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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

TOWARD AN ECO-COSMOPOLITANISM:  
WENDELL BERRY AND ECOWOMANISM IN CONVERSATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY

WADE CASEY

CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST 2022

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Dedicated to those who paved my theological way:  
Randy Harris, Fred Aquino, and Mark McIntosh.

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## ABSTRACT

This project explores the social and ecological thought of Wendell Berry, Alice Walker, and bell hooks. I argue that the distinctive concerns of these three thinkers are compatible in significant ways and can help to develop ethical commitments to protect and advance human and environmental well-being. I also suggest that the compatibilities between these three respective thinkers also share important similarities with major Christian theological voices, such as Willie Jennings and Melanie Harris. As such, a reading of these figures together allows for this project to cast a vision for the world that cares deeply for social and ecological matters and works to bridge major divides in our world such as race, gender, religion, and even human and non-human life on earth.



## INTRODUCTION

Beauty and struggle define the existence of life on Earth. To know something of the world's endowed beauty, one needs only to step into a park, to notice the intricacies of a leaf, to consider parents' joy at a child's healthy birth, to smell and taste a meal prepared with care, to share a warm connection with a stranger. But struggle is also just as apparent on Earth. To catch a glimpse of the challenges facing the world, one needs only to speak to a troubled neighbor, to watch the news but for a moment, to see mountaintop removal mining, or to witness beaches lined with trash. The emotional and physical ebb and flow of our world is natural, in many ways. Days come and go, seasons change, life begins, then ends. But observations of human activity also indicate that people's choices are changing the world in a rapid and unsustainable manner. Our desires for comfort, immediacy, and endless gain are revealing the Earth's natural limits.

The 2021 report by the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) confirms the effects of the Anthropocene Epoch, a term popularized by Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist, Paul J. Crutzen. The Anthropocene Epoch is the preferred term among a growing number of scientists for the current geologic interval in which humans "began to

substantially alter the Earth’s surface, atmosphere, oceans, and systems of nutrient cycling.”<sup>1</sup>

What the IPCC report notes is the “unequivocal” and enormous adverse effects human activity is having on rising global temperatures as well as the degradation of land, oceanic, and cryosphere ecosystems. This data suggests that population growth paired with increases in per capita consumption “have caused unprecedented rates” in usage of the Earth’s environments and resources which “have contributed to increasing net GHG [greenhouse gases]. . . loss of natural ecosystems. . . and declining biodiversity.”<sup>2</sup> As Valérie Masson-Delmotte, one of the chief researchers for IPCC’s 2021 report, writes “it has been clear for decades that the Earth’s climate is changing, and the role of human influence on the climate system is undisputed.”<sup>3</sup>

The IPCC report focuses heavily on greenhouse gas emissions, especially carbon dioxide, and the resulting increase to global temperatures. The report reveals that advances in “the science of attribution” reveal “the role of climate change in intensifying specific weather and climate events such as extreme heat waves and heavy rainfall events.”<sup>4</sup> The full effect of climate change on weather patterns is still coming into focus, as are the multitude of the ways in which warmer global temperatures adversely affect human and natural ecosystems. And even though the science

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Rafferty, “Anthropocene Epoch: Geochronology,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Feb 23, 2009, <https://www.britannica.com/science/Anthropocene-Epoch>. Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3ff. Crutzen popularized the term in the year 2000 at the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme in Cuernavaca, Mexico and through several subsequent publications, *This Sacred Life*, 3. However, the term was coined in the late 1980s by American biologist Eugene Stoemer, Rafferty, *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<sup>2</sup> IPCC, “People, Land, and Climate,” in *IPCC: AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*, A.1.3, August, 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/chapter/summary-for-policymakers/>.

<sup>3</sup> IPCC, “Climate Change: Widespread, Rapid, and Intensifying,” in *IPCC: AR6 Climate Change 2021*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

is developing rapidly, there are easily observable ecological changes like rising sea levels<sup>5</sup> and extremely polluted natural environments—I am here thinking of oil spills in the Niger Delta, the Gulf of Mexico Dead Zone, the Pacific Garbage Patch, etc. Though the fullness of the detrimental effects of human activity on the planet are coming to light, there is substantial and observable data to reveal humans, particularly since the Industrial Revolution in the West, have not treated the Earth well.

The tone of the IPCC report is dire but, importantly, it is not hopeless. As much as the reporting is clear about human participation in the climate crisis so too does it say that “human actions still have the potential to determine the future course of climate [sic].”<sup>6</sup> This project affirms both the IPCC’s reporting about humanity’s role in degrading the planet but also the possibility of hope through changed actions. In other words, this project seeks to offer some constructive reflections and recommendations on how humanity’s disregard of ecological well-being might be reversed.

One need not look deep into environmental and climate literature to see the real-world effects caused by this crisis. In fact, as noted above, I believe simple observational knowledge by “non-expects” reveals a world wounded by cultures of consumerism and industrialization. Even where resistance exists, it appears that with the continuing passage of time and unabated degradation of land, water, and sky that the consequences of the crisis will be unavoidable by all people on the Earth. This makes plain that the ecological crisis is not something only coastal

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<sup>5</sup> NASA, “Facts: Vital Signs - Sea Level,” *NASA: Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet*, August, 2020 <https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/sea-level/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

communities, or rainforest caretakers, or farmers will concern themselves with. Rather, this is a global concern and, thus, one in which the world's people must unite and take seriously the demands necessary to address it.<sup>7</sup>

### **Addressing the Ecological Crisis in a Diverse World**

The expansion of exchanges between peoples and traditions across the world necessitates the cultivation of connection and intimacy. Our diverse world is divided along many lines that give our particular lives form and meaning. At the same time, it is also true that as human beings living on a singular planet filled with many other material things, there are a host of ways in which our lives are inextricably bound to each other and to all other earthly things. This project is an attempt to honor both the particular and universal aspects of our lives, especially as they relate to the ecological crisis which serves as the orienting feature of this project. This does not mean that I am attempting to offer a definitive explanation for the crisis or even a conclusive remedy to it. Rather, my goal is to consider the ways in which ecological degradation affects our world as a whole and how varying perspectives from multiple backgrounds contain resources for addressing it. The compatibility between these varying perspectives will be scrutinized in this project so that by its conclusion I will be able to put forward some broad principles of ecological care.

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<sup>7</sup> As I will argue later in the project, the “addressing” of the problem is not something to be *equally* shared by all people, for as I will suggest, not *all* people are equally responsible for the problem. However, the ecological crisis is still a universal crisis and thus of concern to everyone *and* everything on Earth. Even though some actors have a larger part to play in addressing ecological degradation, as they have had a (much) larger role in advancing it, I believe there must be a wide “casting of the net” to draw as many people as possible in to caring about ecological justice and reparation.

In terms of my own perspective, I primarily come to this project as a Christian theologian. Because of this fact, I am under the assumption that everything I write about finds at least some unity with Christian life and doctrine. This does not mean that what I write is strictly a matter of Christian orthopraxy and orthodoxy, but that constantly I am looking to put particular Christian values in conversation with values from other traditions. My conviction is that if and when significant overlaps exist in beliefs and actions between varying peoples and cultures that these are powerful locations to “move the needle” on matters that carry ramifications for the entire planet. Given ecological care is the locus of this project, I also believe strongly that any sort of ecological vision of care must find, at least, significant connections between varying peoples and cultures so that a concerted effort at deconstructing the destructive nature of ecological abuses can transpire.

I am, in some way, aware of the audacity of what I am suggesting here. But the pressing need for a holistic and universal ethic of environmental care is certainly not a matter of timidity. To hold true to the belief that particularity matters I will venture to evaluate certain figures who are undoubtedly well prepared in my American context to offer invaluable ecological insights. But again, to maintain the possibility that these insights are not only valuable in particular, I have chosen these voices for my project because of their potential universal appeal. Put differently, because it appears they are in tune with a host of other ecologically minded peoples and traditions around the globe, the figures I have chosen to converse with in the project are good companions for a journey such as this.

## Guiding the Project

I have chosen to consider three contemporary voices who have made significant contributions to scholarly and popular conversations on ecology and justice: Wendell Berry, Alice Walker, and bell hooks. One might find it odd that a Christian theologian has chosen to consider three lapsed Christians as the interlocutors of his project. However, I will show that the ecological visions of these three figures, when put into critical conversation together, are in fact, close to the heart of a Christian ecological ethic of care. Interestingly, Berry, Walker, and hooks all grew up in Christian households and maintain varying commitments to Christian teachings. Not only do they share a Christian background, but many within Christian circles have interpreted their work to find important resonances with Christianity. In this project, I will not only point to the ways in which Berry, Walker, and hooks maintain commitments to Christian ideals but the ways in which their broader convictions about the natural environment are compatible with a Christian ecotheology.

To frame my project in theological terms I will rely heavily on the work of Willie Jennings and Melanie Harris. In recent years Jennings has been at the forefront of a theological discourse concerned with the origins of race and its inextricable boundedness to place.<sup>8</sup> He has

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<sup>8</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). Other scholars like J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) have helpfully explored the connections between race and Christian theology, resulting, in part, from anti-Jewish sentiments in Christianity but not tied them as directly as Jennings to the [dis]placement of people from the land. Kelly Brown Douglas has taken an interesting angle in the conversation around race and Christian theology by exploring the role and “worship” of private property rights in the United States. Using the example of Trayvon Martin, Brown Douglas explores a history of grotesque justifications of violence against the black community for hundreds of years under the rubric of “self-defense” and/or the “protection of property,” *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). I take Melanie Harris’ work to be a significant, and more recent, contribution to these conversations and one that directly explores the integral and intimate relationship specifically between black women and place.

explored the Christian call for relationality that allows for truly intimate, authentic connections between people and the earth. Harris, on the other hand, has critically evaluated the womanist tradition and minded its ecological and theological emphases, showing them to be inseparable. She also makes plain the exclusion of black female voices in wider conversations both ecological and theological (not to mention a whole host of other disciplinary exclusions).<sup>9</sup> It is through Harris' work that I have come to know and appreciate Alice Walker and her contributions to a vision of the world that is deeply spiritual and caring for all things and that is informed by, among other things, her Christian roots.

Jennings and Harris use a multitude of Christian resources to ground their projects about race, place, and ecology. Both theologians offer compelling accounts of how Christianity has been coopted by political, corporate, and social forces to the detriment of the earth-respecting, place-loving, and people-valuing aspects of the Christian tradition. Accordingly, I will often turn to other Christian sources to show the ways in which Jennings and Harris are firmly grounded in the Christian tradition. At the same time, I will also reveal how the projects of Jennings and Harris bear striking resemblances with the ecological visions of Berry, Walker, and hooks. Even though Jennings and Harris will not be my only Christian interlocutors, my reliance on them does suggest that I believe their visions of Christian life, race, and ecological care (and the necessary relationship between these three) are radical proposals that should begin to transform not only our understandings of ecology but also the ways in which a more harmonious future for all things on the planet might be pursued.

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<sup>9</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

I readily admit that Jennings is not as directly interested in ecology like Harris. And yet, as I will argue below, I believe that matters ecological—particularly in relation to human life—are never distant from his concerns. Many other important emphases in his work are beyond the scope of this project and yet the ways in which his interests address the coalescence of Christian life, race, and ecology seems of utmost importance for my present concerns. The fact that he cares about issues of identity, formation, and their racialization, while showing how this relates to land and the well-being of all creation, gives me confidence that including Jennings' work moves this project forward in meaningful ways.

### **Grounding the Project**

My interest and belief in the worthwhile nature of this project is multifaceted, as one might assume. The ecological crisis facing the planet is unavoidable and people must unite and take seriously the demands necessary to address it. Growing up in, and remaining connected to, a community that seldom considers the impact their lives and beliefs have on the environment, I am constantly aware of some of the challenges facing climate scientists and those desiring a more sustainable and healthier path forward for the globe. On account of this and the demands of the crisis, it seems necessary that greater attention at all levels of society must be given to ecological care.<sup>10</sup> This project is my attempt, at this stage in my career, to give theological

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<sup>10</sup> I am the first to admit that there are many reasons to care for the earth, not least of all the theological underpinnings that I am amazed do not resonate with more Christians. For an important rebuke of the anti-environmentalism of much of Evangelical Christianity, see the evangelical pastor Tri Robinson's works: "The Biblical Mandate for Creation Care," in *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, eds. Kathleen D. Moore and Michael P. Nelson (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2006), 260-62; *Saving God's Green Earth: Rediscovering the Church's Responsibility to Environmental Stewardship* (Boise, ID: Ampelon Publishing, 2006).



attention to the ways our lifestyles and values improve or worsen the ecological peril of the planet.

As my awareness of ecological matters grew during my university years, I started to encounter a multitude of figures concerned with environmental ethics from religious and spiritual perspectives. It was at this point that I realized counter ecological narratives existed not only in my circle of contemporaries but also within the Christian tradition as a whole. This realization allowed for a fresh reading of classic Christian texts like Genesis 1-2 and a deeper appreciation for figures like Francis of Assisi. It also introduced me to scholars like Elizabeth Johnson, Emilie Townes, Sallie McFague, Melanie Harris, and Rosemary Radford Ruether who operate within the Christian tradition but push the boundaries of theology at important ecological points—in addition to many others.<sup>11</sup> As suggested above, the work I do in this project aligns well with these thinkers in that I very much place myself within the Christian tradition but want to push Christian theological and ethical conversations in a more universalistic direction, especially as they relate to the environment. The language of “spiritual holism” in my project has been chosen for this reason, though as I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, I believe this “holism” is already present in the Christian tradition, revealing an existing universalism that cares for all human and non-human materiality on Earth.

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<sup>11</sup> Emilie Townes, *In A Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005). In Chapter 1, I will review and evaluate in greater detail the works of Elizabeth Johnson and Sallie McFague. Consideration of Melanie Harris’s work will occur throughout the project but my most extensive attention to her writings appears in Chapter 2.

In addition to the existential motivation for the project and my own religious background, I am driven to write about ecological concerns given my decision some years ago to forgo a more strictly academic life for a life on a tree farm just a mile from where I was born in Colorado. I believe growing things is a meaningful way of life and therefore a profound path toward connecting the different ways I spend my days (pulling weeds and trimming trees and reading and writing). Given my interests in ecology and spiritual life, I could not avoid Wendell Berry's writings and the ways he has positively shaped thinkers for decades. And yet, as I considered the burgeoning field of ecological ethics, I found how black voices, particularly black women's voices, were marginally represented. Bearing in mind the seriousness of the current landscape surrounding racial justice in the United States, and the Black Lives Matter movement more specifically, it seemed paramount that I consider the manifold ways that black women have cared deeply for the earth for as long as anyone can remember (though only a few know to remember).

Berry is rightly respected and included in many studies on ecology. However, I will argue that this should also be the case for the womanist tradition.<sup>12</sup> Chelsea Mikael Frazier offers a great introduction and defense of the interminable relationship between black women and the Earth.<sup>13</sup> Of utmost relevance is Frazier's rejection of any notion that black women have only begun to give attention to matters of ecology or are following the vanguard of white men, as

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<sup>12</sup> Obviously this is not something the black community needs to hear, for they know their own heritage well enough. Rather, this is my attempt to transform the ways in which the white community, particularly the white Christian community, remains ignorant of not only the strong commitment to environmental care that black women possess but also the ways in which cultures and traditions beyond Christianity likewise are in possession of rich resources for caring for the earth and all that is in it.

<sup>13</sup> Chelsea Mikael Frazier, "Black Feminist Ecological Thought: A Manifesto," in *Atmos*, Oct 1, 2020, <https://atmos.earth/black-feminist-ecological-thought-essay/>. My reading of Alice Walker and bell hooks in this project, affirms much of what Frazier argues.

many of them seemingly begin to notice for the first time the detrimental effects of their unsustainable practices. And thus, she fully rejects any notion that white men led (or lead) this effort for ecological care. Rather, she suggests that black women have a much longer and more intimate relationship of care for the earth than is commonly recognized.<sup>14</sup>

To make more explicit the need for this project and my interest in writing it, I offer these rationales. First, I have yet to find a study that compares and evaluates these respective thinkers. Berry is essential to anyone interested in ecology and I argue, like Frazier, that womanist thinkers too are essential voices for matters ecological and thus deserve much greater attention in the ever-expanding literature on environmental care. Second, given the growing interest in often-left-out black perspectives on a host of topics, it seems necessary to consider the voices of black women and their beliefs on how one develops and embodies an ecological ethic. Because Berry enjoys success in having his voice heard in ecological conversations—though not always listened to—I find the comparison with these less frequently listened-to ecowomanists all the more needed. Finally, given my commitments to spiritual and religious life, farming, ecological care, and the ways that race and social locations affect different perspectives, for these reasons, this project is a very fruitful one for me.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> A small but perhaps significant aside is that Melanie Harris has familial and agricultural roots in Colorado. Given that I am writing this project from a tree farm about 50 miles West of Dearfield, Colorado—the black settlement her family migrated to during the “Great Migration”—I find this aside, among a host of reasons, a valuable connection to her work in particular.

### A Defense of the Project

The question should rightly arise as to why this project should be undertaken by me—a white, Christian, male (not to mention cisgendered and heterosexual). Certainly, the worry of appropriation is always before me as I write. Yet, to an extent, my identity and concerns of appropriation push me forward in addressing these very issues. I am aware that I am not aware of all of my privileges and biases. I am aware that I am using the thought of black women and men to help me advance in my career. I am not aware of the full-extent of the criticism I will receive for writing this project or staking out the claims that I do. But I am, to the best of my ability, lending my ear to the wisdom of those who guide this project.

