves in the process.

Considering Funk Beyond Empires of Reproduction

As Butler illustrates these misunderstandings, she invites us to re-examine the ways that intelligence serves hierarchy in our earth ethics or that hierarchy serves intelligence. Butler also helps us to see how misunderstanding the relationship between intelligence and hierarchy can lead to dangerous effects including the reinforcement of a colonial earth ethic. To reiterate, a "colonial earth ethic" describes ethical codes that legitimize disrupting extant ecologies due to ignorance, willful ignorance of defilement of indigenous people, plants, and other materials inherent in forced displacement; breaches of trust violations (including sexual assault or rape) obscured by constantly shifting notions of "legality;" and an insatiable hunger for ecological conditions structures by late capitalism's reliance on notions of scarcity, excessive consumption, and reproduction. As I've argued earlier, the Oankali ascribe to a colonial earth ethic that is deeply dependent on both mechanized extraction and reproduction. Though

[223] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 95)

capitalism does not enter *Lilith's Brood* in an explicit way, the Oankali's rigid dependence on mechanized extraction and reproduction—two key features of capitalist consumption—suggests a helpful comparison. The analogous relationship between capitalism and Oankali dependence on mechanized extraction and reproductions, invite us to reflect on capitalism—cis-hetero-capitalism's—various limitations and effects. One of the most dangerous effects, that the Oankali and pre-Oankali humans suffer from is a desire for an automated and therefore controllable process of human reproduction.

In order to think beyond this dependence on mechanized extraction and reproduction present in our current colonial earth ethic and reflected in the fictional Oankali colonial earth ethic, several insights from Lamonda Horton Stallings' *Funk the Erotic* return to mind. In her text, Stalling asks us to consider understandings of an order of erotic knowledge produced from funk. Funk—typically only engaged academically as a genre of music—rarely gets taken up as a portal through which life—and with it, theories of "love, uses of the erotic, sexuality, sex, and work," might be understood outside of the Western order of space-time. As Stallings notes, "Funk produces alternative orders of knowledge about the body and imagination that originate in a sensorium predating empires of knowledge."[224] In light of Stalling's insistence, another concern this chapter carries is about resisting an unbalanced or misaligned understanding of the relationship between intelligence and hierarchy. With practice and careful consideration, orders of knowledge, like funk, that predate *empires* of knowledge can help us to detect when mechanized extraction and (re)production forecloses the fruitful possibilities that derive from erotic creativity. Moreover, thinking with Stallings alongside Butler provides an opening for us

[224] (Stallings; Adichie 6)

to conceptualize an ecological ethic that hopefully, as Stallings insists, is "less bound by capitalism's emphasis on production and biopower's reproductive ordering of time."[225]

First, Stallings' insights also provide an interesting way to understand what is promising about Oankali knowledge systems. Oankali knowledge systems produce orders of knowledge about the body that exceed our present conceptions of bodily knowledge. Those knowledge systems exceed our present conceptions of bodily knowledge, because in many ways, the Oankali are more evolved than humans, though they are not necessarily on a different evolutionary path than humans. As the Oankali explain to Lilith,

> You are intelligent…That's the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have to put to work to save yourselves. You are potentially one of the most intelligent species we've found, though your focus is different from ours. Still, you had a good start in the life sciences, and even in genetics.[226]

Oankali privilege genetic information/intelligence over everything and apply that intelligence in service of their benevolent dominance over and absorption of other species into their species and interstellar empire.[227]

To make the analogy even more clear, I am aligning Lilith, the human resisters, and Lilith's half Oankali and half human offspring Akin, and Jodahs with funk and the alternative knowledges produced from it and alongside it while I am simultaneously aligning my delineation of a colonial earth ethic and the "empires of knowledge" that derive from it with the

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[225] (Stallings 8)
[226] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 38)
[227] Feminist and critical race theorists have explored conversant the kind of absorption referenced above through the "eating" of "primitive" cultures as a key facet of White heteropatriarchal domination. For more on this, see bell hooks' "Eating the Other," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 1st edition (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992)., and Kyla Wazana Tompkins' *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

Oankali. This analogy allows me to avoid the unnecessary impulse to definitively declare whether or not the Oankali are a positive or negative presence throughout the series and to instead use them to critique the perils and possibilities of scrutinizing a colonial earth ethic. Furthermore, this analogy, though helpful for this part of my argument, is not necessarily linearly consistent throughout the whole of my chapter. This tendency is not a reflection of careless theorizing on my part, but rather an attempt to critique Butler's work in rhythm with the malleable logic that makes this series fascinating and coherent narrative-wise, yet difficult to make sense of through abstract logic. Quite similar to life itself.

