



Handle with Care, John Lautermilch

Honoring Our Connections

BY CHRISTIAN BROOKS

Since the beginning of creation, the earth and humanity (at its most selfless) have shared a symbiotic relationship based on mutual respect and honor. This relationship is of extreme importance to people of the African diaspora, especially Black women. For centuries, Black women have held a sacred and spiritual connection with the environment. The environment served as a source of provision, a place of worship and a means of escape from bondage.

However, in recent years, this connection has been disrupted due to the stripping of resources from Black communities globally. Without access to natural resources like clean air and water, as well as societal resources like health and economic resources, Black communities are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is evidence of a larger system of racism and inequality. We must dismantle this system and rebuild our society so that it is equitable for all.



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Left: The Flint water crisis—that began in 2014 and has yet to be resolved—was caused by environmental and structural racism. Flint residents (a majority of whom are Black) still need to drink bottled water and struggle with the health impacts of unknowingly drinking lead tainted water. **Right:** Healthcare workers at Brooklyn's Kings County Hospital show their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement during the coronavirus pandemic.

Sacred Connection

Often, when we think of environmentalism, the first image that comes to mind is not of a person of African descent. Yet, environmentalism is a personal issue for Black people, especially Black women. In *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage*, Dianne D. Glave describes the relationship between African Americans and the environment as “the interconnectedness of the human, spiritual, and environmental realms . . . harm toward or care for one necessarily affected the others.”¹

Historically, women of the African diaspora were explorers and caretakers of the earth; many still are today. They cultivated the earth for food and walked the land to gather water and fuel. They used their knowledge of environmental resources to make medicine for the sick and elderly and to supply nutritional balance for children. Through these societal responsibilities, Black women developed a deep relationship with the earth and a divine understanding of its role in protecting and sustaining life. This intimate bond with nature was passed down from generation to generation.

It endured the Middle Passage and manifested itself as a tool for survival for many enslaved Africans.

Nature served as a covering for enslaved Africans, allowing them to engage in uninhibited worship. They gathered in hush harbors to preach, pray, sing, shout, and truly commune with God.

Nature also served as an avenue for escape. Harriet Tubman, like many Black women before her, had an intimate ancestral connection with nature. It was through this sacred bond with nature that she was able to survive the woods, navigate waterways, overcome treacherous landscapes, and use the stars as a guide to freedom. Harriet is believed to have made 19 trips to the South and escorted more than 300 enslaved persons to freedom.²

A Broken Connection: Health Burdens

In recent years, this sacred bond has been disrupted due to inequitable access to resources and the current ecological state of many Black communities in America. Black neighborhoods are disproportionately burdened with air toxins, unclean

drinking water and a host of other environmental injustices. A recent report by scientists from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that Black communities, regardless of economic status, are exposed significantly more to the air toxin known as PM 2.5 than is the population at large.³ High rates of PM 2.5 are a result of polluting facilities locating in Black neighborhoods and lead to higher rates of asthma and heart and lung disease.⁴

Black communities are also more likely to have contaminated drinking water due to deteriorating water infrastructure and pollution from industrial plants and landfills.⁵ Contaminated drinking water has been linked to elevated blood lead levels, which can lead to heart disease as well as kidney and nervous system damage.⁶ The World Health Organization says, “Lead is a cumulative toxicant that affects multiple body systems Young children are particularly vulnerable to the toxic effects of lead and can suffer profound and permanent adverse health effects, particularly affecting the development of the brain and nervous system.”⁷

These chronic illnesses—the result of environmental racism and structural racism that makes quality, affordable and/or accessible care less likely—have rendered the Black community particularly vulnerable to the fatal effects of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mortality rate for the Black community has been disproportionately high. Black people are only 13 percent of the population but account for 23 percent of the total COVID-19 deaths in the United States.⁸ This disproportionate reality points to a larger structure of racism and inequality also present in the economic system.