Jennings casts a vision that is about belonging, and struggling to find a life together that is healthier and more inclusive than the one before. He writes:

*Theological education is supposed to open up sites where we enter the struggle to rethink our people. We think them again, but now with others who must rethink their people. And in this thinking together we begin to see what we had not seen before: we belong to each other, we belong together. Belonging must become the hermeneutic starting point from which we think the social, the political, the individual, the ecclesial, and most crucial. . . the educational. Western education (and theological education) as it now exists works against a pedagogy of belonging. Theological education must capture its central work—to form us in the art of cultivating belonging.<sup>16</sup>*

I would also add that belonging is the “hermeneutic starting point from which we” think the ecological. As Melanie Harris claims, this idea is firmly rooted in ecowomanism, given that

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<sup>16</sup> Willie Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 10, the emphasis is original.

womanism is gender inclusive<sup>17</sup> and, as I would argue, inherently interested in healthy and healing relationality between humans and nature. If Jennings and Harris are right, and I pray they are, then what I am endeavoring to do in this project finds salience.

I am not motivated to hedge my project against any and every critique. I am not wanting to appear to be the most “woke” or more academically speaking, the most well-read or most precise and convincing in my argumentation. Of course, these are not unimportant to me, in that proper preparation will only improve the project rather than impede it. But I am interested in something I believe is more important than these things. And I believe it is at the heart of both the projects of Jennings and Harris. Crudely put, I am waiting to find a better future that begins not in some time to come but in the very presence and composition of this project. It is my conviction that the varying ecological visions of Berry, Walker, and hooks, read through the lens of Jennings and Harris and other Christian thinkers, are the types of visions that make our world more tenable for all things. It is also my conviction that the visions of the world these figures conceive of and live into is, in fact, very close to the heart of God.

Let me offer one final word of introduction before I outline the project. Willie Jennings says his writing of *The Christian Imagination* is in the “hope” of forming a “truly cosmopolitan citizenship.”<sup>18</sup> As I will argue in the project, I believe Berry, Walker, and hooks help fulfill Jennings’ desire for this “cosmopolitanism,” one that is fundamentally centered on how humanity engages not only among themselves but also with the Earth. In this way, I believe

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<sup>17</sup> Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 91. Harris is following Alice Walker’s definition of womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1983), xi

<sup>18</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 10-11.

Jennings' articulated desire for a cosmopolitanism is transformed into an eco-cosmopolitanism when he is read alongside figures like Berry, Walker, and hooks. This eco-cosmopolitanism, I argue, is a vision of the world in which differences remain and help people and places maintain their particularities. However, I suggest that these differences also can find valuable common ground with other perspectives and experiences and that on this common ground such an eco-cosmopolitanism can flourish. Finding this common ground among the varying racial, spatial, vocational, religious, and the host of other differences separating the interlocutors of my project guides my exploration in the chapters that follow.

### **Outlining the Project**

In Chapter 1, I survey the Christian tradition, revealing a host of theological writings that support a robust ethic of care for the natural world. I argue that in spite of Christian teachings which promote negative views of the material world there also exist in the tradition teachings which celebrate the physical world, affirm its inherent goodness, and encourage care of it. I consider most extensively the writings of Elizabeth Johnson and Sallie McFague and suggest they are two recent theological voices who advocate strongly for an ecotheology being at the heart of the Christian witness in our present age.

In Chapter 2, I explore the contours of the thinking of Wendell Berry, Alice Walker, and bell hooks. I show the centrality of ecological care apparent throughout their writings. I detail how for each of them the importance of an ecological ethic of care, supported by local communities who give intimate consideration to their environments, allows for a deep attentiveness to the world's goodness and beauty. This ethic also recognizes the ways in which

human well-being is inherently dependent on the well-being the land. Such an ethic naturally rejects harmful practices on a personal level but they also each possess a strong rebuke of the ways corporate and governmental actors perpetrate their own grotesque harms to the natural world.

In Chapter 3, I bring Willie Jennings into the conversation and detail how his writings unearth the ways Christian theology supported colonial and even neocolonial ideologies which harmed people *and* the land. I employ Jennings to argue that not only are Berry, Walker, and hooks privy to the unity of social and ecological ethics but so too is this a Christian concern. I argue that Jennings helps bridge the gap in Christian discourse between ecological and racial justice, showing them to be intimately related. At the same time, by bringing Jennings into the conversation it begins to become more apparent the similarities shared by the non-Christian social and ecological ethics espoused by Berry, Walker, and hooks, and Jennings' very Christian commitments. These similarities, toward the end of the chapter, allow me to put Jennings in conversation with Walker and hooks to argue that their commitments to understanding the intersectional nature of domination can assist humanity in working in a concerted manner to achieve Jennings' desire for a better cosmopolitanism.

For this effort to have the greatest chance for success, in Chapter 4, I argue Berry must be critiqued. I challenge what I call Berry's "inattention" to the history of the plight of black Americans, particularly as it relates to his telling of agricultural history. I note the power of his publication of *The Hidden Wound* early in his writing career but question why the thoughtfulness he articulated there does not reappear with more frequency in his later non-fiction works. I

consider a couple of defenses of Berry's attention to race in his writings but suggest they are too narrowly focused on only a few of his works and that when one considers more broadly Berry's telling of America's past a rather severe lacuna appears in his account of the history. At the end of the chapter, I suggest that in spite of this insufficiency regarding race, his overall social and ecological vision can be recovered and reframed if his attention would be turned ever so slightly in his telling of America's agricultural past.

In Chapter 5, I take a cue from Berry, the ecowomanists, and Jennings by applying the social and ecological implications of the project to the spheres of politics, the academy, and the church.<sup>19</sup> In the political realm I offer two case studies and detail how ecological concerns are never distant from social ones as social concerns are never distant from ecological ones. When it comes to the educational sphere, I lean heavily on Berry, Jennings, and hooks and argue for a greater interdisciplinary focus (hooks) in academics that moves away from the Western intellectual emphasis of self-sufficiency and mastery of knowledge (Jennings) and toward applying specializations to general or more universal concerns (Berry). In my section on the ecclesial sphere I advocate for the centrality of ecotheologies in church dogma and praxis and point to the extensive resources in the tradition that position the church well to be an active and collegial participant in the global effort to build an eco-cosmopolitanism.

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<sup>19</sup> These overlays well with David Tracy's "social portrait" of the three publics of theology, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1981). The reason I say this "overlays" well with Tracy is I first outlined the spheres of society I wanted to address from the concerns of the interlocutors of my project. Only after I determined these three "realms" were of grave importance to Berry, the ecowomanists, and Jennings, did I notice they were the same three "publics" Tracy famously addressed.



## CHAPTER ONE

### HOW WE GOT HERE

The destructive reach of environmental degradation extends into most spheres of global life. It is acutely felt in places far from the decision-making centers like the halls of the United States Congress or the White House or even somewhere more globally-minded like the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. Recent reporting suggests that by 2050 plastic waste in the Pacific Ocean will outweigh the Ocean's fish species.<sup>20</sup> Sadly, though unsurprisingly, are the ways such waste and toxicity and their destruction affect the world's poorest and most vulnerable communities most severely.<sup>21</sup>

As a Christian theologian I am also very interested in what our tradition has to offer for such dire circumstances and to highlight the ways in which our traditional environmental sensibilities find coherence with other traditions and cultures. On account of my social location

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<sup>20</sup> World Economic Forum, "The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the Future of Plastics," by *World Economic Forum, 2016* (January 2016), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. P. Gonzalez, et al. "Southwest," in *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume II*, eds. D. R. Reidmiller, et al. (Washington, DC: U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2018), 1101–1184; Doug Brugge, Timothy Benally, and Esther Yazzie-Lewis, *The Navajo People and Uranium Mining* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2007). These are but a few examples of the ways the climate crisis affects marginalized communities in the United States more than any other. However, this is also a well-documented global phenomenon, James Schafer, "Introduction," in *Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2011), 15-17.

and the demands of the crisis, it seems necessary that concerted efforts be conducted by the varying communities in our expansive, pluralistic world. I think it is interesting how something like a global climate catastrophe might actually allow for the varying human cultures on our planet to unite and embrace a universal response to the crisis. I am, here, thinking of the hopeful precedent set by global response to Ozone depletion crisis.<sup>22</sup> This project is my attempt to give such attention to our lives and lifestyles, their differences and similarities, and how they improve or worsen the ecological peril of the planet.

### **Varying Christian Visions of Ecological Care**

I grew up in a very observant Christian household and at every turn we were taught to think about and act in the world according to our faith. When I began to study the depths of the Christian tradition in undergraduate and graduate school it struck me that my Bible-centric community cared so little for the health of the planet<sup>23</sup> in spite of the powerful biblical visions of a material world that God declared “very good” at its inception (according to Gen. 1). In this section, I will offer a brief survey of some of the core teachings of the Christian faith, beyond Genesis 1-2, that reveal a God who loves and cares for the world.

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<sup>22</sup> In the 1980s, the world became aware of the depletion of the Earth’s Ozone layer caused by CFCs (Chlorofluorocarbons—found, at the time, in many aerosols, refrigerators, air conditioners, styrofoams, and other products). Through the work of climate scientists like Susan Solomon, research convinced the scientific community to hold press conferences for the public and to lobby governments and corporations about the harms of CFCs. This pressure worked and culminated in the Montreal Protocol of 1987, in which, eventually, every single country in the world signed the Protocol. Thus, making it the only universal treaty to ever be ratified. For more, see the U.N. Environment Program report on the Montreal Protocol, September 15, 1987: <https://www.unep.org/ozonaction/who-we-are/about-montreal-protocol>.

<sup>23</sup> My community is certainly not the only one. For example, Elizabeth Johnson has written many times about similar sentiments in the Catholic Church as well as other religious communities, “God’s Beloved Creation” in *America*, April 16, 2001, 9; “An Earthly Christology” in *America*, April 13, 2009, 27.

Throughout Jesus' ministry he restored people's bodily well-being through healings and resurrections (e.g. Matt. 8-9), casted out chaos-inflicting demons and evil spirits (e.g. Matt. 17, Mk. 5), and fed those who were hungry (e.g. Matt. 14, 15). In each instance, offering relief to the real, material suffering of people's lives rested at the core of Jesus' identity. Such attention comes into view in Jesus' inaugural sermon in Luke in which Jesus reads from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19).<sup>24</sup> Directly following this declaration Jesus drove out an evil spirit (Lk 4: 31-35) and healed many people of varying ailments (Lk. 4:38-41). It was in reading such texts anew that I began to grasp a vision of God which was very interested in the material, corporeal well-being of people. But I also noticed in other texts that not only was there a focus on the well-being of people but, at times, even the world as a whole.

God's establishment of the Noahic covenant struck me in that it was not only established with humanity (Noah and his descendants) but also with "all living creatures" and "the earth" (Gen. 9:8-17). The covenant established with Noah is a sort of reconstitution of God's creative act at the beginning of Genesis and, in many ways, Israel's exodus from Egypt reaffirms this covenant as do the prophets' oracles concerning the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions and captivities. In Hosea (set directly before the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom), God instructs the prophet to marry the prostitute Gomer as an illustration to Israel of the nation's unfaithfulness to God and subsequent destruction by Assyria (Hosea 1:2-2:1). God then offers a

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<sup>24</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version.

prophetic speech in which God reveals that it was God who gave all the good things to Israel rather than the perceived Baals (2:13). And though the story carries distasteful themes for modern readers about gender, prostitution, and even child-rearing, there is striking commitment from God to all the creatures of the Earth and a rejection of all violence which takes place on the land. God promises that if Israel returns to and trusts in God, God will “make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things on the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you life down in safety” (Hosea 2:18-19).

The cosmic perspective of the Noachic covenant (and its later Assyrian renditions) is of particular note in the anticipation of Israel’s liberation from Babylonian captivity that Deutero-Isaiah foreshadows. The author brings back to the Israelites’ minds God’s creative energies that spread to “the ends of the earth” (Isa 40:28). The mountains, hills, trees, and even the “depths” are said to sing and clap because of God’s impending salvation of Israel (Isa 44: 23; 55:12). “Who is this God?” the author asks, “The Creator of Heaven and Earth. I am YHWH, your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Isa 49:26). For Christian interpreters of Isaiah, such language brings to mind the most famous New Testament prayer in which Jesus implored his disciples to pray for the enactment of God’s will in heaven *and* on earth (Matt. 6:13). Of course, this terrestrial emphasis in the Lord’s Prayer reappears at the end of the New Testament with Revelation describing the coming renewal of the earth (beginning with the city of Jerusalem), in which material things are restored rather than replaced through God’s regenerative work. In my final chapter I will return to some of these themes and texts as I offer constructive

suggestions for how Christians might begin to reshape their ecclesial communities' theologies of ecology.

These readings of the biblical text can serve as a breath of fresh air for many, like me, who are wearied by the individualistic, consumeristic American psyche. And for anyone who grew up in conservative Christian communities, these readings offer a fresh yet age-old prophetic word, that the Christian tradition possesses strong resistance to any ideology which cares little for material world. Within the same set of texts and traditions that have been used to promote a narrative calling for domination and control of the physical realm, it becomes apparent that a very different vision of the material world is also available to Christian people. One that is much more at home in our fleshly, soil-fill world. If one considered the more world-affirming, even eco-friendly traditions just recounted, one would find it absurd that Christians have so often treated the earth harshly.

However, it remains impossible for any student (or even casual reader) of the Bible to overlook texts that can be read easily with a more sinister focus on the passibility of the material world and the supposed pre-eminent focus for God's people on "spiritual" matters and life rather than anything material. For instance, Paul's condemnation of the flesh (*σαρκός*) in Romans and the subsequent work of modern translators to render *σαρκός* as the "sinful nature" (most notably in the 1973 original and updated versions of the NIV) is a noteworthy history in Biblical studies that gives attention to the negative views within Christianity toward human embodiment and the material world (more broadly). One might also think of Paul's "allowance" of monogamous, heterosexual marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 as sort of sensual band-aid for those who cannot control

their sexual desires during the time of the supposed immediacy of Jesus' "second coming" (1 Thess. 4; 2 Pt. 3). Such texts reveal that within Christianity certain voices spoke of the material world as something to be endured, and even struggled against. This of course was made possible because of the promise of a gloried, spiritual future to come (Rom. 8:18-27). And though neither of these perspectives are a full vision of the biblical texts' understandings of the natural environment and humanity's proper relationship toward it, they are illustrative of the multi-vocal and internally conflicted nature of the Bible.

During the patristic period similarly variegated takes on the vitality of creation and its goodness and evilness abound. One discovers Basil's declaration of a God who took the different parts of the world to make "a harmonious symphony result from the whole,"<sup>25</sup> one in which all things on earth point to the very beauty and diversity of God—from humans to animals to plants.<sup>26</sup> A few centuries later Maximos the Confessor portrayed the *whole world* as a cosmic Church through which all things participate in the divine liturgy,<sup>27</sup> a seeming acknowledgement that all material things not only are good but constantly performing in a sort of universal act of worship. In the Medieval period Eriugena granted immense value to materiality when he says

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<sup>25</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 8, trans. Blomfield Jackson and eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895), 1.8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.11, 5.2.

<sup>27</sup> Maximos the Confessor, *On the Ecclesiastical Mystagogy: A Theological Vision of the Liturgy*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan J. Armstrong (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019).

that “all things” that were made live in Christ unchangeably.<sup>28</sup> In a similar manner, Bonaventure spoke of God as the “All-inclusive One” in whom all things are contained,<sup>29</sup> and Francis (who is frequently associated with the patronage of animals and the natural world) is strikingly attributed with praising “Brother Sun,” “Sister Moon,” “Brother Wind,” “Sister Water,” “Brother Fire,” “Sister Mother Earth.”<sup>30</sup> In each of these instances, there exists Christianity’s powerful prophetic witness of a world deemed “very good” by the Creator God.

However, again, to find a contrast to this more affirming portrait of the body, nature, and materiality, one does not need to dig deep into the tradition. Gregory of Nyssa influentially spoke of the beauty and grandeur of the created world but suggested—following Genesis 1-2—that it was “missing” something: humanity.<sup>31</sup> In turn, this resulted in God’s offering dominion to humans over the natural world upon God’s creation of Adam.<sup>32</sup> This injunction for humanity to have dominion over the land and animals is the sort of history which lead to Lynn White’s now famous critique of Christianity—namely that Christian theology, stemming from God’s commandment in Genesis 1 that humanity “fill and subdue the earth,” has led to the present

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<sup>28</sup> John Scotus Eriugena, “Homily on the Prologue of the Gospel of John,” in *The Voice of the Eagle: The Heart of Celtic Spirituality*, trans. by Christopher Bamford (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2000), 86.

<sup>29</sup> Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey to God*, trans. and ed. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 106-07.

<sup>30</sup> Francis of Assisi, “The Canticle of Brother Sun,” in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. and eds. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 37-39.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 5, trans. H.A. Wilson and eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), 1.5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.1.

ecological crisis.<sup>33</sup> And even though Nyssa, in this instance, holds a higher view of human nature over and against the natural world, he maintains a low view of all material life.<sup>34</sup> Central to Nyssa's low view of materiality is the sexual self. The centrality of a very restricted sexual self is evident throughout the Christian tradition and no voice has held greater importance for Christian sexuality and bodily pleasure throughout the ages than Augustine. Not only has Augustine influenced the ways Christians understand sex but his thought has also deeply permeated so much of our understandings surrounding the material world (including human sexuality) and how we think about and care for it.