Scent is a key feature for Oankali understandings of the body and the environments with which they have a relationship. This invites us to consider another of Stallings' insights about funk. As she explains, "Scholarship on funk as a music genre downplays the significance of funk's philosophical link to the sense of smell and, consequently, the alternative mode of being that derives from sensus communis that prioritizes smell."[228] Similarly, the Oankali make use of a knowledge system of philosophy that is inextricably linked to smell. For example, Lilith attempts run away from her designated Oankali family aboard the ship, but quickly remembers that,

> There were no signs she could read. Oankali did not use such things. Their kinship group areas were clearly scent-marked. Each time they opened a wall, they enhanced the local scent markers—or they identified themselves as visitors, members of a different kinship group. Ooloi could change their scent and did when they left home to mate. Males and females kept the scents they born with and never lived outside their kinship area. Lilith could not read scent signs.[229]

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[228] Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*; 6.
[229] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 67)

This prioritized sense of smell explained above is primarily used to guide an overarching project of mechanized (re)production and a series of smaller projects, meant to keep a draconian hold on the order of Oankali survival. Juxtaposing Stallings' discussion of funk and Oankali use of scent then allows us to parse the nuances between the two concepts. If "funk produces alternative orders of knowledge about the body and imagination that originate in a sensorium predating empires of knowledge,"[230] Oankali knowledge systems represent the ways that scent produces orders of knowledge about the body (*devoid of imagination*) that perpetuate a sensorium that reinforces empires of knowledge that gird a colonial earth ethic.[231] A key feature of this mechanism? is a belief that indigenous ways of being were inferior to colonial governance systems and that colonial ways of being were inherently salvific. This tension is most pronounced through the ways Butlerian erotics show up throughout the series—particularly as it pertains to gender.

<u>You Treat all Mankind as your Women!: Alternative Femininities in Butlerian Erotics</u>

In her essay, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: 'Pleasure under Patriarchy,'" Katherine Mackinnon argues that, while "Dominance eroticized defines the imperatives of [gender's] masculinity, submission eroticized defines [gender's] femininity."[232] Mackinnon's language, though controversial both now and within the second-wave context from which her insights emerged is nonetheless instructive. In many ways, her insights provocatively explain

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[230] (Stallings; 6)
[231] As a note in a previous chapter a colonial earth ethic describes value systems and ways of being that justify taking action ("environmental" or otherwise) while armed with *ignorance* about local ecosystems; willingness to enact or ignore the intrinsic violences that accompany forced displacement of indigenous people, plants, and other materials; violations (including land theft) obscured by constantly shifting notions of "legality;" and the paradoxical hunger for ecological conditions limited by late capitalism's reliance on notions of scarcity, hoarding, and excessive consumption.

[232] (MacKinnon 318)

the function of masculinity and femininity in under a colonial earth ethic and condition the ways that many of us consciously and unconsciously make sense of gender and power. Put simply, masculinity is read and accepted as dominant and femininity is read and accepted as submissive. Her formulation, when applied to in order to understand femininity as it manifests in Butler's work, however, doesn't quite fit. Femininity, under Butler's formulations represents many elements—chief among creativity, allurement, and (often underestimated and misunderstood) power.

One of the most obvious ways Butler explores femininity is through characters described as women or female—and the allurement attached to these characters. In *Adulthood Rites*, for example, one of Lilith's human lovers, Tino, describes his experience of the onset of an erotic encounter with her:

> She moved closer to him, rested warm, calloused hands on his forearms. He could smell her. Crushed plants—the way a fresh-cut lawn used to smell. Food, pepper, and sweet. Woman. He reached out to her, touched the large breasts. He could not help himself. He has wanted to touch them since he has first seen them. She lay down on her side, drawing him down facing her.[233]