A Broken Connection: Economic Burdens

The Black community, as well as Indigenous and Latinx communities, have experienced higher rates of infection and unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Black, Indigenous and Latinx people are overrepresented in low-wage jobs deemed “essential,” placing them on the front lines of exposure to the virus. These essential occupations are among the lowest-paid occupations in the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2019, occupations such as grocery clerks, farmworkers and home healthcare workers paid between \$24,000 and \$31,000 per year.⁹ This is \$38,000 to \$45,000 less than the average cost of living in the U.S. In addition to the low pay and increased risk of infection, these positions typically do not include paid sick leave or health insurance.¹⁰

During the pandemic, the unemployment rate for Black, Latinx and Indigenous people has exceeded the national rate. In May 2020, the national unemployment rate was 13.3

percent. However, unemployment rates for Blacks and Latinx were higher, at 16.8 percent and 17.6 percent, respectively.¹¹ We can assume that higher rates of unemployment also existed among Indigenous communities, as this has been the trend for a number of years.¹²

The effects of the current health and economic crisis on the Black community and other communities of color are due to the inequitable allocation of resources. Unfortunately, this reality is not new to our country’s history, especially during times of crisis. Research shows that during a national crisis, Black people and other people of color are the worst affected. During the Hurricane Katrina crisis, in New Orleans, people of color made up nearly 80 percent of the population in neighborhoods that were flooded.¹³ Black

people accounted for close to half, 44 percent, of people harmed by the broken levees.¹⁴

During the economic crisis of 2008, while the national unemployment rate peaked at 10.2 percent,¹⁵ the Black unemployment rate peaked near 16 percent, and the Latinx unemployment rate peaked at nearly 13 percent.¹⁶ In times of crisis and economic downturn, Black people and people of color are the first impacted, suffer the worst impact and are the last to recover. The COVID-19 crisis looks to be no exception.

Coming Together

In April 2020, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) started a new discussion series called “COVID at the Margins,” focusing on the experiences and struggles of communities of color

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during the global pandemic. During the first discussion, “The Black Community’s Experience with COVID-19,” Roslyn Bouier, who is a pastor and executive director of the Brightmoor Connection food pantry in Detroit, spoke about the inequitable allocation of resources she sees in Detroit and how this has impacted the spread of COVID-19.

As she noted, the Black community in Detroit has experienced a water crisis since 2011. Hundreds of Black residents are without water due to their inability to pay their water bill. This has caused the virus to ravage Detroit’s Black community amid a pandemic where the ability to wash hands, clothes, etc. is essential to defend against infection.

Roslyn expressed frustration with the country’s slogan, “We’re all in this together.” She said, “We’re not all in this together. If we were all in this together, we would all have the same resources.” Roslyn’s call for the equitable distribution of resources echoes the many other Black women who are on the front lines of advocacy every day, fighting for clean water, clean air, health insurance and health services, jobs that pay living wages and other justice and wholeness issues.

Angela Cowser, a Presbyterian minister, sociologist and associate dean of Black church studies at Louisville Theological Seminary, sees our inequitable society as a

construction of the human imagination for the earth. This construction has intentionally and strategically placed some people in a position of safety and privilege with access to clean air and water, beautiful parks, etc., while others—particularly people of color and people of low wealth—have been subjected to the dangers of living in poisoned spaces and spaces prone to natural disasters, with limited access to the resources needed to survive. Angela urges the church to work at local, congregational and governmental levels to reimagine our society so that it is equitable for all.

We must heed Angela’s call. The Black woman’s relationship with the earth is representative of God’s purpose for all of creation. We are all tied to a symbiotic existence that should be based on mutual respect and dignity. The construction of societies that strip communities of color of their natural resources and hinder their access to societal resources, like health care and living wage jobs, dishonors that existence. As people of faith, it is our collective call and responsibility to live into God’s purpose for creation by dismantling structures of oppression and ensuring everyone has equitable access to the earth and its resources. 🍓

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Notes

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Learn More

Watch “The Black Community and COVID-19” webinar at <https://bit.ly/2Vchaha>. The webinar’s four speakers offer insights into how racism compounded the COVID-19 crisis in Black communities, and the resulting health, economic, social and employment impact on Black communities.