In *On the Good of Christian Marriage* Augustine's argues that sex is driven by "evil habits" when people seek sex (even in marriage) for the purpose of pleasure. For Augustine sex's first good is procreation and sex beyond the purposes of a procreative act results from a "weakness" experienced by one or both parties.<sup>35</sup> In a very candid moment, Augustine even calls sex for *anything* other than procreation a "sin."<sup>36</sup> In this way, he is not always consistent about his understanding of some sort of unitive allowance in sex. Apparently following Paul in 1 Corinthians, Augustine wants to allow for marital sex to be an important component of reducing

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<sup>33</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-07.

<sup>34</sup> Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 17.5.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *On the Good of Christian Marriage*, trans. Charles T. Wilcox, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1955), 6.1. Famously, Augustine adds to Paul's allowance of sex in marriage by suggesting the marital sex is best when in pursuit of progeny. Augustine adds further goods that come from marriage but not necessarily sex: friendship and the sacramentality of marriage, 24.1-2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.1. He interestingly, again, in a sort of Pauline fashion says that such a sin is pardonable.



further the threat of more grave forms, in his mind, of sexual sin. However, in his more purist moments he resorts to a vision that still understands any sex for any means other than procreation to be sinful. It is at this point that I contend that Augustine's ideas of marriage and sex fit squarely within his larger framework of the human and divine natures.

Augustine affirms throughout *On the Trinity* the strong differentiation between what is divine and human, thus also suggesting the superiority of what is immaterial to what is material. This leads to his conclusion that the human mind (in its ability to reason and thus "move beyond the self") is the most analogous aspect of the human person to God, though of course it still falls severely short of what is divine.<sup>37</sup> Augustine, and for the vast majority of the tradition, the sharp divide between divine nature and human nature diminishes the value of the material world. This need not be necessarily interpreted as grounds for the destruction of the natural world but certainly anyone with much knowledge of common Christian rhetoric around eternal life, heaven and hell, the spiritual and material, knows how frequently appeals are made to a "better life to come" and a "leaving behind" the present world and its troubles.<sup>38</sup> As I will note momentarily, Christian theologians like Elizabeth Johnson and Sallie McFague also offer ways for moving

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<sup>37</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity (De Trinitate)*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 14.11-15.

<sup>38</sup> There are scholars like N.T. Wright who attempt to ground any sort of eternal experience in a renewing of our present world. For a more popular expression of this see *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (London: SCPK, 2008). Wright gives a much more extensive look at these ideas, along with many others, in his four part series "Christian Origins and the Question of God" published by Fortress Press. Someone like Wright, I believe, is helping shift low views of materiality and corporeality not only in more conservative biblical and theological scholarship, but also on an ecclesial and lay level.

beyond the negativity of embodiment and materiality espoused by Paul, Augustine, and a host of other Christian figures.

### **Christian Feminist Ecological Concern**

In light of this history of Christian ecological thought, the more recent Christian ecological writings of Elizabeth Johnson and Sallie McFague become very important developments. From Johnson's early work she has recognized the need for greater ecological consideration in theology.<sup>39</sup> However, as the decades have passed it seems that ecological care has taken on an even greater role in her writing. As the demands of the ecological crisis have become more mainstream over the years she has maintained a deep commitment to her theological heritage and its unique bearing upon environmental care. This pairing of core theological tenets and their ramifications for ecology are on full display when, near the beginning of *Creation and the Cross*, she says: "The question on which this whole work rests. . . is this: How can the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ be understood as good news for the whole created world, including human beings, to the praise of God and the practical and critical effect?"<sup>40</sup> I find this quotation significant for my project in that the ecological ethics of care that Johnson and McFague advocate for are not only thoroughly Christian but also share

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<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993); Elizabeth Johnson, "Turn to the Heavens and the Earth: Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology," in *Proceedings of the Annual Convention (Catholic Theological Society of America)* 51 (1996): 1-14; see also my references below from Johnson's *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads, 1992). For a good introduction to Johnson's thought as well as a testament to her influence on generations of scholars see *Turning to the Heavens and the Earth: Theological Reflections on a Cosmological Conversion: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth A. Johnson*, eds. Julia Brambaugh and Natalie Imperatori-Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), 28-9.

common ground with a host of non-Christian ecological visions of care—not least of all those of Berry, Walker, and hooks. To shed greater light on these claimed compatibilities let me now turn to examine more precisely Johnson and McFague’s eco-theologies.

Johnson’s ecological vision of care grows out of several important theological foci. One of Johnson’s earliest arguments for ecological care roots itself in the motherly personification of God.<sup>41</sup> This maternal divine image is one found in the biblical text (Cf. Isa. 66:13, Hosea 13:7, Mt. 23:37, Lk 13:34) and is often associated with animal motherhood, though not exclusively so (I.e. Isa 66).<sup>42</sup> For Johnson such a portrayal of God reveals the divine characteristics of care and comfort that are extended to humanity but also to the entirety of creation. Johnson repeatedly recognizes and celebrates God’s beautification of the world and the overall attention to aesthetics throughout the creative acts of God.<sup>43</sup> In this way, God’s care for creation rests importantly on observing, protecting, and cultivating the beauty of the world. In this way, as just seen, strong parallels exist between Basil’s celebration and valuation of the world’s beauty and Johnson’s. For both Basil and Johnson, beauty is something to cherish, care for, and enriched whenever possible. This emphasis on aesthetics will reappear when I turn to consider the ecologies of Walker and hooks, in particular.

A second way Johnson constructs her eco-theology stems from her Christology and Pneumatology. In addition to what I noted from the Gospels above, Johnson highlights the ways

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<sup>41</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 171-86.

<sup>42</sup> Isa. 66:13 reads: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 180.

the bucolic and domestic nature of many of Jesus' parables.<sup>44</sup> Quoting Jesus in Matthew 10, Johnson highlights not only Jesus' teaching by means of animal life but the divine attention given to the world's small creatures: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your heavenly Father knowing it.' Jesus' whole ministry was centered on the coming of the reign of God. Given that this God is the Creator who loves the whole world, this means nothing less than the flourishing of all creation."<sup>45</sup> Johnson's spotlighting of this passage matters in that she reveals divine care for things often considered of little significance. Johnson understands the Spirit as the "Vivifier" of the natural world, down to its smallest features. Following Tertullian's naturalistic metaphors for the Trinity (the sun and water), Johnson argues that the Spirit accomplishes the divine transformation of the natural world through its beautification and nourishing effect.<sup>46</sup> It is the Spirit who brings forth the divine incomprehensible mystery into the world and allows it to pervade the whole of the material world.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, Johnson's understanding of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are in service of revealing and upholding the inherent goodness and value of the material world.

It deserves mentioning that Johnson takes space in her Christological reflections on ecology to address the prevailing negativity among feminists for terms like the "kingdom of God." Though she acknowledges the inherent patriarchy bound up in such language, she

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<sup>44</sup> Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, *The Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 182-83.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

redefines the idea by acknowledging its life-affirming qualities: “compassion and kindness will abound, joy and peace will break out, and all creation will flourish.”<sup>48</sup> Johnson does not shy away from the problematic patriarchy, misogyny, and nationalistic tendencies in biblical and contemporary renderings of faith, and in fact, at many turns throughout her feminist theological explorations she deconstructs them. And yet, she powerfully offers counter-narratives and reinterpretations of classic Christian doctrine to reveal not only a less violent and vitriolic God but a God who cares for the whole of a very material world.

Closely connected to Johnson’s Christological and Pneumatological ecology is the value she places on relationality for ecological care. Johnson highlights the centrality of divine relationality for Trinitarian theology and suggests three essential aspects of God’s triune nature: 1) relational mutuality, 2) radical equality, 3) communal diversity.<sup>49</sup> Johnson calls this the “triple helix” of the divine nature.<sup>50</sup> As a theologian, Johnson carefully analyzes these core Christian understandings of God and respects their history and purpose throughout the centuries of Christianity. However, one of most valuable aspects of her theological explorations over the years has undoubtedly been the ways she reveals the compatibilities between Christian theology and ecology. God’s relational nature passes to the material world by means of God’s creative power. This is abundantly notable in how the material world of animals, plants, and all created things relate to each other. But relationality in this vein becomes all the more important when

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<sup>48</sup> Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 212-224.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

one considers humanity's connections with each other *and* the material world to which they are bound. As such, and as Johnson maintains, this inherent relationality and its divine inspiration demands a full reconsideration of how humans live in the world.<sup>51</sup> Human life then, in its unique ability to imitate God in Christ, bears a distinctive responsibility in embodying the caring nature of God in the world. As humans are part of the world in a very real, material sense it serves as all the more important that they sustain a deep level of care for the very world to which they belong, and which God distinctively blesses with God's divine immanence.

This brings us to Johnson's important (though controversial) affirmation of panentheism. What Johnson means by this is that God pervades all aspects of the world, thus existing in them.<sup>52</sup> Quoting the definition of "Panentheism" from the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Johnson says in affirming the definition: "Here is a model of free, reciprocal relation: God in the world and the world in God while each remains radically distinct."<sup>53</sup> This final distinction for Johnson is what allows her, as a Christian theologian, to embrace panentheism.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>53</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 231.

<sup>54</sup> In recent theological writing Catherine Keller has perhaps embodied best the panentheistic tradition. Keller's conception of panentheism is grounded in her apophatic theology, and in certain ways finds interesting similarities with McFague's notion of theological metaphor. Following Nicholas of Cusa's negative theology, Keller posits that the One is not contrary to the multiplicity but unfolds "in and as" it, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 92. Keller, of course, is deeply influenced by process thought which developed from Alfred Whitehead's work in mathematics and philosophy but has carried into many disciplines including process theology. Of significance for the ecological focus of this project are the ways Whitehead's work was further developed in theological and environmental directions by John Cobb who is one of the first modern Christian theologians to seriously value ecological ethics in Christian discourse with his publications *A Christian Natural Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1965) and *Is It Too Late?: A Theology of Ecology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1972). Cobb later became Keller's dissertation director at Claremont Graduate School in 1982.

As I will suggest, it is also the key difference between what Johnson is suggesting for a God deeply embedded in the world and someone like Alice Walker who suggests a sort of indivisibility between God and the world. However, before I turn to evaluate this difference between Walker and Johnson let me consider briefly the ecological thought of Sallie McFague who seems to take Johnson's panentheism a step further, and possibly closer to what someone like Walker defends.

Like Johnson, McFague defends panentheism but does so from her theological notion of divine models.<sup>55</sup> According to McFague, there are resources within the Christian tradition that allow for the metaphorical understanding of the world as God's body.<sup>56</sup> Though there certainly are texts and traditions that give McFague some ground to stand on for these claims, what really seems to allow McFague to make these claims so boldly is her belief that Christian theology "is mostly fiction."<sup>57</sup> What McFague means by this is that theology, as McFague conceives of it, is a matter of metaphors and models constructed in the world and by humans to describe and hopefully understand God better for one's own time.<sup>58</sup> As such, McFague holds that her positing of the Earth as God's body might not be the preferred metaphor in the past or the future. Even currently the model should be augmented by other models so that one might move ever closer to

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<sup>55</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 149-50.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 30ff; 179-195.

<sup>57</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xi.

<sup>58</sup> Sallie McFague, "The World as God's Body," *The Christian Century*, July 20-27 (1988), 671-72.

a more complete understanding of God.<sup>59</sup> However, her conviction that theological language should be appropriate for one's time allows for Christians to better make sense of and care for the world by the most relevant and helpful means possible. At times, McFague's work seems to move in an unorthodox Christian directions while at other times she is very orthodox. In *The Body of God*, she explores the fictive nature of theology when she says, "No human words can describe God, but it is difficult to remember that because our language, although always metaphorical when applied to God, sounds descriptive: God is father, God is loving, God is the creator."<sup>60</sup> McFague argues for the ever important notion of metaphor and imagination for coming to understand God with the passing of each generation.<sup>61</sup>

According to McFague, one of the most valuable aspects in understanding the earth as God's body is how one understands diversity and difference. When one takes stock of the world's diversity and understands the complex web of life and matter that allows for the earth to sustain itself and flourish, one begins to understand differences not as liabilities but rather assets. The vast array of differing things on planet Earth come together to unite the world so that it might remain alive and healthy. In this way, McFague holds that the fullness of Godself manifested in the world is predicated on beauty and necessity of diversity.<sup>62</sup> McFague suggests that differences need not result in competition and violence but rather can be seen as

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 673. Of course McFague does not believe one can ever fully know God but her claim that more models for God help one gain a fuller picture of the divine certainly has a valuable logic to it.

<sup>60</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 23.

<sup>61</sup> For a fuller discussion of metaphor in Sallie McFague's work see her *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 31-144

<sup>62</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 164.



characteristics that work together to improve the whole. Certainly differences among people (and the natural world) have very often led to conflict and violence between people. McFague attempts to offer a model of friendship that sees differences not as liabilities but rather as vitally significant assets for addressing a host of needs and desires in our complex world.<sup>63</sup>

One model of great significance to McFague, similar to Johnson, is God as Mother.<sup>64</sup> McFague takes this metaphor in a different direction from Johnson when she suggests that such a motherly image of God means that when God created the world it was a “bodying forth” of a divine and material world. For McFague, this means that any action performed in the world and against the well-being of the whole world is an injustice toward God.<sup>65</sup> She says “it is impossible to consider loving God apart from loving the others (human and otherwise) that constitute the body of the world, and love toward the others, the agapic love of creation, is a very basic love: the affirmation of existence.”<sup>66</sup> This notion fits well with Johnson who, following Pope John Paul II, suggests that ecological harm is a moral failure, that disregards respect for life in all forms and rather seeks the economic enrichment of a few to the well-being of the whole.<sup>67</sup> To

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 97-123. McFague is clear that she is not rejecting the notion that God is also father in addition to a multitude of other metaphors. Rather, McFague focuses on motherly images for God “in order to balance and provide a new context for interpreting God as father,” 100.

<sup>65</sup> McFague, *Models for God*, 11. Cf. McFague also suggests there is something necessarily valuable in holistic well-being for the planet given that human life is inherently dependent on the earth and her health, *The Body of God*, 5-13. Injustice toward the Earth’s well-being that leads to its destruction therefore is thus not about justice in some abstract sense but rather is about the very survival of humanity and all other forms of life on the planet.

<sup>66</sup> McFague, *Models for God*, 117. In this quotation McFague highlights the three characteristics of God’s motherly nature she puts forth: loving, creative, and seeking justice.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, “God’s Beloved Creation,” 9.

take McFague and Johnson's frameworks seriously, one should posit that if there is harm done to one part of the earth, this is to be seen as harm done to all parts and even to God. Conversely, harm done to God results in harm to all things given that the world is understood as (at least a significant aspect of) God's very self.

Of particular significance for this project, is the affirmations of the body and our material world, more generally, found in Johnson and McFague's eco-theologies and the womanist tradition. As I will point out in the next chapter, Walker and hooks affirm a sort of spirituality that views God as an intimate and active participant in the material world. God is something to be touched, conversed with, and known through the trees, soil, animals, and other human beings. McFague holds to some extent that God "oversees" the world and its affairs as a "father, lord, lover, king, protector."<sup>68</sup> McFague suggests understanding God as an "agent" or "person" who is "like" humans but still the one who creates the world and draws it toward God's intentions for it.<sup>69</sup> Whereas Johnson believes God is present in all things, McFague puts forward an understanding of God that focuses almost exclusively on God's relatability with the material world. McFague holds that God is known only in our embodied state.<sup>70</sup> As noted earlier, McFague argues that metaphor or modeling is our only way to speak of God and thus the accuracy of our theological claims about God are, in many ways, beyond certainty. Upon this ground McFague puts forth her abiding metaphor for God that the universe, though most acutely

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<sup>68</sup> Sallie McFague, "God's Body, Our Home: Intimate Creation," *The Christian Century*, March 13-20 (2002), 40.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>70</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 22-25.

planet Earth, is the *very* body of God.<sup>71</sup> In this way, McFague puts a premium value on embodiment just as do those in the womanist tradition (and specifically those developing an ecowomanism).<sup>72</sup>

### **Conclusion**

What I am attempting to do in this chapter is not to offer a systematic defense of a particular ecological theology but rather to point toward a few, much more modest, claims. First, it seems from a brief survey of these figures from the Christian tradition that one can say there are abiding concerns about humanity's and God's relationship with the nonhuman world throughout the history of the tradition. These concerns are different in significant ways from present ecological concerns, but it seems that at a minimum one can say that throughout the entirety of Christian history there is a tradition that cares deeply for the well-being of the Earth and all that exists in it. This challenges Lynn White's claims though I do not deny that his

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 19-22, 159-196.

<sup>72</sup> I will also show a resonance exists between these feminist thinkers, the womanists I consider in Chapter 2, and Wendell Berry. In each of these individuals and traditions, there is a deep appreciation of and respect for human embodiment and the materiality of the natural world.

perspective remains salient when held up against large swaths of the Christian tradition.<sup>73</sup>

Second, holism—or, a commitment to valuing every aspect of the material world—permeates many ecologies of the Christian tradition.<sup>74</sup> McFague’s use of the metaphor of the Earth as God’s body is an example of just this type of holism,<sup>75</sup> highlighting how what occurs in one part of creation has effects on the whole of creation.