In this passage, Tino's attraction to Lilith's is barely contained, yet the words that describe his attraction have nothing to do with submission. Earthly imagery like crushed plants, pepper, and sweet call him. Yet her initiating moving closer to him, her calloused hands, largeness, and her positioning of his body to her liking signals her power in the encounter. In another erotic encounter—this time in *Imago*—Jodahs describes a human woman with a similar level of awe and desire: "The beauty of her flesh was my reward. A foreign Human as incredibly complex as

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[233] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 295)

any Human, as full of the Human Conflict—dangerous and frightening and intriguing—as any Human. She was like the fire—desirable and dangerous, beautiful and lethal. Humans never understood why Oankali found them so interesting."[234] Yet again Butler explores elements of femininity through descriptions of attraction and power. These twinned characteristics come out most saliently with Butler's invocation of fire imagery and the danger and desire that fire literally and metaphorically calls to mind.

Though allurement is often attached to women or females in Butler's narratives, characters described as male or men are often attached to some of the same kind of erotic imagery and descriptive language—particularly construct and human males. As the quote above alludes to, Oankali—especially ooloi—find human men and women equally enticing, powerful, and dangerous. This suggests that femininity exceeds the categories of human woman and/or human female. Under Butler's purview in *Lilith's Brood* all humans become feminized in relation to the Oankali—primed for penetration and for extraction. Most humans—especially human males despise this aspect of human and Oankali relations. As one human man, Joao, angrily shouts at an ooloi that has just finished healing one his injuries, "Your kind and your Human whores are the cause of all our trouble! Your treat all mankind as your Woman!" Because Joao and other humans like him can only make sense of femininity as something synonymous with submission, they loathe the Oankali, the penetrative nature of the ooloi, and to a large extent themselves for humanity's perceived impotence/powerlessness under Oankali rule. Humans like João, correctly note that all humans—under Oankali treatment—retain the potential to occupy or work from a place of femininity. What humans like João cannot see, however, is their inherent and indispensable value because of their

[234] (Butler, *Lilith's Brood* 577)

allurement, their ability to facilitate the *creation* of new life for the Oankali, and the *power* that derives from their "dangerousness" and inability to be fully contained.

Given the ways that Eurocentric categories of gender are insufficient for fully explaining the kinds of gender dynamics at play in Butler's work, Lilith's last name, Iyapo suggests that other African philosophical understandings of gender—particularly femininity—are present in *Lilith's Brood* as well. For example, in West African indigenous philosophical and spiritual systems—particularly as it is embodied through the Orisha Oshun—femininity represents anything but submission. According to Ifá priestess Luisah Teish, femininity is understood as "the unbridled eroticism of nature" and "the power of attraction that causes a particle and a wave to interact with each other." Luisah goes onto explain that femininity is "why atoms and molecules hold together," "why plants entwine their roots," and "why animals make mating calls to each other" and that life on micro and macro levels depend on femininity.(Teish) Rather than being described as submissive, under African indigenous spiritual law, instead femininity captures a nebulous and sometimes contradictory constellation of tools and modes of being.[235] At the core of these many tools and modes of being however, not unlike the properties of Oshun that Teish explains, femininity in *Lilith's Brood* is about love through connection (erotics) and the miracle of the ways that erotics facilitate creativity/life itself.

The Erotic as Feminine in the Black Feminist Intellectual Archive

[235] For more on African indigenous understandings of femininity, see Rowland Abiodun, "Hidden Power: Osun, the Seventeenth Odu," in *Osun across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* (Bloomington, UNITED STATES: Indiana University Press, 2001),; Rachel Elizabeth Harding, "What Part of the River You're In: African American Women in Devotion to Osun," in *Osun across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*, ed. Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001)., and (*The Archetype of Oshun and the Divine Feminine (Changing of the Gods)*)

African indigenous conceptions of femininity can also help us to make sense of the productive tension between Butlerian erotics and Black feminist interventions into discourses of coloniality, pleasure, reproduction, and ecology. I must take some time to trace a discussion of black feminist theories of erotics to which Butler is responding to, aligning with, and pre-dating beginning with Audre Lorde's preeminent discussion of the concept in her essay, "Uses of the Erotic." As Lorde explains,

> There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.[236]

It is here that Lorde is making clear a few key characteristics for understanding the erotic. First, and very importantly, it is polysemous. This means that it is complex, and it carries more than one interrelated meaning. Here Lorde introduces the concept as power, as a resource, and as information that can be used (or suppressed)—through culture—in order to catalyze transformation.