This creation care in Christian thought can be seen in the early Hebrew Bible’s covenants established by God and between Godself and the whole of creation. It is also present in the Hebrew Bible and New Testaments prophetic words about a heavenly renewal of the Earth, a renewed world in which God dwells with God's creation. There are theologians throughout the Christian centuries like Maximus who affirm the value of spiritual practices that limit one’s consumption and wasteful or selfish tendencies. And in our own time there are developed

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<sup>73</sup> I am, here, speaking of the world-debasing thought I recounted earlier where figures in the tradition have rejected the goodness of the world and rather perceived the world to be something one fears and looks forward to “escaping” in death or even mystical experience—John of the Cross, “The Dark Night” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. and eds. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 1991), 353-460. This aspect of the tradition also seems to very much to have influenced many parts of Christianity today through popular theologies that speak of an overwhelming evil world that one will be able to escape in death by going to heaven. These theologies often offer little in the way of teaching their followers to care for the Earth or to appreciate and value their material existence. I think of hymns sung in the Churches of Christ of my childhood like “I’ll Fly Away” and “This World Is Not My Home” or sermons preached in many evangelical churches today that emphasize the world’s wickedness and the “better” and “pure” future awaiting God’s people in the life to come. I will further address these ideas in my final chapter. The late Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz has done a good job of writing about such fatalistic evangelical theologies while offering a more hopeful, even materially appreciative reworking of much evangelical theology, Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994): 571-660; *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>74</sup> For some Christian theologians, such as Bonaventure, this holism manifests in a hierarchical way.

<sup>75</sup> It is not insignificant that McFague uses the same metaphor Paul does to speak about the church and the ways that the actions of ecclesial members necessarily affect all the the ecclesial members (I.e. 1 Corinthians 12).

ecotheologies from theologians like Sallie McFague and Elizabeth Johnson who reveal not only the feminist emphasis of ecological care but also God's power and care which infuses all material things with goodness and love.

As I noted, the tradition has not always concerned itself directly with ecological "responsibilities" but, nevertheless, it is clear the tradition is filled with a rich resourcefulness that—if taken seriously—could alleviate much ecological harm. But how might these Christian teachings and resources connect with a wider audience of ecologically-minded figures? Is there the possibility of Christian ecological ethics of care finding common ground with other traditions (religious and non-religious) in an effort to not just influence Christian communities but all communities and cultures on the planet? In other words, can Christian ecological teachings find a home in a world of diverse ecologies so that a more great eco-cosmopolitanism might emerge?

In Chapter 2 I will evaluate the thoughts of Wendell Berry, Alice Walker, and bell hooks. None of these figures identify strongly with Christianity (though all have backgrounds in Christian faith) but they each hold strong commitments to a spiritual life and ecological care. Given these commitments, I will evaluate their thoughts in relation to Christian theology to discover if a spiritual and ecological holism exists between them and Christian theology and what sort of holism this might be. My purpose in answering these questions is to consider how diverse convictions and commitments might find common ground in addressing the the universal concern of ecological degradation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ECOLOGICAL VISIONS OF CARE

With the brief survey of Christian ecological perspectives behind us, I would now like to turn to the main subjects of this project, Wendell Berry, Alice Walker, and bell hooks. The decision to place my evaluation of the main interlocutor of the project after my consideration of Christian ecological thought results from my effort to reveal a sort of parallelism between Berry, Walker, and hooks and Christian thinkers. In this way, I am suggesting that by reading these figures together with Christian thinkers the eco-cosmopolitanism I have been speaking of begins to appear.

The present chapter will follow as such. For each figure, I will first give a brief biographical sketch to help situate their lives and ecological convictions. Second, I will evaluate the major trends in their thinking that all bear importantly on their ecologies and how they stem from their beliefs about the interconnection of all things. Where helpful, I will bring in secondary literature to better understand each figure but my goal is to primarily attend to each figure on their own terms so that I might construct a meaningful outline of their thoughts. It will become apparent that all three figures never address ecological concerns without also considering the intersectionality of ecological degradation with labor, gender, sexuality,

agriculture, race, and religion. In this way, Berry, Walker, and hooks refuse to silo off ecological ethics from a host of other ethical concerns that they believe must always be considered together so that the preferred futures they imagine might be best positioned to come to fruition. Though it is not possible to review the entirety of these figures' writings in this chapter (or in a whole book), I will address what is most critical to their ecological concerns while also making nods to other important aspects of their thinking that might not directly address ecology but that I believe reveal the world-affirming quality and spiritual holism in their writings. At the end of the chapter, I will synthesize Berry, Walker, and hooks' ecological and social visions to make explicit the through lines within their respective writings.

### **Wendell Berry: Biographical Sketch**

Wendell Berry (b. 1934) grew up in rural Henry County, Kentucky. He is the eldest of four children born to a multi-generational farming family. His father farmed tobacco and later became an attorney to help defend their small tobacco program, Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association, against "the ceaseless opposition to it."<sup>76</sup> Berry earned a B.A. and an M.A. from the University of Kentucky in English, attended Standard University as a Wallace Stegner Fellow in creative writing, was a Guggenheim Fellow, received The National Humanities Medal, among a host of other accomplishments. He published his first novel,

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<sup>76</sup> Wendell Berry, "Landsmen: Jim Leach in Conversation with Wendell Berry and Tanya Berry," in *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2012), 44.

*Nathan Coulter*,<sup>77</sup> in 1960, and his first non-fiction work, *The Long-Legged House*, in 1965.<sup>78</sup> He was the first living writer to be inducted into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame in 2015.<sup>79</sup>

Berry is an important voice for ecological matters, particularly for bringing agrarian concerns<sup>80</sup> into popular discourse and for offering thoughtful insights into local agricultural communities and their values. He is celebrated by theists and atheists, nonfiction writers and poets, farmers, scientists, day laborers, academics, and many others. The breadth of audiences Berry appeals to is matched by his expansive writing styles (poetry, short stories, novels, and essays). He is equal part activist and cultural critic, an important commonality I will show he shares with Walker and hooks. Berry takes these duties seriously but for more than 40 years he

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<sup>77</sup> Wendell Berry, *Nathan Coulter* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2008).

<sup>78</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 1965).

<sup>79</sup> Tom Eblen, “At the Hall of Fame Ceremony, Wendell Berry Laments ‘Public Silence’ on Kentucky Writers’ Work,” *Lexington Herald-Leader* January 15, 2015. His lament seemed to have proved effective, at least for other living Kentucky writers. In 2018 bell hooks became only the fourth living Kentucky writer inducted after Robbie Ann Mason and Barbara Kingsolver, “Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame,” *Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning*, accessed Jan 21, 2022, <https://carnegiecenterlex.org/kentucky-writers-hall-of-fame/>.

<sup>80</sup> Berry’s agrarianism cannot be properly understood without appreciating the past and present. Thomas Jefferson frequently appears in Berry’s writings and what strikes Berry most positively about Jeffersonian agrarianism is the early American president’s view of democracy which promoted small land ownership and agriculture as the foundation for a thriving democracy. As I note later in the project, it is Berry’s admiration, without critical reflection of figures like the U.S.’s third president and his extensive ownership of black slaves that must be called into question if Berry’s legacy is to remain intact. Agrarian contemporaries of Berry like Wes Jackson, Gene Logsdon, Vandana Shiva, Marty Bender, and others have influenced and sharpened Berry’s work at every turn. In particular, Wes Jackson’s The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas frequently receives mention in Berry’s work and is one of the most promising efforts at actualizing many of the agrarian principles Berry, Jackson, and others advocate for to a wider audience. Berry, Jackson, and Logsdon have frequently written essays together, co-authored and co-edited works, and composed many forwards and introductions for each other’s works. A good introduction to these thinkers’ ideas, their relationships to each other, as well as other key agrarian figures can be found in *Meeting Expectations for the Land: Essays in Sustainable Agriculture and Stewardship*, eds. Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Bruce Coleman (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1984) and in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2003).



has allowed them to be guided by and grounded in his day job: “subsistence farming.”<sup>81</sup> Berry believes strongly in a beautiful and good world that when cared for properly will not only provide sustenance for all creatures but will allow them to flourish.

### **Wendell Berry: Major Themes**

#### **Agri-Industrialization**

If one could only bring attention to a singular theme in Berry’s corpus that encapsulates the focus of his work more than any other, it would be his critique of industrial agriculture. From his early and vision setting *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* to the fairly recent work *The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings*, Berry consistently laments the ways in which he believes industrialism has wrecked not only agricultural lands but also the communities who have cared for them for centuries. Berry contrasts agricultural industrialism with agrarianism saying that industrialism begins with “machines” and “technological innovation” while agrarianism “begins with givens: land, plants, animals, hunger, and the birthright knowledge of agriculture.”<sup>82</sup> Berry shows that with the widespread introduction of industrialized agriculture there was a loss of work as well as a way of life for millions of farmers

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<sup>81</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Economics of Subsistence,” in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1981), 149-154. Subsistent farming for Berry is the means by which one can live off the land through “use of a plot for a garden, a pen for chickens, a lot or stall for fattening a hog, pasture for a milk cow,” “A Long Ancestry,” in *The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017), 223.

<sup>82</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 24-26.

who were told their work needed to be replaced by “more efficient and effective” machinery and chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.<sup>83</sup>

In “The Agrarian Standard” Berry says the fundamental question for agrarians is: “what is the best use of the land?” Industrialists are interested in extractive practices that view the land and its resources (humans included) as cogs in a global machine that is interested in turning the greatest possible profit.<sup>84</sup> Agrarians by contrast, recognize the limits of the land’s precious resources and know the absolute necessity of living within limits and with frugality.<sup>85</sup> According to Berry, this requires a strong dependence on local economies who are interested in protecting their local resources. Whereas industrialism relies heavily on “outside” information and resources, agrarianism prides itself on mitigating reliance on foreign substances and trusting local knowledge and skill to perform tasks with as little harm done to land and people as possible.<sup>86</sup> Industrialism and agrarianism, in their current forms, are incompatible Berry contests. But it also appears that industrialism, in its current form, cannot exist for much longer given the earth cannot sustain or tolerate forever its destructive appetite.

### **Sabbath and Learning Limits**

The idea of limits informs the invaluable importance of sabbath for Berry. The importance of rest appears often in Berry’s corpus and throughout his writing career it is a theme

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<sup>83</sup> Wendell Berry, “Living in the Future: The ‘Modern’ Agricultural Ideal,” in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), 55-84.

<sup>84</sup> Berry, “The Agrarian Standard,” 27.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-30.

<sup>86</sup> Wendell Berry, “Local Economies to Save the Land and the People,” in *Our Only World: Ten Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2015), 62-3.

he has returned to again and again.<sup>87</sup> In the introduction to *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems* Berry writes about his sabbath practice of going to his land on Sundays but not for work: “I go free from the tasks and intentions of my workdays, and so my mind becomes hospitable to unintended thoughts: to what I am very willing to call inspiration.”<sup>88</sup> Berry’s notion of sabbath is rooted in the Judeo-Christian traditions and some interpreters and admirers of Berry’s poems have no problem declaring him “a Christian farmer poet.”<sup>89</sup> But Berry’s poetry and writings, on the whole, are far from an orthodox Christianity. Not only is Berry resistant to identifying as a “Christian” but often challenges many expressions of Christianity.<sup>90</sup> Though Berry has tremendous respect for particular Christian values like neighborliness it seems he often pairs such values with animism.<sup>91</sup> It is for this reason that I find such conspicuous parallels between his thought and figures like Walker and hooks as well as Christian theologians like McFague and Johnson.

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<sup>87</sup> Berry’s first publication of sabbath poems appears in *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1998). There were a couple more publications of collected poems between *A Timbered Choir* and the exhaustive collection of Berry’s sabbath poems (at the time of publication) *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Catapult, 2014).

<sup>88</sup> Berry, *This Day*, xxi.

<sup>89</sup> Marc Hudson, “Instantaneous and Eternal: Wendell Berry’s Sabbath Poems,” *Sewanee Review* 123 (Winter 2015), 189.

<sup>90</sup> Perhaps Berry’s most Christian principle is his notion of neighborliness, Cf. “Our Deserted Country,” in *Our Only World*, 129; “A Statement Against the Vietnam War,” in *The Long-Legged House*, 66. In much of Berry’s writings he has tremendous regard for Jesus’ notion of neighbor love, even when Jesus extends it to enemies, Cf. “About Civil Disobedience,” in *It All Turns on Affection*, 103. What strikes me about Berry’s praise of the first part of Jesus twofold love commandment (Mt. 22, Mk. 12, Lk. 10) is that Berry leaves out the second, God-centered, part of the commandment. I read Berry’s very intentional omission, to be the result of his valuing of the material world as a sort of stand in for God.

<sup>91</sup> He often personifies Nature, and seems to substitute any transcendent aspects of Christianity with a more earthly, materialistic notion of “God,” Cf. “It All Turns on Affection,” 27; “Landsmen,” 60.

The vitality of a practice like sabbath is a key differentiation between agrarianism and industrialism which is on full display in the first stanza of one of Berry's earliest sabbath poems: "The bell calls in the town / Where forebears cleared the shaded land / And brought high daylight down / To shine on field and trodden road. / I hear, but understand contrarily, and walk into the woods. / I leave labor and load, / Take up a different story. / I keep an inventory / Of wonders and of uncommercial goods."<sup>92</sup> Agricultural industrialism's commercialization of labor, land, and life drives an irremovable wedge between the worlds of agrarians and industrialists. Instead of allowing for practices that enhance human and planetary well-being, like rest, industrialists only consider the financial "bottomline" when making decisions about what is "best" practice.

By taking aim at agricultural industrialism, Berry squares his focus on understanding what it is that gives life meaning. As a small acreage Kentucky farmer, Berry truly believes the industrialization of agriculture (as well as the industrialization of many other aspects of American life and life around the globe) is a tremendous evil. However, what guides his lambasting of agricultural industrialism is not some universal Amish-esque vision of the world (though he certainly has deep respect for the Amish's way of life) but rather his conviction—supported by extensive experience and research—that industrial agriculture has not actually improved the land and all that depend on it. As Berry observes, industrial agriculture justifies its existence through the "need" to feed the world's hungry (a sort of altruism) and/or its evolutionary inevitability (a sort of predestination).<sup>93</sup> Yet, the problem of people not having

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<sup>92</sup> Berry, *A Timbered Choir*, 9.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. The terms altruism and predestination are my terms for what Berry describes.

adequate food (not to mention good food) has certainly not been solved after decades of such innovation in technology from agribusinesses. The issue of inevitability is also a difficult one to appreciate given those often making this claim are those who sit atop the industrial agricultural apparatus and thus benefit the most from its “inevitable” existence. As Berry suggests, agrarians do not believe in a one-size-fits-all model for knowing how best to use the land. But they do recognize the inherent value of people’s lives and the land which sustains them and thus advocate for democratic uses of land and resources rather than consolidation and exploitation.<sup>94</sup> By this reasoning, agrarians think decisions about the future of people’s lives and the well-being of the earth should not be undertaken by an elite, small group of decision-makers but rather must be localized and committed to practical solutions based on what works best for each time and place.

### **Freedom and Work**

In the *Unsettling of America* Berry asks what he believes is a fundamental economic question: to those who believe that industrialism has “freed” humans from labor, what is it that humans have been freed for?<sup>95</sup> Implicit in this question is a belief in the goodness of work with and on the land. Attached to this is the notion that “freedom” from providing for basic human needs (through cooking, cleaning, raising and producing food, maintaining shelters, caring for

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 31-33.

<sup>95</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Culture,” in *The Unsettling of America*, 32-33. In Berry’s essay “Home of the Free,” in *The Gift of Good Land*, 183-188, he extends this line of reasoning. From evaluating two ads in 1978, one from John Deere and the other for a condo housing development, he concludes that what is being advertised is a proposal “that if we put all earthly obligations and the rites of passage into the charge of experts and machines, then life will become a permanent holiday,” “Home of the Free,” 184. Not only has this not occurred but Berry is suspicious of the efficacy of such a perpetual holiday.

people, etc.) is dehumanizing. Industrial agriculture, he believes, with its emphasis on “modernizing” farming practices and technology, in fact, leads to tremendous exploitation of land and people.<sup>96</sup> As he says in “Home of the Free,” freedom has come to mean for “developed” and “industrialized” cultures that convenience and efficiency are prized above all. Following John Milton, Berry concludes that such traits are not freedom at all but rather that one finds freedom “only by living in this world as you find it, and by taking responsibility for the consequences of your life in it.”<sup>97</sup> Berry suggests such living in the world will necessitate doing some chores but that through taking responsibility such chores become life giving, for they make life meaningful and sustainable.

What makes life meaningful and sustainable? Berry seems to find an answer to this question in his advocacy for local-ness and the ways he believes agri-industrialism harms local communities and their land. Berry’s advocacy is on display when he laments Secretaries of State Ezra Taft Benson’s (1953-61) “Get Big or Get Out” and Earl Butz’s (1971-76) “Adapt or Die” agricultural policies.<sup>98</sup> The “Get Big” mentality caused many small farmers and ranchers to sell their properties and livestock to large corporations whose focus on efficiency and mechanization destroyed soil and water, abused animals, and pushed people off the land all in the name of maximizing productivity and thus financial gains for corporations run by men thousands of miles away.

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<sup>96</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Thought of Limits in a Prodigal Age,” in *The Art of Loading Brush*, 20ff. He explores the idea of exploitation extensively at the beginning of his essay “The Unsettling of America,” in *The Unsettling of America*, 7ff.

<sup>97</sup> Wendell Berry, “Home of the Free,” 187.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

## Class and the Power of ‘Local’

In Berry’s mind, the abuses perpetrated by large corporations are almost always enabled by poor governmental oversight and concern for local communities. In *The Long-Legged House* Berry spends his first two essays addressing the ways that strip-mining practices in Eastern Kentucky decimated local communities. In Berry’s opinion, the harm caused by these corporations was instigated by state and federal governments who were desperate for cheap fossil fuel development and thus allowed for horrific abuses of Kentuckians and their land.<sup>99</sup> Berry, thus, finds both big business and big government to be conveniently unable to be interested in local communities because of the “larger” purposes these actors must attend to. Big business and big government’s distance, and disinterest, from local communities and environments flies in the face of Berry’s claim that “[t]he closer to home the correction is made, the better it is—the more moral it is.”<sup>100</sup>

In addition to critiquing big business and big government, Berry also places blame for the disintegration of rural life on academics and economists like the esteemed late Martin Feldstein. Berry quotes from a *Wall Street Journal* piece from February 2016 authored by Feldstein in which the then Harvard professor said the U.S. economy was in “good shape” based on “income,” “unemployment,” and “industrial production.” Feldstein noted that “the big

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<sup>99</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Tyranny of Charity,” in *The Long-Legged House*, 3-11. Berry, without mincing words, blames figures like Earl Butz for this trajectory in United States government: “. . . the tendency, if not the intention, of Mr. Butz’s confusion of farming and war, is to complete the deliverance of American agriculture into the hands of corporations,” “The Unsettling of America,” 10.

<sup>100</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Landscaping of Hell: Stripe-Mine Morality in East Kentucky,” in *The Long-Legged House*, 12-29.

uncertainties that now hang over our economy are political.”<sup>101</sup> Though it was true at the time that production was up, unemployment low, and incomes rising, Berry notes the rather narrow definition of “economic health” that Feldstein operates with, one that to Berry’s exasperation, says nothing about (and seemingly cares little for) the use and the abuse of the land and its resources. In fact, Berry even says that “Prof. Feldstein does not know [of these abuses], but is conventionally ignorant of them.”<sup>102</sup> It seems that any assumption that incomes were in “good shape” is certainly not taken from someone making \$15 an hour (or less) but rather an armchair expert that is little interested in how *well* people are able to live in a dramatically unequal economic system.

Anecdotes such as the one about Professor Feldstein are common in Berry’s writings. He laments the ways in which people from many backgrounds at the top of society (academically, economically, politically, corporately) pay little attention to the natural environment and those who work it—an environment and economy upon which all societies depend. The disdain for agricultural life and the workers and their labor which uphold it strikes Berry as one of the only remaining acceptable prejudices in American society.<sup>103</sup> Though I would contend there are a few others, I would not reject his claim that this prejudice is alive and well within not only American society but around the world. As the United States becomes ever more an economy of knowledge and technology, we continually outsource our production of “basic goods” to more efficient

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<sup>101</sup> “Home of the Free,” 20.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Wendell Berry, “Racism and the Economy,” in *The Art of the Commonplace*, 47ff.



machinery or people in “developing countries.” This dynamic tells us enough: the sort of work that provides food, clothing, and other essentials is to be provided by those “less developed,” or by the “working class” or even “working poor” within our own country and (even more so) abroad. The more “advanced” forms of work (like I am currently engaging in in front of a computer screen) are to be left to a class of laborers who belong to the “developed” world.

### **Waste, Simplicity, and Caring for the Earth**

Closely related to Berry’s preference for more archaic forms of life and their simplicity (at least in his mind) is the value of being thrifty or discarding as little as possible.<sup>104</sup> For Berry, the idea of thrift is inextricably bound-up with his ethic of care. He believes that if care of the natural world were taken seriously, people would produce much less waste. This is connected to his critique of industrialization—and even capitalism—in that both of these are dependent on growth that cannot be sustained. Such indiscriminate growth, according to Berry, cares relatively little about preventing waste and creating cultures of care.<sup>105</sup> As such, Berry finds industrialism and its capitalistic motivation to be fundamentally uninterested in care for people and land. It would not be fair to say that Berry is opposed to innovation, hard work, or doing things better. But he approaches such tasks with great caution in that he recognizes such “progress” can only be understood as progress if it leads to improvements in the health and well-being of all things on earth, rather than the few who exist at the top of the economic heap.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.; “Living With The Land,” *The Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* 65 (November-December 1991), 390.

<sup>105</sup> *The Unsettling of America*, 9ff; “Living With The Land,” 392. In “Living With The Land” Berry also critiques industrial communism which he believes does not have significantly different interests than industrial capitalism.

This leads me to a sort of summation of Berry's ecological ethic. The above-mentioned value of thriftiness is of great importance to Berry's ecological ethics but perhaps of equal worth is what he calls balance—and which I consider to be his interest in “holistic” care. Balance for Berry has everything to do with attention and intentionality. Balance leads to symmetries and harmonies, but Berry contends that finding such an equilibrium takes skill and precision in attention to detail.<sup>106</sup> When one successfully pursues balance in one's work, Berry believes one achieves a better, more holistic approach to farming and life. This demands that one balances the ways that one cares for the land. The good farmer is not just one who tries to make a profit (though one must find a way to make a living) but one who is concerned with how land, animals, and humans (and the work-load placed on each of them) are treated and the ways these differing parts of the natural world, when held together by mutual respect, enhance the well-being of the others.<sup>107</sup> This approach lends itself to problem-solving that is not isolated or driven toward singular goods but is “good in many respects.”<sup>108</sup> Said differently, Berry thinks that true care for one aspect of creation necessarily results in the care of all aspects of creation.

This final evaluation of Berry's work, and his desire for holistic care, perfectly places Berry at the center of my study and reveals that what he values is not far from what the Christian tradition values in its ecological emphases. Berry calls the Earth a “gift” and suggests appropriate human relationships with the land must be guided by faithfulness (acting in accord

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<sup>106</sup> Wendell Berry, “Solving for Patterns,” in *The Gift of Good Land*, 141.

<sup>107</sup> Wendell Berry, “Whose Head Is the Farmer Using? Who Head Is Using the Farmer?,” in *Meeting the Expectations of the Land*, 26ff.

<sup>108</sup> Berry, “Solving for Patterns,” 141.

with one's nature), gratitude, and humility, and that humans must act neighborly toward each other by being kind, generous with strangers, and honest.<sup>109</sup> Throughout Berry's writings he often quotes from the Bible and a multitude of Christian thinkers. In the "Gift of Good Land" Berry synthesizes many aspects of Christian teachings from these sources and interprets those teachings ecologically, presumably for Christian people:

If 'the earth is the Lord's' and we are His stewards, then obviously some livelihoods are 'right' and some are not. Is there, for instance, any such thing as a Christian strip mine? A Christian atomic bomb? A Christian nuclear power plant or radioactive waste dump? What might be the design of a Christian transportation or sewer system? Does not Christianity imply limitations on the scale of technology, architecture, and land holdings? Is it Christian to profit or otherwise benefit from violence? Is there not, in Christian ethics, an implied requirement of practical separation from a destructive or wasteful economy? Do not Christian values require the enactment of a distinction between an organization and a community?<sup>110</sup>

In Chapter 3 I will further assess the Christian underpinnings of Berry's thought. As I will show to be the case also with Walker and hooks, it seems imprecise to call Berry a Christian. He holds values compatible with many ecological themes in the Christian tradition but his critical eye toward the non-ecological, world-affirming themes in Christianity lose their bite with any simple attempt to designate his thinking as "Christian."

### **Alice Walker: Biographical Sketch**

Alice Walker (b. 1944) was born and grew up in Eatonton, Georgia, a small, rural farming town. She was the eighth child of sharecroppers and laborers of a local dairy, Minnie and Willie

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<sup>109</sup> Berry, "The Gift of Good Land," 272. He also adds that humans must act with good "husbandry" toward the land and animals and in many ways this seems to further describe what it means to be "faithful" to the land.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 275-76.

Walker.<sup>111</sup> After attending Spelman College from 1961-64, she transferred and graduated from Sarah Lawrence College with her B.A. in 1966. During her college years she became involved in the Civil Rights Movement, taking part in the March on Washington in 1963.<sup>112</sup> She published her first book of poetry, *Once*,<sup>113</sup> in 1968 and her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*,<sup>114</sup> in 1970. She became the first black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction with her 1982 work, *The Color Purple*.<sup>115</sup>

Much of Walker's work over the years has borne a variety of themes but notably she has often written about black life in America, the lives of women around the world, and the life-giving nature of the earth. She attributes her fascination with these topics and the world more broadly with her childhood in Georgia, a childhood she says was filled with explorations of the woods and stories told to her by her parents and grandparents.<sup>116</sup> Much of Walker's writing is filled with a hopefulness that is palpable as well as a cosmic spirituality firmly grounded in her Christian childhood, her family's indigenous and African roots, and her fascination with Buddhist mediation.

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<sup>111</sup> Gerri Bates, *Alice Walker: A Critical Companion* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2005), 1-2.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>113</sup> Alice Walker, *Once* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Publishers, 1968).

<sup>114</sup> Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Publishers, 1970).

<sup>115</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

<sup>116</sup> Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (New York: Random House, 1997), xxiv.

## Alice Walker: Major Themes

### Recognizing Goodness, Finding Hope

Walker's hopefulness is unavoidable for any serious, or even casual, reader of her work. And for anyone who thinks hopefulness breeds a sort of naivety, such a skeptic needs to look no further than the writings of Alice Walker. Walker constantly holds together a critical yet hopeful gaze toward the world. One might even suggest that her hopefulness paves the way for her criticism, as if the preferred future she believes so strongly in requires her to stand opposed to the evils of the world. As such, Walker never shies away from condemning abuses perpetrated against marginalized people (black community, women, the poor) as well as harms done to the earth. She demands oppressors take ownership of past and present abuses (i.e. slavery, colonialism, male domination),<sup>117</sup> and at times even echoes the strong condemnatory language of one of her activist and literary heroes, Zora Neale Hurston.<sup>118</sup> But it is Walker's ability to hold in tension these seemingly contradictory ideas that gives so much of her work the powerful ferocity

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<sup>117</sup> In spite of Walker's hopeful tone in much of her writing, she at times takes a much more harsh stance toward those she believes are serious perpetrators of injustice. A good example of this is found in "Only Justice Can Stop a Curse" in which she vehemently condemns the actions of white men and their seemingly unbounded ability to colonize and destroy the world. But she takes it even farther, and is rather prophetic for our time, when she says that "white men continue to subjugate [planet Earth], and continue their lust to dominate, exploit, and despoil not just our planet, but the rest of the universe, which is their clear and oft-stated intention; leaving their arrogance and litter not just on the moon, but on everything else they can reach," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando, FL; Harcourt Publishers, 1983), 341. I say this is prophetic in that three white billion men, Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk, nearly forty years after this essay was published, are not just very interested in space but are active in their exploration of it.

<sup>118</sup> Hurston is an important figure for Walker. Walker helped renew interest in Hurston's work with her essay "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," in *Ms.*, March 1976. Hurston was a prolific writer herself who came of age during the Harlem Renaissance and later was a central figure in the movement. In the essay "Only Justice Can Stop a Curse" Walker begins by quoting what she calls "curse-prayer" from Hurston that is reminiscent of the Hebrew Bible prophets' oracles against the nations, or in the case of some like Amos' condemnatory of Israel's elites who crush the poor.

it possesses. This tension is well on display in her anger and rage-filled essay “Only Justice Can Stop a Curse.” Walker minces no words about the ability for those in power to consistently destroy the goodness of the world. But toward the end of the essay she maintains that change is possible, that hope for a better future is not beyond our grasp if we but desire to pursue this better future by allowing “justice to stop the curse.”<sup>119</sup>

Such a tension is very characteristic of Walker’s writings. She holds out hope for a preferred future but a hope that is not naive. Walker recognizes the injustices of the world, particularly those enacted upon people of color, the poor, and the Earth. And thus she attempts in her writing to dismantle these forms of oppression through her writing and activism, deeply believing such efforts to be a matter of justice. She is convinced that such movement toward justice will improve the world, making it the sort of place where all things can thrive rather than only those which have the power to coerce and dominate.

### **Good People, Good Earth**

As just noted, Walker’s hopefulness stems not from some sort ignorance or willful thinking about the world. Rather she believes that when people and all the things of the world are allowed to thrive, a goodness inherent to all things becomes visible. In the “Introduction” to *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* she says: “I believe the Earth is good. That people, untortured by circumstance or fate, are also good. I do not believe the people of the world are naturally my enemies, or that animals, including snakes, are, or that Nature is.”<sup>120</sup> But for the actualization of

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<sup>119</sup> Walker, “Only Justice,” 342.

<sup>120</sup> Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, xxv.

this goodness, and her hopefulness in it to come to fruition, she believes perpetrators of present and past abuses must take responsibility and chart new paths of freedom and life. Interestingly, Walker's hope for a new future that repairs past abuses resonates with her understanding of Jesus. In many ways, Walker's Jesus embodies many of correctives she believes are necessary for the world to manifest its goodness. She says: "Everybody loves Jesus Christ. We recognized him as one of us, but a rebel and revolutionary, consistently speaking up for the poor, the sick, and the discriminated-against, and going up against the bossman: the orthodox Jewish religious leaders and rich men of his day. We knew that people who were really like Jesus were often lynched."<sup>121</sup> Walker identifies with a sort non-domesticated Jesus, a Jesus that is much closer to the biblical narrative than is often spoken of in Christian circles. And her love of Jesus expands beyond even the image of Jesus she was "brought up to adore." She says later in life she began to see Jesus as a "wizard" or "dancer" that "coexists quite easily with pagan indigenous peoples. . . [who] already practiced the love and sharing that [Jesus] preached."<sup>122</sup> As is the case with many womanists, including hooks (as I will show below), Walker broadens the religion of her childhood out to include a more pluralistic spirituality that maintains certain Christian notions of Jesus but that opens up her love of Christianity's central figure to embody an even broader, more universalistic spirituality.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 18. This brings to mind James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013) which explores the parallels between the cross and lynching tree among black American Christians' spirituals, stories, sermons, poems, and collective consciousness.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 25.

This universalistic Jesus Walker identifies with, I believe, is core to the hopefulness she exudes. But Walker is clear that Jesus and Christian teaching, though foundational, were not the only sources of her universalism or hopefulness. Additionally, she sought wisdom from the women of her childhood church community,<sup>123</sup> as well as found courage and promise of a better future in the message of the Civil Rights Movement as proclaimed by Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>124</sup> The people she met during her travels around the globe inspired her and revealed the universal nature of love and a desire, a love and desire she believe would birth a better world.<sup>125</sup> As Walker says, she was “helped, supported, encouraged, and nurtured by people of all races, creeds, colors, and dreams.”<sup>126</sup> Walker says that in art and life one must always have a “larger perspective” in mind.<sup>127</sup> Certainly, Walker casts a vision of the world that is not easy to attain given the multiplicity of injustices done to people and the earth but it is nevertheless one that continues to galvanize countless people to strive toward the better, more cosmopolitan future she powerfully envisions.

Walker’s sense of the inherent goodness of the world and its people leads her to view the world holistically. She frequently writes about identifying with women across the world who

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<sup>123</sup> Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, xviii.

<sup>124</sup> Alice Walker, “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, 124-25.

<sup>125</sup> Alice Walker, “‘You Have All Seen’: If The Women Of The World Were Comfortable, This Would Be A Comfortable World,” in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, 31-43.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Alice Walker, “Saving the Life that Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life,” in *In Search of Mothers’ Gardens*, 5.



experience female genital mutilation<sup>128</sup> or mothers in war torn countries like Iraq.<sup>129</sup> She writes about the unified natural world in which people are codependent with other living creatures on the Earth— which she calls the “Great Mystery” and “Mother.”<sup>130</sup> In this way her womanism connects her to women and all people all around the world, particularly in their sufferings. But her womanism is rightly terms an ecowomanism in that she also always connects the experiences of woman to the Earth. What I find particularly striking in her talk fo the unity of the world is the frequency with which she connects it with geopolitical issues. Thus, Walker is privy to the ways that women and the Earth and harms done to them are too often directly a result of violent conflicts perpetrated by humans against each other and the against the planet as a whole. When Walker talks of beauty or happiness she regularly connects these ideas to justice, thus revealing in her thought a strong connection between aesthetics and ethics<sup>131</sup> and how they come together in the lives of many women around the world and their understandings of their relationships with the Earth.

### **Geopolitics and Caring for the Earth**

In similar fashion to Berry, Walker’s thought has influenced countless academics, activists, and common people for decades. The beauty with which she writes and her keen insights and descriptions highlight that which is spectacular with the grandeur it deserves, while

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<sup>128</sup> Walker, “You Have All Seen.”

<sup>129</sup> Alice Walker, “To Be Led by Happiness,” in *We are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2006), 246-51.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 243-44.

<sup>131</sup> For a classic reflection on the relationship between aesthetics and ethics see Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

always giving attention and dignity to what is more prosaic. Walker has an adept ability to pinpoint connections between something as complex and overwhelming as the dynamics of the Cold War with things more mundane like micro-aggressions against women or people of color. For example, Walker draws parallels between the rhetoric of domination during the nuclear arms race by U.S. political and military leaders (and their subsequent destructive action toward the Soviet Union and other “weaker” countries)<sup>132</sup> with the ways American leaders throughout its history have dominated black bodies—particularly black women’s bodies.<sup>133</sup> Walker fits well within the voluminous community of feminists or womanists who give witness to the similarities between the harsh U.S. political and militaristic tactics used against American “enemies” and even toward poorer countries (I.e. the CIA’s rogue, unscrupulous actions in Central American during the ‘70s and ‘80s) and the ways these actions are mimicked in how the powerful in American society treat marginalized people domestically.