The transformation Lorde calls for is urgent—particularly because she writes to and from "the culture of the oppressed." These cultures of the oppressed can take many shapes—but in her specific address she is speaking about women in the West. Lorde situates the erotic as inherently primed for decolonial appropriation when she goes to explain that,

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[236] (Lorde and Clarke 53)

> As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibility of it within themselves. So, women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving sub- stance for their masters.[237]

In delivering this paper—first as a speech at Mount Holyoke College in 1978—to declare the erotic as a resource of power was an intensely subversive move. Despite all the claims of sex-positivity and highly evolved sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s—in 1978 in the United States, we resided (and still do in 2019) in a Western culture that regarded erotics as suspect precisely because of the ways erotic expression has been misnamed as a characteristic of feminized and therefore supposedly morally, ethically, and culturally inferior cultures and populations.

In the above quote, Lorde also sets up a dichotomy between the male and female world. She explains that the male world benefits from denying the importance of the erotic because of its association with inferiority. The male world (and the colonial earth ethic that fuels it) denies the importance of the erotic while paradoxically recognizing and deeply valuing the erotic *only* as a fungible resource to be automatically reproduced and extracted from the female world in order to manage the material and psychological gendered hierarchy of the West.

Before going any further, I must make investments in Lorde's formulation of gender clear and explain how my interest the erotic as a facilitator of alternative eco-ethics derives from yet departs from ideas Lorde introduced in a very different era of feminist and queer

[237] (Lorde and Clarke 88)

theorizing. First, throughout these initial passages, Lorde uses the terms woman and female interchangeably. Queer-of-color critique spear-headed by scholars like Cathy Cohen and Sharon Patricia Holland has challenged tendencies in Eurocentric feminist theorizing to conflate the categories of femininity and femaleness. Additionally, given my alignment with other contemporary scholars of queer-of-color critique as well as scholars of African indigenous understandings of gender, I do not understand the categories of woman and female as interchangeable and therefore I not use them as such throughout this dissertation.[238]

Second, Lorde describes the male world and the female world as distinct entities. This dynamic could simply be interpreted as a rhetorical or stylistic device to communicate separations in Western society in caused by Eurocentric heterosexism. But because she makes these distinctions between the male world and the female world while conflating descriptions of sex and gender, I argue that Lorde adheres to a binaried sex/gender system that fails to take into account the myriad genders that blackness enables.[239] I, however, insist on a clear distinction: that "erotic" knowledge is rooted in a deeply feminine (rather than female) and spiritual plane. I make this distinction because several genders can be feminine or work from, reject femininity (not just women, femmes, or those assigned female at birth). I also emphasize this point because subjects who are gendered men or sexed male do have access (if they are so willing) to the erotic rooted in a deeply feminine plane. This point is rarely articulated or modeled because colonial earth ethics discourage masculine persons or men from tapping into

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[238] See Sharon Patricia Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 47–60 for paradigmatic example of queer-of-color critique that provides an understanding of the intellectual history of erotics that Audre Lorde is writing to and against with her 1978 speech and 1984 publication "Uses of the Erotic."

[239] For more on the myriad genders that blackness enables, see Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 47–60., (Douglass), Treva Carrie Ellison, "Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender," *The Black Scholar* 49, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 6–16., (Snorton)

this power without (at best) relying on a feminine subject to facilitate access for them or (at worst) violently extracting said power from a feminine subject. This point is crucial because even though the World of Man and the colonial earth ethic that undergirds it despises both femininity and femaleness, the erotic is a life force, a power that we—none of us—can survive without.[240]

This is an idea is heavily reflected in the black feminist literary/intellectual archive. Because of its literally life-giving sustenance, representations of the erotic have been a key feature in the black feminist literature. As highlighted with the genealogy of black women writers I offered at the onset of the chapter, Black feminist texts offer stylized explanations of the erotic, methods by which black-fem subjects have accessed the erotic, tapping into the erotic as a healing force, and as I'll explain more as I return to Octavia Butlerian erotic, the murky waters of navigating its dangers and complexities.