In Walker’s “Nuclear Madness: What You Can Do” another important theme for my project rises to the surface: the universal experience for all people of sharing a common human nature and how this common nature gives each person the opportunity to care for or harm the Earth. Walker is careful not to conflate the unique experiences of differing peoples and communities. However, she thoughtfully connects different threads of a mass of experiences so

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<sup>132</sup> Alice Walker, “Nuclear Madness: What You Can Do,” in *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden*, 343-47.

<sup>133</sup> For an excellent, and personal, recent exploration of the ways black bodies in America have been systematically dominated see Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between The World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015).

that commonalities might bring differing peoples together.<sup>134</sup> She shows how certain experiences transcend individual and communal uniqueness, thus opening up avenues for disparate peoples and cultures to find resonances between themselves and others.<sup>135</sup> The existential threat of the Cold War for the global community is an example that Walker returns to again and again to illustrate this point. By highlighting the universal agency of all people and by understanding the role all people share in addressing abuses done to other humans as well as the Earth, Walker offers a powerful universalistic call for collective action. As the possibility of nuclear destruction loomed during the Cold War (and still, in many ways, remains with us), Walker's writings attempt to inspire a sense of collectivism that cares for the health and well-being of all people and the planet in the face of such a global catastrophe.

## **Memory**

Core the Walker's advocacy for caring for all things is her respect for and engagement with "the ancestors." Central to this engagement is story telling and the importance of memory. Walker argues that remembering and telling stories serves not only to maintain memories of the past but also assists oppressed peoples in resisting oppressors and learning to thrive. In this way, Walker highlights how the black community uses the power of storytelling and remembering lessons taught by those now dead to the living to recover their self-worth and to actualize their agency and bearers of truth and history. Walker says she converses with dead family members,

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<sup>134</sup> Alice Walker, "Coming in from the Cold," in *Living by the Word: Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), 66.

<sup>135</sup> This theme is on display throughout *The Color Purple*.

friends, and even people she has never met.<sup>136</sup> In this way she suggests her ongoing conversations with those who have died and that this connection allows her to not forget what and who has gone before her. This connection to the past and her attempt to keep it always before her gives Walker the strength to work toward a better future in the present.<sup>137</sup> As such, memory serves as a catalyst to recall valuable lessons from one's ancestors so that one might pursue a better future in the present.

Walker's remembrance of and interactions with her ancestors, as well as her resistance to systems of oppression, result from the hope that pervades every aspect of Walker's writings. Her hopefulness, positivity, and profound love for the world and all its inhabitants is on full display in the Introductions to several of her works.<sup>138</sup> But as I noted above, Walker's hope in the goodness of the world is certainly not something that she holds uncritically or naively. She says people are good but that "circumstances of fate" torture us and form us into the sorts of evil and vile expressions known far too often throughout our history.<sup>139</sup> These circumstance of fate are, in Walker's mind, results of a "colonized spirit" that works incessantly to oppress the world and its creatures. This undergirds her activism which for Walker focuses itself on overthrowing oppressiveness wherever it exists so that the enjoyment of human selves and the world might be

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<sup>136</sup> Walker, "Coming in from the Cold," 67-8.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, xxii; *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 14.

<sup>139</sup> Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, xxv.

possible.<sup>140</sup> In the following chapter I will show how Walker's notion of a "colonized spirit" connects well with Willie Jennings.

### **Enjoying the (divine) Earth**

The enjoyment and wonder with which Walker approaches the world serves a crucial role in her spirituality and it leads me to note a final theme in Walker's thought: the divinity of the Earth.<sup>141</sup> With this notion Walker is tapping into a deep tradition that for her roots itself in earth religions, Buddhism, and even her childhood Christianity.<sup>142</sup> I find her 1992 "Preface" to *The Color Purple* an invaluable summation of her understanding of the divine as nature, and subsequently her understanding of theology, religion, and spirituality. She says that she has always understood *The Color Purple* as a theological work, one that took her "from the religious back to the spiritual."<sup>143</sup> She says that "the Great Mystery's word" did not come to her in Sunday sermons or from the mouth of any human, but rather as she sat in a field and "heard and saw [the word] moving in beauty across the grassy hills."<sup>144</sup> In this way, and as I will demonstrate

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>142</sup> Walker famously called herself a tri-spiritualist, saying she was raised Christian but has come to love Buddhism and earth religions in "Moved to Speak," Interview with Scott Winn, November 15, 2000, <https://www.realchangenews.org/news/2000/11/15/table-contents-nov-15-2000-pictures-entire-issue>. Importantly, this has led to a sort of spiritual fluidity for Walker. At times throughout the project it will make sense to bring in figures throughout the history of Christianity to show places in which there are striking (dis)similarities and how someone like Walker might still occupy a sort of honorary seat in Christian discussions. In this instance, there seems to me to be important connections between Walker's claims of divinity of the Earth and certain Patristic and Medieval thinkers such as Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximos the Confessor, or Bonaventure.

<sup>143</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, i.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., ii.

throughout the project, Walker is an excellent example of a figure who consistently holds together and draws out a spiritual holism that is always ethically interested in the dignity both of people and the earth.

As Pamela A. Smith has documented well, Walker's work (primarily her later work) should not be read without taking note of the importance she places on the interrelation between spirituality, ecology, poetry, and morality.<sup>145</sup> This is well illustrated in a passage (that I thank Melanie Harris for highlighting)<sup>146</sup> from Walker's "The Only Reason You Want To Go To Heaven" where she points to the divine healing power of the earth. She tells a story of her mother, a sharecropper, working long rows of cotton while being in the latter stages of pregnancy. Feeling as if she was on the verge of death, Walker's mother lay under a tree, fell asleep, and when she awoke, she felt restored, as if her "soul" had been touched by "a healing breeze."<sup>147</sup> Such a passage highlights the multilayered nature of Walker's spirituality and ethics: the earth heals the brokenness wrought by human injustice. But as I have surveyed above, Walker's thought also allows for a very participatory role for humanity to play in healing the earth. The back and forth of this reciprocal relationship between humanity and the earth that Walker envisions is a perfect sight for healing and well-being, or for conflict.

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<sup>145</sup> Pamela A. Smith, "Green Lap, Brown Embrace, Blue Body: The Ecospirituality of Alice Walker," in *CrossCurrents* 48.4 (Winter 1998-99): 471-487.

<sup>146</sup> Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 33.

<sup>147</sup> Walker, "The Only Reason You Want To Go To Heaven Is That You Have Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover's Arms)," in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, 21.

### bell hooks: Biographical Sketch

Bell hooks was the pen name of scholar and activist Gloria Jean Watkins (1952-2021) who chose the name to honor her maternal great-grandmother.<sup>148</sup> Like Berry she was born and raised in rural Kentucky, along with her six siblings, by working class parents.<sup>149</sup> A close reading of hooks reveals the significance her upbringing has had on her life as a writer and activist. A prolific author of over 30 books, hooks wrote the first draft for her first book, *Ain't I a Woman*,<sup>150</sup> during her college years at Stanford. The title comes from a speech given by Sojourner Truth (one of the hooks' literary and moral heroes) in 1851 in Akron, Ohio, that advocated for women's suffrage.<sup>151</sup> Following the example of Sojourner Truth and other activists, much of what hooks wrote over the years that bore a prophetic-ness decades after its composition. Like Berry and Walker, hooks approached her work with an acute sensibility to the well-being not only of marginalized peoples but the planet as a whole. Unlike Berry and Walker, hooks lived most of her professional life in academia and yet, as I will show, hooks worked painstakingly to remain close and attentive to the issues facing the black community, women, and the working class in the United States. One might even say that the arc of hooks' professional trajectory constantly bent toward matters of justice for marginalized peoples and our imperiled planet.

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<sup>148</sup> Min Jin Lee, "In Praise of bell hooks," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2019. Lee took classes with hooks during the short stint hooks taught at Yale in the 1980s. Lee notes that hooks chose to use lower case letters for her pen name to shift focus from her name to her ideas.

<sup>149</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-recovery* (New York: Routledge, 1994), *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>150</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (London: Pluto Press, 1981).

<sup>151</sup> Lee, "In Praise of bell hooks."

Hooks came to consciousness of conflicts regarding race, class, and gender during her formative years in Hopkinsville, her small Kentucky hometown. During her college years her consciousness expanded around these issues as she began to articulate her thoughts on them in her early writings. This connection to rural Kentucky is a fruitful touch point with Berry, one that grew extensively after hooks' return to Kentucky in 2004 to teach at Berea College.<sup>152</sup> Her move back to Kentucky invigorated all the more hooks' commitment to write about the lives and worlds of rural, working class people. This interest and concern for the working class in Kentucky is best on display in *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, which she wrote in 2009. However, evaluations of her earlier works such *Where We Stand: Class Matters* and *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, both published in 2000, reveal that her move back to Berea was not what initiated her interest and advocacy for working class people but rather served as a sort of culmination of her identification with marginalized groups and her desire to devote much of writing to advocate for a more inhabitable future for all people and the planet.

### **bell hooks: Major Themes**

#### **Intersectionality of Race, Class, Gender**

Hooks' race, class, and gender interpretative nexus is the guiding feature of nearly all of her works. For hooks, each of these supports and sharpens the value and critical ability of the other two. But a careful reading of hooks reveals her belief that race and gender share an ability to be coopted by those with class privilege. Thus, one claiming to be a feminist or an anti-racist might continue to uphold and strengthen divides between economic haves and have-nots. Even

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<sup>152</sup> As I will detail below, over the past decade and half hooks has engaged ever more so with Berry's writing and even conducted an interview with him that she includes in *Belonging*.



women and people of color, hooks contended, often participate in and perpetuate class segregation. In *Feminism Is For Everybody* hooks noted the tendency among societal and academic elites to join what she called “liberal reformists” who have interest in joining elite circles of influencers but not in deconstructing the exclusionary nature of these circles.<sup>153</sup> This includes what she called “reformist feminism” that often aligned itself with achieving equal status with privileged men to the demise of working toward a total restructuring of gender biases which would offer more equity to all people, specifically in terms of class hierarchies.<sup>154</sup>

Hooks detailed the severe gender discrimination she experienced at Stanford in the 1970s. Having attended a women’s college (that she never names) during her first year of undergraduate, she noted the strong contrast between women’s agency and self-worth in mixed gender classrooms at Stanford as compared to all-women classrooms at her previous institution.<sup>155</sup> In spite of this overt discrimination, hooks surmised that implicit biases within feminist movements held a unique, more subtle potential to wreak havoc. As a general feminist consciousness rose during the 1970s and ‘80s in the United States, hooks notes how the agency of white women was the first to make major gains. And as white women gained greater economic and social privileges hooks described how many of them lost the radical gender and racial justice advocacy of earlier feminist activism.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> hooks, hooks, “Feminist Politics: Where We Stand,” in *Feminism Is for Everybody* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4-6; “Consciousness-Raising: A Constant Change of Heart,” in *Feminism is for Everybody*, 7-12.

<sup>154</sup> bell hooks, “Feminism and Class Power,” in *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, 101-110.

<sup>155</sup> bell hooks, “Sisterhood is Still Powerful,” in *Feminism is For Everybody*, 13-14.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

However, hooks made clear that the siloing of race, class, and gender was not something that only white, more privileged women engaged in. She says that the “academization” of feminism in America led to the “deradicalization” of the movement by leaving so many middle class and poor women (of many ethnic and racial groups) behind to figure out their own way of climbing the societal ladder.<sup>157</sup> Hooks noted that a further instantiation of this corrupting force of power was apparent in that as white women in the 1980s became more comfortable talking about race they still are largely neglected serious conversations about class.<sup>158</sup> Academics and white feminists, according to hooks, were not the only one’s deradicalized by the new acquisition of power and privilege. In hooks’ essay “Class and Race: The New Black Elite” she also criticized black elites for allowing their class identity to supersede their racial identity, thus preferring to associate with powerful and wealthy whites rather than the poor black underclass of American society and even the smaller, vulnerable black middle class.<sup>159</sup> Hooks minces no word as she described how the “talented tenth” have emerged as the “power brokers” of black culture through their “selling of blackness.” These developments within the black community in United States reveal, to hooks at least, that black elites viewed themselves as having “nothing in common with the black poor.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. This seems a rather prophetic word given the over-eagerness in many academic and even corporate worlds to discuss race, all the while a chilling silence around class privileges hangs in the stale air of these “progressive” spaces. I am thinking of the recent and extensive formation of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) committees and statements at numerous universities, businesses, and other organizations.

<sup>159</sup> bell hooks, “Class and Race: The New Black Elite,” in *Where We Stand*, 89-100.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 94.

If one is to draw a through-line in this history, as hooks told it, it can be summarized as such: In the social upheaval of 20th Century, particularly from the 1960s on, there was a consistent theme in that as previously disenfranchised groups grew in power they often neglected to bring along with them those who were disenfranchised in different ways. For instance, as white women began to enter elite circles in politics, education, business, religion, etc., they frequently distanced themselves from women of color and poorer women. Similarly, as a small cohort within the black community moved upward economically, educationally, and politically, they tended to disregard any social commitment to the well-being of the much larger underprivileged black community. Hooks made clear that escaping from hegemonies of oppression (racism, sexism, classism) has regularly not corrected these systems but rather only reconfigured them. And though this takes place in all oppressive hierarchies, hooks consistently argued that class transformation is often the most difficult challenge.

### **Thrift and Simplicity**

Core to hooks' coming to class consciousness was the generational and cultural divide between her parents and her maternal grandparents. Hooks' maternal grandparents, Baba and Daddy Gus, showed young hooks not only a more simple and sustainable way of life but also opened her eyes to the wonder and goodness of the material world. In contrast to Walker, hooks spoke more extensively and more positively about her grandparents than her parents. Baba and Daddy Gus were "simple folks" who valued what was old and questioned what was new.<sup>161</sup> Baba and Daddy Gus cared deeply for the material world because of the wonder they found in it but

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<sup>161</sup> hooks, "Making the Personal Political: Class in the Family," in *Where We Stand*, 15.

also on account of necessity given they were poor agrarian southern black landowners who lived off the land during American racial apartheid.<sup>162</sup> Hooks appreciated the thriftiness and deep care for aesthetics apparent in Baba's intricate quilts made entirely from scrap cloths, to the way Baba's garden produced sustenance in the form of vegetables and herbs and beautification in the form of flowers. Baba grew, picked, and cured tobacco for smoking as well as "twisting and braiding [it] into wreaths" to keep moths out of clothes and bedding. As hooks says, for Baba "everything that could be made from scratch and not bought in a store was of greater value."<sup>163</sup> From Daddy Gus (along with her high school art teacher) hooks learned to care for all things and to find particular value in the discarded things of the world.<sup>164</sup> This contrasted sharply with hooks' mother who wanted store-bought, new things and to associate with the wealthier members of their small town community rather than the poor folks.<sup>165</sup> Though Baba could be harsh and her justice rogue,<sup>166</sup> hooks learned to love beauty and to find it in all manner of things at Baba and Daddy Gus' house in spite of her mother and father's disdain for their way of life.

### **Goodness of Work**

Closely associated with hooks understanding of simplicity and reuse is the empowering nature of work. She suggests that a core lesson she learned in "our black churches and in our

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 10ff.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>164</sup> hook, "Coming to Class Consciousness," in *Where We Stand*, 30.

<sup>165</sup> hooks, "Making the Personal Political," in *Where We Stand*, 17-19. Hooks noted her father's contempt for her mother's impoverished and uneducated family and the role his contempt played in driving hooks' mother's desire for a "well-to-do" life.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 14.

school [was] that it ‘was not what you did, but how you did it’ that mattered most.”<sup>167</sup> This was a principle her parents and grandparents could agree on, and, as hooks says a principle that nearly all black women valued.<sup>168</sup> She says that even the black women she knew who did not need to work preferred to work because of the belief among black women that work granted value to one’s life. Hooks used these reflections on work among the black community early in her life to counteract the popular racial and gender narrative of the welfare queen. She suggested that in reality there was a strong stigma associated with social services and welfare among many black women in her communities.<sup>169</sup>

In a strikingly similar fashion to Berry, hooks says that work is good when it is meaningful and performed well. Hooks notes the difficulties of finding such work for many black women and the limitations they face on account of race, class, and gender dynamics all being against them.<sup>170</sup> She recognized that in previous generations of black Americans there was an emphasis on “right livelihoods” or profession that gave one’s life purpose. However, hooks believes that the advice she received, and only become more popular since her youth, socialized young people to “get-ahead,” thus making how much money one made more important than “what [one] did to make that money.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> bell hooks, “Work Makes Life Sweet,” in *Sisters of the Yam*, 30.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 33.

### Rootedness in the Earth and Ecomemory

Hooks bridges the gap between the work of Alice Walker and Wendell Berry in important ways. Hooks frequently engaged them both in her writing and bore striking resemblances to both of them as if she has internalized their thinking. Hooks' essay "Touching the Earth" encapsulated well not only hooks' valuation of the natural world but the ways in which marginalized peoples (primarily America's black community) might work to regain self-worth through reclaiming their connections to it. In this essay she describes the necessity for the black community of mining their memories (stories, literature, song, etc.) so that they may honor the tremendous role of nature in their collective consciousness and thus recover black identity from white supremacy.<sup>172</sup> Again hooks uses Baba (and her illiteracy) to reveal the importance of storytelling as "the site of all epistemology."<sup>173</sup> And thus, "remembering together" for hooks is "highest form of communion" that enables not only stronger bonds of knowing and caring between oppressed peoples but also with the Earth.<sup>174</sup> Hooks believes this "ecomemory" helps the black community shed white oppression and destruction. She argues that the freedom the black community experiences from this connection to the earth allows for greater self-determinism through their independence from whites and their interdependence on each other and the Earth.<sup>175</sup> What hooks

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<sup>172</sup> bell hooks, "Touching the Earth," in *Moral Ground*, 363-68.