Reimagining Hierarchy through Butlerian Erotics

As I have attempted to explain Butlerian Erotics are significant for articulations of a Black feminist ecoethics because it 1) divorces masculinity and femininity from the categories of human maleness and human femaleness, 2) it articulates black femininity as both alluring and powerful (not submissive, hyper-emasculating, or primed for injury) and black-fems as repositories of power. Additionally, and only after a careful understanding of these first two points, Butlerian erotics insists on the *function* of hierarchies while critiquing the architectures that animate them under a colonial earth ethic. In the *Lilith's Brood* series, hierarchy itself is not the problem. Hierarchies are, in many ways unavoidable for most complex organisms—as in the case of young needing to raised. Hierarchies, in many ways are useful--for protection, for

[240] This point is further emphasizes in Teish's description of the Yoruba Odu "Ose Otura," in (*The Archetype of Oshun and the Divine Feminine (Changing of the Gods)*)

structure, and to give things shape and organization. Yet it would be foolish to ignore the fact that hierarchies—particular as they manifest in things like antiblackness, white supremacy, classism, and misogyny—to retain the potential to uphold the colonial earth ethic that we need to intentionally move beyond.

Careful recognition of a Butlerian erotics however, certainly reveals the perilous dynamics of hierarchies Oankali and human hierarchies at work, but it also lingers on the fruitful possibilities. These possibilities are murmurs in the first two novels *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites*, but truly begin to take shape in the final novel *Imago*. Simultaneously, and especially as the series goes from *Dawn*, to *Adulthood Rites*, to *Imago*, the Oankali also come to truly understand, and then appreciate the nature of the power that humans offer them. They move beyond their preoccupation with mechanized survival fueled by a colonial earth ethic and surrender to making room for the full unpredictable and "danger" of a many aspects of human existence. Through the erotic encounters and dynamics Butler renders, she provides an alternative understanding of masculinity through the Oankali, who come to represent mechanized survival. Butler also provides an alternative understanding of femininity through humans, who come to represent love, connection, creativity. Furthermore, in *Imago* humans become harbingers of the potential to rearrange the kinds of categorizations many of us have consented to confining ourselves to under a colonial earth ethic. For example, as humans are finally granted consent because of construct-led advocacy, many of them can occupy a place of femininity without feeling threatened. Moreover, Oankali are guaranteed an existence that exceeds mere survival and evolves into interesting, pleasurable, and pleasantly surprising life. Most of this transformative healing culminates in the journey of the construct ooloi Jodahs. Jodahs embodies and operates from a variety of subjectivities and its very existence defies categorization. It embodies masculinities and femininities recognizable under colonial earth

ethic as its appearance changes back and forth from that of a human male to a human female and often takes on different submissive and dominant demeanors in line with those physical transformations. At the same time, Jodahs' disposition travels back and forth between masculinities and femininities recognizable under Butlerian erotics--sometimes privileging mere survival, sometimes indulging in sensation rich erotic connection, and most fruitfully—often gracefully balancing the two poles. Its very being is extremely dynamic, unlike anything humans or Oankali had even envision prior to its birth in the novel. This of course, makes it dangerous, and yet invites us to consider what happens when, as Stallings notes, "we recover sacred-profane androgynies, or what I term funky erotixxx, that create identity and subjectivity anew and alter political…movements."[241] Jodahs' unforeseen hyper-androgyny, erotic partnership with humans, and advocacy for human-specific needs speaks to the harmoniousness that can arise when hierarchies are animated by something other than a masculinized colonial earth ethic. Jodahs offer an alternative to an ethic reliant on mechanized subduing and extraction from a feminized power source. Theoretically offerings from Stallings continue to be instructive here as we question the reasons why Jodahs' existence and life help to change the status quo. Stallings explains that "funky erotixxx's emphasis on creativity and improvisation dictates that there are no scripts because what is profane changes over time depending on when and where it originates."[242] In other words, funky erotixxx helps us understand that though Jodahs' very existence is first considered profane, the creative impetus behind the "mistake" that led to its birth and the creativity that accompanied the ways it developed outside of prescribed human, Oankali, and construct scripts show that subjectivities and modes of being are ever-changing. Jodahs' existence requires constant negotiation to avoid the unwarranted

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[241] (Stallings xii)
[242] (Stallings xv)

and unnecessary denigration and/or association with profanity. In *Imago*, as a product of love and as a receiver and giver of love, Jodahs' journey offers us the opportunity to reflect on the fact that often, healing does not mean restoring things back to the way they once were. Often, healing means creating circumstances that can sustain much needed transformation—new hierarchies with the potential to animate new Worlds. And most of the time, those new worlds are brought about by subject that have no neat place in the current one.

Put simply Octavia Butler's rendering of erotics helps us to scrutinize and trouble notions of hierarchy. To reiterate, these hierarchies, condition the ways that different materials we recognize as aliens, humans, plants, animals, men, and women interact, and certain androcentric, xenophobic, racist, and sexist hierarchical interactions have become integral to the ongoing stabilization of a colonial earth ethic. As I have tried to show in this chapter, though hierarchical systems are introduced throughout the series, Butlerian erotics offer alternative understandings of hierarchies that at times uphold a colonial earth ethic while also carrying the potential of exceeding it.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that Butlerian erotics are conversant with an African indigenous notion of femininity that is as wide as it is complex. At its root however, that femininity about the ways that love through connection (i.e. erotics) yields unbridled creativity. The colonial earth ethics under which we are all struggling frequently undervalues, misunderstands, and outright disrespects this feminine erotic energy. Colonial earth ethics instead over-relies on hierarchies rooted in notions of masculinity that privilege survival while consciously and unconsciously insisting that our hierarchies cannot be animated by anything else. As *Lilith's Brood* shows us however, Butlerian erotics' carry the potential for helping to exceed colonial earth ethics by luminating pathways to hierarchies animated by something

beyond survival. Butlerian erotics luminate pathways principles, ethics, and even hierarchies bound-up in creativity, connection, and most fundamentally love.

CODA:

Butler's erotics, Maathai's indigenous feminism, Mutu's red and fungus, and Johnson's quotidian leadership are as distinct from each other as the disciplines/professions within which they were developed. What connects them, however, is the motivation and skill-sets behind the development. Each of these repurposing queens left us with questions, challenges, and an archive of strategies to reference as we build an environmental politics, that perhaps can usher in a more impactful era of environmental justice. Juxtaposing their stories also speaks to the fact that we all, no matter our talents or resources, can activate them for a common goal. One of our most pressing goals is of course, stabilizing our global ecosystem. That endeavor is so big that we need all the help we can get. This study represents a very small number of scholarly works focused entirely on black-fem environmental activism, and as I have tried to show throughout this study black-fems have offered us an amazingly rich collection of help in conceptualizing and addressing this larger goal. So why then, has it taken us this long to recognize—to even begin articulating a desire to recognize—the existence and relevance of their work to this problem? I've shown that Black-fem struggles against the anti-blackness and anti-femininity that structures life in the West, is unfortunately, a useful place to start.

At an academic conference recently, someone asked me what my work was about at its most fundamental root. After some reflection, I explained that my work was about empathy and what inhibits it. Some months later, another colleague asked me how I thought we, as a society, could have or create more empathy. This second question about empathy brought me right back to the first. Our desire to connect so deeply with Others that we feel their pain or pleasure, is not something that we need to conjure up in ourselves. As inhabitants of Earth, comparable to our desires/capacity to eat, sleep, and stay warm; connection and (more specifically) empathy

is inherent. When surveying environmental studies—at conferences, in meetings, or through articles and monographs—it was not hard to recognize the passion behind pronouncements that we were so disconnected from our environment that we were killing it. People wanted, deeply, to care and to reconnect. Surveying the field also curiously performed a particular kind of disconnection because—in its Western academic manifestations—the field was so homogenous. These dynamics mirrored the broader environmental movement as well. Environmental studies' anxious performance of disconnection fueled my desire to understand what mechanisms were reinforcing homogeneity, exclusivity, disconnection—and ultimately to understand what was inhibiting empathy.

"Repurposing Queens" does not claim or aim to definitively prescribe an antidote for the kinds of disconnections that reinforce ecocide. What this project does do however, is gesture toward much more intentional excavation and investigation into everything that is keeping us from recognizing and further implementing the majesty, genius, and love that animates black-fem eco-activism. Johnson, Mutu, Maathai, and Butler imagined and enacted worlds unyoked from the kinds of ecological imbalance currently plaguing us. We are learning more and more about the dreadful and urgent effects of a colonial earth ethic. "Repurposing Queens" helps us to consider what kind of healing could happen if by governed ourselves with something much different.

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