<sup>173</sup> hooks, "Making the Personal Political," in *Where We Stand*, 16.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> hooks, "Making the Personal Political," in *Where We Stand*, 11ff.

envisioned is reminiscent of movements like Shirley Sherrod's "New Communities,"<sup>176</sup> or a host of other black initiated agricultural and communal ventures that attempt to recapture the historical and cultural ties between America's black community and its robust agricultural past.<sup>177</sup>

Taking the lessons hooks learned about aesthetics from her grandparents and highlighting the value of ecomemory become the launching points for *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*. In this work hooks takes an extensive look at how black women, in particular, can find greater strength and resiliency through a rootedness in the earth. Interestingly, hooks frequently cites the Bible and Christian thought throughout this work. Early in the work she praises Christian mysticism while she explores black women's recurring recognition of the Earth's beauty, the interconnectedness of all life, and the natural world's ability to heal itself.<sup>178</sup> *Sisters of the Yam* is a valuable intersectional work where hooks evaluates the interrelationship of nature and spiritual life by observing black women's reflections on the natural world, their spiritualization of it, and the ways they celebrate the environment's beauty, and thus looking to

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<sup>176</sup> Debbie Weingarten, "How a Black Farming Community Found Justice," in *Civil Eats*, August 16, 2019, <https://civileats.com/2019/08/16/how-a-black-farming-community-found-justice/> (accessed Sept 5, 2020). Sherrod founded the land trust "New Communities" in 1969 in Georgia. Susan Witt and Robert Swann have suggested that Sherrod and others' work with "New Communities" was a central driver for the Community Land Trust movement in the United States, "Land: Challenge and Opportunity," in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, eds. William Vitak and Wes Jackson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 246.

<sup>177</sup> I.e. Marquise Francis and Kamilah Newton, "19 Black families purchase 96 acres of land to create a 'safe haven' for Black people," *Yahoo News*, Sept 3, 2020, <https://www.yahoo.com/now/19-black-families-purchased-96-acres-of-land-to-create-a-safe-haven-for-black-people-215152697.html> (accessed September 4, 2020).

<sup>178</sup> hooks, "Introduction: Healing Darkness," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 1-2; "Dreaming Ourselves Dark and Deep: Black Beauty," 59-75. These very emphases bring one back to Walker's story of her mother and the healing power she attributed to sleep and the gentle breeze.

affirm life as a fundamental value of ecowomanism. It was with such ideas in mind that hooks launched into an essay on love that she grounds in the teachings of the biblical book of 1 John.<sup>179</sup> For hooks, affirming and loving life is overwhelmingly valuable for oppressed peoples and every facet of nature which hooks recognized as “full of life.”<sup>180</sup> Melanie Harris picks up this theme in hooks and suggests this “simple” recognition of the Earth as beautiful allows for black women to resist the urge to domineer or control the Earth but rather let it be through one’s honoring, observing, and enjoying it rather than consuming it.<sup>181</sup> Hooks quotes the Bible as an authoritative source on several occasions,<sup>182</sup> each time highlighting what she finds to be teachings of love, healing, and transformation.

### **Beauty in All Things**

Discovering beauty and valuing it opened hooks to a vision of the world that plays itself out in nearly everything she wrote. For hooks, the world’s beauty not only gives it value but it means there is a deep interconnection between all things because of their shared materiality. As Harald Witt and Lliane Loots show, hooks’ belief in the interconnected nature of all things leads to a necessarily bifurcated and potentially destructive option for life: one either affirms and

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<sup>179</sup> hooks, “Living to Love,” in *Sisters of the Yam*, 97ff.

<sup>180</sup> hooks, *Talking Back*. She also revisits this theme in “Seeking After Truth,” in *Sisters of the Yam* where she argues that black women are in particular need of self-affirmation, which hooks suggests is only possible when the truth is told. The great difficulty is that black women have been conditioned to withhold the truth for their well-being for hundreds of years making it extremely difficult for them to break this habit and thus experience peace. This theme will also likely receive greater attention in the project given the importance of truth telling in Berry’s work.

<sup>181</sup> Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 29.

<sup>182</sup> hooks, “Living to Love,” in *Sisters of the Yam*, 111; hooks, “Walking in the Spirit,” in *Sisters of the Yam*, 146.



pursues the holistic beauty and interrelatedness of the world or one neglects the inherent interconnection of all things and thus destroys the world.<sup>183</sup> In other words, not granting value to one thing hurts not only that specific thing but the greater whole to which that singular thing belongs.<sup>184</sup> In hooks' mind, the world's interconnectedness gives value to everything in the world in that, if anything is valuable everything is valuable. Such ubiquity of value for all material things is also apparent for hooks in that she think everything has "an element of beauty." She says she learned this lesson from Baba. "More than any grown-up, Baba taught me about aesthetics, how to really look at things, how to find the inherent beauty. This was a rule in that house; everything, every object, has an element of beauty."<sup>185</sup> These emphases in hooks' thought about ancestors, interconnection, and the affirmation of all material objects forms a very wondrous and holistic vision of ecological care. Hooks cared not only for the present but also the past. She cared not only for the animate but also the inanimate. She cared not only for health now but also for how our actions in the present affects the well-being of the future.

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<sup>183</sup> Harald Witt and Liane Loots, "Seeking Earth Democracy: The Relationship of Gender, the Environment and Activism in South Africa," in *Agenda* (2004): 4-15.

<sup>184</sup> I noted above, this same framework is key to Melanie Harris' work. I am struck by the ways that someone like Maximos, 1400 years ago, spoke about the interconnectedness of all creation and the inherent value this gave all things. In his *Mystagogy*, Maximos discusses how the Earth is a sort of cosmic church in which all things have value and worship God. Likewise, even though Bonaventure, in his *The Soul's Journey to God*, maintains a strict hierarchy between humans, animals, and inanimate objects, he still acknowledges the value each of these has and how they, in their own unique ways, have an ability to be as God made them and thus make the world as God desires it to be. Though problems might exist here, there is certainly a critique of the contemporary sentiment among many Christians that humans have complete dominion over the world. For Christians this often results in them justifying harmful actions (waste, resource extraction, etc.) that seemingly could never fit into the caring, holistic visions of the world in Maximos and Bonaventure.

<sup>185</sup> hooks, "Making the Personal Political," in *Where We Stand*, 16.

### **Conclusion: Synthesizing Visions**

It is true that each of these thinkers approaches ecological care from differing vantage points. But the goal of this chapter has been to take a bird's eye view of their writings to show that each of their respective visions hold strong compatibilities with the others. Each figure critiques particular structures they view as dominating and destructive—Berry critiques agri-industrialism; Walker challenges domination of peoples of color and women along with U.S. global interventionism and militarism; hooks criticizes the hegemonies of race, class, and gender. But as I revealed, even in their uniqueness, they all attempt to amplify voices and experiences they believe are often disregarded in public and academic discourse. One manifestation of this appears in their criticisms of societal elites (in government, universities, churches, corporations, etc.) and said elites constant efforts to maintain the status-quo and its injustices which often advantage those at the top and disadvantage those toward the bottom of such public, academic, ecclesial, and corporate hierarchies. In noting this, I am not suggesting Berry, Walker, and hooks view elites as a homogenous cohort who communicate and formally act in concert to deprive the working-class and poor of their deserved well-being. What I am suggesting is that each of these writers wants to highlight the destructive nature of power and wealth and how the unbridled pursuit of them leads to widespread harm and injustice, both among human societies *and* natural environments.

Another note of summation from this survey of Berry, Walker, and hooks is the recognition of their reliance on remembering and celebrating the past and granting it epistemological and moral valuation. It would be difficult to pick up any significant writing of

Berry, Walker, or hooks and not find at least some engagement and appreciation with their personal histories as well as the histories of their ancestors. By no means do they praise every experience or lesson from their families and communities but they all show a deep connection to their histories and the worlds their ancestors bequeathed to them. For each writer, the respect of the Earth is embedded in their tellings of their family and community histories. The ways in which these histories always possess ecological connections makes the term “ecomemory” a rather apt description of the remembering that Berry, Walker, and hooks engage in.

Central to the ecomemory of each are common emphases on simplicity, limiting waste, thrift, and the ways these values enable one to connect to the Earth. For Berry, the limiting of technological “tools” creates greater opportunity to know the Earth intimately and what is good for it. Additionally, Berry’s practice of observing sabbath focuses on rest and rejuvenation rather than squeezing every last bit out time, land, and people. Walker focuses often on the basic recognition of people and the Earth and their inherent goodness. She frequently speaks of learning to appreciate the wonder of what is usually understood as mundane and finding there, in the simplicity of life, a profound beauty and goodness. Baba and Daddy Gus were powerful examples for hooks regarding how to make the most of what one has and how to find and make beauty out of what is simple. Instead of buying something new, she learned to value what she already had and to live within limits so that all things might have the possibility to flourish.

In each of these themes found in Berry, Walker, and hooks I believe the holism I have been speaking about is present. This holism is apparent as each figure seeks to discover the goodness of people and the land and the ways they interrelate with each other. In accord with

this, Berry, Walker, and hooks oppose destructive and wasteful practices and ideologies. They believe in limits that if widely practiced would restore health to the planet and sanity and meaning to the lives of all people on Earth. In this way, their holistic visions for societal and planetary health leads to what I have been calling an eco-cosmopolitanism. A sort of harmonious relationship between humanity and the Earth, one in which people, animals, planets, and the planet as a whole possess the requisite means to exist and prosper.

But might more be said of this idea of eco-cosmopolitanism? In the next chapter I will turn to evaluate Willie Jennings' work more extensively. As noted in the Introduction, Jennings uses the term cosmopolitanism to describe the kind of world he desires to move toward, one in which people of all races, nationalities, genders, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and everyone in between can thrive. My highlighting above of particular themes in Berry, Walker, and hooks is my attempt to suggest that such a cosmopolitan world is being realized in their writings. But as I have suggested, I also think something more than just a human-centric cosmopolitanism is at play in the writings of Berry, Walker, and hooks. And, as I will argue in the following chapter, I also believe that even a close reading of Jennings allows for a sort of ecological, land-centered cosmopolitanism that fits well alongside Berry and the ecowomanists.

Finally, as a matter of drawing conclusions from this present chapter as a sort of preparation for the one that follows, it would be an oversight to not emphasize the spiritual nature of the writings of Berry, Walker, and hooks. As I have attempted to reveal in both Chapters 1 and 2, deep resonances exist between Christian ecological witnesses and the ecological witnesses of Berry, Walker, and hooks. When Berry, Walker, and hooks identify a

divine presence that interconnects the wholeness of the Earth, and especially manifests in justice and beauty, one cannot ignore the sort of divine presence each thinker believes permeates the whole world. Such divinity for them is not something that is above or beyond the material world but necessarily bound up in the very tangible, concert reality of it.

This should bring back to one's mind the work of Elizabeth Johnson and Sallie McFague. Johnson and McFague attest to reality that humans and nature are not fundamentally at odds but rather enliven each other. A process that fits very well with a more panentheistic notion of the world and with the reflections of Berry, Walker, and hooks on the human and non-human features of our planet. But without doubt, many obstacles stand in the way of the realization these hope-filled, prophetic pronouncements about our world. By bringing Jennings into the conversation in Chapter 3, I will argue that many of the colonialist impulses of the previous centuries are still with us and ardently resist the type of eco-cosmopolitan world these figures envision. After evaluating his thought and putting him in conversation with Berry, Walker, and hooks, I will begin to make gestures toward how these tensions might be resolved, or at least lived with in a way where all on Earth might be allowed to thrive.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CULTURES OF DOMINATION

This chapter considers the ways Berry, Walker, and hooks discuss cultures of domination and relate these varying notions of domination to ecological degradation. I employ the work of Willie Jennings, and to a lesser extent Melanie Harris, in this chapter to note how the oppressive systems Berry, Walker, and hooks describe are substantiated by important aspects of the Christian tradition. I will connect the constructive suggestions offered by Berry, Walker, hooks in Chapter 2 and further parse them out by considering them alongside Jennings and Harris. I will reveal the interplay between these varying portrayals of domination presented by each writer, and in turn, to reveal and argue that domination is always something that affects both people and the land.

I will attend first to Jennings' work to help situate Berry's concerns about agri-industrialism. I will then turn to show how Jennings' consideration of colonialism's decimation of people's identities to the land is core to womanism's intersectional focus, as explained by Melanie Harris, Walker, and hooks. I will conclude by suggesting that read together, these figures allow us to understand more fully how industrial, colonial, racial, sexual, and gendered expressions of domination damage not only their "own" spaces but also those adjacent to them.

## Claiming Space

In *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Willie Jennings details the ways in which the colonialist project of a multitude of European empires and their Christian inhabitants set out to dominate people and land that were not their own. It will become clear by considering Jennings' insights how colonialism and its racialization process helped set the stage for the ecological concerns addressed by Berry and the ecowomanists. As I suggested in Chapters 1 and 2, it will also become more apparent in this chapter that Christian theology and the spiritualities of Berry, Walker, and hooks share valuable intellectual space that can assist our world in moving toward what I am calling an eco-cosmopolitan vision.

Jennings insights into the origins of the process of racialization during the colonial period assists one in seeing the through lines between cultures of domination, not only in terms of different classes and races, but also the ways in which people were displaced and dispossessed of the land and the subsequent ways colonialism commodified those spaces. In contrast, authentic Christian identity, according to Jennings, roots itself in connection and intimacy. Thus, Jennings believes the Christian witness of the Catholic and Protestant powers of Europe was destroyed by colonialism's ransacking of black lives and their identities that were built upon associations with the land. For Jennings the crux of the destruction of Christianity's witness by the colonists, though multifaceted and far-reaching, lies at the heart of colonialism's domination of African and indigenous peoples, and the resultant inequities which remain with us to this day.

### Universal Concern, Universal Care

At the outset of considering Jennings' work, it is significant for my project to note the ways that Jennings makes sense of his project and articulates his goals. Jennings, in his introduction, says that he anticipates his project will be considered not theological enough for theological circles.<sup>186</sup> This stems from his observation that any project about identity and belonging, or the failure thereof, has resulted from "the resistance of theologians to think *theologically* about their identities."<sup>187</sup> His desire is to form a better cosmopolitanism that roots itself in "deeper soil" than "an imagined democratic spirit."<sup>188</sup> His concluding thought to his introduction deserves a full quotation:

That deeper rich soil is not easily unearthed. It is surely not resident at the surface levels of Christianity and ecclesial existence today. Yet Christianity marks the spot where, if noble dream joins hands with God-inspired hope and presses with great impatience against the insularities of life, for example, national, cultural, ethnic, economic, sexual, and racial, seeking the deeper ground upon which to seed a new way of belonging and living together, then we will find together not simply a new ground, not simply a new seed, but a life already prepared and offered to us.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 10.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. The emphasis is original. Jennings further says that this "was the negation of a Christian intellectual posture reflective of the central trajectory of the incarnate life of the Son of God, who took on the life of the creature, a life of joining, belonging, connection, and intimacy," 7.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. I find it interesting, and intentional, that Jennings leaves out "religious." The intentionality seems assured given he does something similar toward the end of the book, 264. I will argue that I believe Jennings desired cosmopolitanism, at least in theory, is open to religious and spiritual diversity. I also find it noteworthy that womanism, as Harris interprets it, is explicitly pluralistic in religious and spiritual terms, *Ecowomanism*, 86 fn. 18.



This desire to look beyond “surface levels of Christianity and ecclesial existence today” is surely a word that will result in rebuke. At yet, I stand firmly with Jennings, though my project takes a different form.

However, this different form is anticipated by Jennings at the end of his book. Jennings says that he desires for the readers of his work “to capture the sight of a loss” that he says remains in the “slender testimonies of Native American peoples and other aboriginal peoples.”<sup>190</sup> The loss, he says,

is nothing less than the loss of a sense of our own creatureliness. I want Christians to recognize the grotesque nature of a social performance of Christianity that imagines Christian identity floating above land, landscape, animals, place, and space, leaving such realities to the machinations of capitalistic calculations and the commodity chains of private property. Such Christian identity can only inevitably lodge itself in the materiality of racial existence.<sup>191</sup>

Jennings wants to help transform this perverted Christian social imagination to be one not divorced from the materiality of the world but deeply committed to it. To accomplish such a “comprehensive” vision, Jennings believes a “a new dialogue between disciplines” and the multitude of “those concerned with identity formation.”<sup>192</sup>

I find Jennings call here for an interdisciplinary approach enormously helpful, and in line with the intersectional visions of Berry, Walker, and hooks. Jennings helps ground the ecological, racial, and theological foci of my project that I argue cannot be divorced from each other, if we are to move forward in a meaningful way to tackle the problem of ecological degradation. As the

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<sup>190</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 293.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

work of figures like Elizabeth Johnson and Sallie McFague make clear, Christianity has tremendous resources to sustain an ecological theology and theologians like Jennings and Melanie Harris show how these ecological concerns are also significant in terms of race. If the Christian community is going to participate actively in conversations and projects of ecological justice they necessarily must also care about racial justice and economic justice. Conversely, any Christian effort to care for racial justice or economic justice must consider the ways in which ecological justice is their intimate partner.<sup>193</sup> And yet, as Jennings claims here, I think he accurately portrays popular Christian thinking (both academic and lay) about Christian identity: that it is “floating above land, landscape, animals, place, and space” and thus, in certain important regards, is detached from the material.

Jennings’ sentiments in his introduction and conclusion also help me articulate my beliefs about the universal and essential nature of my project. I find the ecology espoused by Berry, Walker, and hooks not only significantly compatible with each other but also with major Christian ideas and figures, with Jennings and Harris at the forefront. This is no small theological claim given those in Christian theological discourse who believe there are more fundamental

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<sup>193</sup> This connection between racial and ecological justice is a hallmark of womanism, and yet, James Cone—undoubtedly influenced by his many black female students over the years—made it very clear that anyone interested in racial justice must necessarily be interested in ecological justice and vice-versa. In Cone’s mind, the pursuit of one form of justice is never sufficient if it cares not for the attainment of other forms of justice, “Whose Earth Is It Anyway,” *Cross Currents* 50 (2000): 36-46. Certainly this emphasis on intersectionality in Cone’s thought is all the more pronounced by womanists and black feminist thought, as Traci C. West suggests when she says that any attempt to liberate the black community from racism must also include a struggle for liberation of all kinds of oppressive systems, particularly those related to sexuality and gender, “Is a Womanist a Black Feminist? Marking the Distinction and Denying Them: A Black Feminist Response,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism In Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 292-294.

Christian tasks which take precedence in theological discourse.<sup>194</sup> To the contrary, I echo Jennings' desire for peacefulness, harmony, and intimacy between all people. By placing these sorts of relationships with all people at the center of Christian life and theology we might better work with Christians and non-Christians to address important, universal issues like ecological degradation that are driven largely by capitalistic industrialization and the ways such a system of commodifications disproportionately affects the working-class and poor around the world. The conviction underlying these desires is that God's universal work in the world not only bears upon Christian life and doctrine but also upon *all* peoples, cultures, and traditions outside Christianity. The global reality of ever advancing ecological destruction also uniquely positions this project to be dialogical with a host of perspectives.

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<sup>194</sup> I am here referencing the Christian theological stance embodied by Stanley Hauerwas and his many students and admirers. They have famously carved out this communitarian space in Christian theology. For example, see Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Norte Dame, IN: University of Norte Dame Press, 1981) and Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989). In "Part II: 'Reframing Theological Ethics'" in *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas, John Berkman, and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001) there is a good overview of Hauerwas' classic idea that the first task of the church is not to make the world more justice but to make the world the world. This idea stems in large part from Hauerwas' reading of the theologian John Howard Yoder and philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, both of whom as essential interlocutors for Hauerwas. Of course, Hauerwas and those following in his footsteps are not the only ones to espouse these ideas. What is now known as Postliberal Theology has important commonalities with many who associate with Christian communitarianism such as George Lindbeck and Hans Frei. In contrast to Postliberalism, Hauerwas, and the communitarian project are figures like David Tracy and Jeffery Stout. Tracy has, now famously in theological circles, argued for a much more universal Christian witness that finds a home within a pluralistic society and diverse cultures. In contrast to Hauerwas, Tracy argues that "all theology is public discourse," *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), 3. Jeffery Stout takes direct aim at MacIntyre's portrayal of "pluralistic society as too fragmented by fundamental disagreement and conceptual diversity to sustain rational discourse," *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 266. Stout offers no easy solutions to the complications of a pluralistic world but does advocate for pragmatic democratic principles like individual rights and tolerance for helping accomplish civility and communication that he thinks can sustain such "rational discourse" and what he calls a society's commitment to "moral bricolage," 292.

### **The Colonial Project of Domination and Displacement**

Jennings structures *The Christian Imagination* with anecdotes about four different Christian men who played varying roles in the colonialist project during the 16th-19th centuries, including the Portuguese theologian and royal chronicler Gomes Eanes de Azurara, the Spanish Jesuit missionary Jose de Acosta Porres, the English Anglican Bishop William Colenso, and the African (presumably from somewhere east of Nigeria) slave and author Olaudah Equiano. By evaluating these men's experiences, Jennings performs in his intimate retelling of these figures' stories the very argument he sets out to articulate in the book: that the Christian emphasis on community, intimacy, and life together (grounded in the Incarnation) is lost generally in any structure of domination, but particularly in the system of chattel slavery.

Jennings charts a history formed largely during the colonial period, one in which human identity was divorced from land and space and reattached to the deleterious social construct of race. Jennings work is a sweeping, impressive account of how Western Christianity was (and still is) beholden to a "diseased social imagination"<sup>195</sup> that is fraught with colonialist and consumptive impulses that plague and torment Christianity in the face of its promised hope for intimacy, connection, and belonging. In so many ways, Jennings provides evidence for Nikole Hannah Jones' claim that racism is the child of economic profiteering, not the father.<sup>196</sup> Jennings argues that colonization by white Europeans, principally, of African and Native American bodies

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<sup>195</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 6.

<sup>196</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, "It Is Time For Reparations," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 30, 2020. Hannah-Jones says she borrowed this language Ta-Nehisi Coates. I searched for Coates' original quotation but could not find it.

and lands reorganized identity away from space and toward race. Thus, in many ways, colonialism was a program of displacement for economic gain justified by a contrived system of hierarchical racialization.<sup>197</sup>

But how exactly was Christianity implicated in this nation-state organized project? By tracing the lives and writings of these four men, Jennings shows how their stories are deeply embedded, though in vastly different ways, in colonialist and Christian enterprises. Azurara, Porres, Colenso, and Equiano serve for Jennings as instantiations of Christianity's witness in the colonial world, though he certainly ascribes to them (and their circumstances) varying degrees of "success" and "failure" in fulfilling the Christian call for loving and caring Christian identity. Jennings uses these figures to understand how colonialism's shaping of human identity carries effects into modernity and how its "reconfiguration of bodies and space as a theological operation. . . heretical in nature, binds spatial displacement to the formation of an abiding scale of existence."<sup>198</sup> This theological operation constantly placed leading Christian figures at the center of colonialism's dehumanization and community destruction.

During colonialism, one of the most powerful ways of justifying the slave trade was the Christian impulse to attain new converts<sup>199</sup> and the very sinister Christian notion of

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<sup>197</sup> Jennings says, "The ordering of existence from white to black signifies much more than the beginnings of racial formation on a global scale: it is an architecture that signals displacement," *The Christian Imagination*, 24-25. Though he often juxtaposes and focuses his analysis mostly on "white and black" experiences he very importantly includes Native American experiences at key moments (i.e. Andean tribes, 93ff, the Apaches 54ff). Though my project does not often take up the experiences of North American or other American indigenous populations, there is certainly an additional project to be composed considering Berry's work in dialogue with the indigenous populations of the Americas.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 26.

supersessionism which helped colonial powers justify, through church teaching, the categorization of the inferiority of non-whites to whites.<sup>200</sup> In this way, theologically trained clergymen were also able to offer moral cover for colonialism's horrors by aligning whiteness with "the believer" or "the saint" while simultaneously positioning blackness (and other forms of non-whiteness, though to a lesser extent) with "the unbeliever," "the sinner," "the heretic."<sup>201</sup> And as Jennings indicates throughout the book, these moves were interested in supersessionist ideology that prior to colonialism had expressed suspicion about the salvific possibility for Jews and Muslims.<sup>202</sup> Black bodies now offered a new reprobate for white, European Christians who possessed now a new contrast for the superiority of their whiteness and thus pureness.

Jennings makes clear that in the colonialist project of discovery and conquest a process of transformation of land and identity began. He says "while worlds were being transformed, not every world was changed in the same way. Peoples different in geography, in life, in different worlds of European designation—Africa, the Americas, Europe—will lose the earth only to find it again in a strange new way. The deepest theological distortion taking place is that the Earth, the ground, spaces, and places are being removed as living organizers of identity and as facilitators of identity."<sup>203</sup> This clarity with which Jennings articulates this shift during colonialism is a theme he returns to, again and again, throughout his project. Jennings examines colonialism by giving attention to the new Christian theological meanings that emerged from

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 30-38.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 33-35.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 39.

colonial acts, specifically the colonial act of disconnecting bodies from land. White European Christians were the agents of these colonial acts, and for this reason, whiteness and white bodies took on a theological significance.

Jennings notes that this theological disassociation between human identity and the land flies in the face of many indigenous communities colonized by Europeans. Jennings also suggests it contradicts the Christian story which Jennings roots in Israel's story.<sup>204</sup> "What if it seemed strange, odd, and even impossible for you to conceive of your identity apart from a specific order of space— specific land, specific animals, trees, mountains, waters, and arrangements of days and nights?"<sup>205</sup> Following the work of Calvin Luther Martin,<sup>206</sup> Jennings argues that native peoples in Africa and the Americas found a deep spirituality within nature itself and its rhythms. But with colonialism's intrusion into black and brown spaces this spiritual life attached to nature was greatly impaired. Jennings notes that "[it] is a truism to say that humans are all bound to the earth. However, that articulated connection to the earth comes under profound and devastating alteration with the age of discovery and colonialism."<sup>207</sup> As noted above, Jennings leaves no room for ambiguity here: in spite of the widespread knowledge that humans were nothing but creatures, Europeans maintained the desire to "discover" and dominate

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 252-59.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>206</sup> Calvin Luther Martin, *The Way of the Human Being* (New Haven: CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>207</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 40.

through colonizing the “New World.” Jennings uses this to illustrate the white impulse to separate oneself from the very places that enabled one’s very existence.

This logic of domination was not simply an effort to destroy more animistic forms of religious life. In many ways, it appears that the colonialists did not care as significantly about the destruction of the religious and spiritual lives of Africans and Native Americans as much as they cared about the utility of their bodies and lands. The “use-value” of Africans and Native Americans’ bodies and lands and their resources for European economic prosperity lies at the heart of the colonialist mentality.<sup>208</sup> Jennings details this in his account about the Anglican Bishop William Colenso’s missionary work in Southern Africa. Jennings describes Colenso’s mission and how the capitalistic fervor of the British colonial machinery dictated how Colenso performed his missionary duties. Jennings suggests that Colenso’s missionary attempts of the Zulus were attempts to bring native people into compliance with imperial rule through an attempt to “domesticate” them by making them good, Victorian-era, cogs in the ever expanding European Industrial Revolution and its insatiable appetite for natural and human resources.<sup>209</sup> Though Colenso and other missionaries might have possessed genuine evangelistic sensibilities, the colonialist script writer was the imperialistic desire for expansion and conquest. This forced any missionary attempt to fit within the confines of imperialistic proliferation that viewed Christian faith as a necessary component of the process of “civilizing” indigenous peoples in colonized

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 123-32.



lands. This meant that “domesticating” and “Christianizing” Africans and Native Americans was well within the wheelhouse of viable colonialist tactics of domination.

This commodification of African and indigenous bodies and lands is the point at which I want to turn first of all to Berry’s work. In fact, Jennings’ descriptions of how colonialism and the development of race during the colonial period offers a foundational concept that connects with Berry, Walker, and hooks and how each understands the ways social and ecological degradation are inescapably related. The oppressor may not always be aware of the link between social and ecological domination, just like Colenso may not have been aware of the ways his evangelism held severely detrimental consequences for the Zulu and enhanced the spread of empire. The point is, by achieving social domination, ecological domination also advances. The two cannot be separated. One might think this only to be the case during the terrors of the colonial period, but before such a judgment be pronounced, let me turn to Wendell Berry to uncover that even now, in our own time, does this same dynamic of domination rear its ugly head.

### **Different Time, Same Story**

Jennings describes the colonialist “theological distortion” of divorcing not only white identity from its European homelands but also its utter destruction of black, brown, and white identities in their new North American homelands. What Jennings suggests is a theological distortion, Berry calls an ecological one.<sup>210</sup> But it is clear that they also sees such an ecological

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<sup>210</sup> Wendell Berry, “Landsman: Jim Leach in Conversation with Wendell Berry and Tanya Berry,” in *It All Turns on Affection*, 61.

distortion also as social distortion.<sup>211</sup> Said differently, Berry is unapologetic in his incessancy that for adequate care of the earth and its resources there must be focus on the idea of local-ness and people's belonging to the land. Berry says: "If we want to save the land, we must save the people who belong to the land. If we want to save the people, we must save the land the people belong to."<sup>212</sup> Berry is obviously attentive here to local American farming communities that have been decimated by agricultural industrialism. And yet, what Jennings describes seems to be a sort of global precursor to what Berry has witnessed to and written about for 50 years.

Berry is convinced that for any "real work" to take place in saving the land and people it must happen at the local level.<sup>213</sup> This is not a rejection of political assistance or of wider efforts taking place beyond the local that could further the land- and people-saving efforts of parochial interests. However, Berry is very suspicious of the possibility of sincere governmental help for such rural communities given the ways in which politicians are so often co-opted by the very corporations that have destroyed rural America.<sup>214</sup> He details the ways in which local resistance

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>212</sup> Wendell Berry, "Local Economies to Save the Land and the People," in *Our Only World*, 58.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid. I do not think this point can be overstated. Throughout Berry's writings he maintains a sharp critique of both governmental and corporate actors, Cf. "The Tyranny of Charity," in *The Long-Legged House*, 3-11; "Thoughts on Limits in a Prodigal Age," 19-56; "Landsmen," 63. A good summary statement from Berry about his opinions of corporations and government and their use of industrialism is: "We may say with some confidence that the most apparently beneficent products of science and industry should be held in suspicion if they are costly to consumers or bring power to governments or profits to corporations," *Our Only World*, 12. Berry's contempt for corporations is rather simple: he believes they thrive on greed which is inherently disinterested in the well-being of people or the land if it jeopardizes profits in any way. His critique of government is slightly more nuanced in that he distrusts government seemingly because of their willingness to sell out to corporations. He says he is not "against government" but rather against the ways they have become industrialized and destructive, and enable corporations to do the same. Interestingly, he see little difference between capitalistic and socialistic forms of government because he finds them to be equally "industrial systems," "Landsmen," 61.

movements have often proved more effective at stopping big business from polluting local waterways and soil and destroying meaningful work in small communities.<sup>215</sup> The ability for these communities to unite together in a show of solidarity is a matter of neighborliness and even, at times, survival.

How exactly does Jennings' argument about the racialization project of colonialism and the denunciation of agri-industrialism in Berry fit together? To start, I find important links between the ways in which both figures describe these respective cultures (colonialism and agri-industrialism) of domination. As noted in chapter 2, Berry believes that American agricultural land and the communities who built their lives from a fairly harmonious and healthy dependence on it have largely been destroyed by the industrial farming complex. For Berry, agricultural industrialism includes large corporations that are assisted by the state to produce large quantities of goods that are supposed to promote national well-being and even national superiority. Berry sees this culture in the United States developing most importantly in the post-World War II era that found itself in hyper competition with the USSR (and related global communistic threats) that was paired with its ever expanding national appetite for consumption, an emphasis that Alice Walker gives significant attention to as well.<sup>216</sup> As noted earlier, Berry pinpoints Eisenhower's secretary of agriculture Ezra Benson and his demand that America's farmers "get big or get out"

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<sup>215</sup> Wendell Berry, "Leaving the Future Behind: A Letter to a Scientific Friend," in *The Art of Loading Brush*, 75-76.

<sup>216</sup> Alice, Walker, "Nuclear Madness: What You Can Do," in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, 343-47.

as a federal watershed moment that opened the floodgates for the deluge of abusive practices of agri-industrialism that continue to sweep away small agricultural operations.

On a macro-scale, there is a noteworthy connection with Jennings' thought in how he also criticizes governmental and private parties working hand-in-hand to exploit black bodies for economic gain during the Atlantic slave trade. Jennings extends his analysis to theology in a way Berry does not. Jennings' exploration of the economic and legal apparatus of slavery shows the ways in which ecclesial authorities were—in best case scenarios—complicit in and—in worst case scenarios—creators of spiritual justificatory systems that clouded Europeans' minds from having to acknowledge the horrors of colonialism. Let me turn again to Jennings' analysis of slave ships. Jennings emphasizes private actors like slave ship captains to detail the ways in which governmental legislation concerning slave trading allowed for horrific and rogue actions on slave ships that were seen as “beyond” legal restrictions because they took place at sea.<sup>217</sup> Jennings notes the exploitative nature of slave ships did not stop with the abuse of blacks aboard ships but extended often to sailors working on the ships who were forced into slave trading work because of their poverty or indebtedness in their European homelands. And yet, even though sailors were in no way seen as high class within their own societies or by their ship's superiors, their whiteness always allowed for the abuses and humiliations they experienced to be passed down the line by them and onto their black cargo.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 176ff.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-179.

This leads to two important connections between Berry and Jennings. First, Jennings highlights the main thesis of his book when he says: “. . . the geographic displacement established by the colonialist moment meant the body stood in, as it were, for the land. The slave ship reveals the flexibility and global adaptability of race, an adaptability enabled by the market. Everyone who stepped on a slave ship became racialized, white and black.”<sup>219</sup> As laid out in greater detail above, the Atlantic slave trade reconfigured peoples’ identity away from being based on the land and toward the color of one’s skin. Whereas land was used by indigenous populations around the world to make sense of who one was, black peoples’ new bounded location on slave ships, and later on plantations and in domestic work in Europe and the United States resulted in a forced shift away from geographical identifications and toward racial ones. Even if a sailor was of low class in Europe or the United States, on the slave ship they were always superior to black bodies whom they were sanctioned to abuse and control.

This destruction of the land as the identifier of one’s personhood connects to Berry’s documenting of the ways in which small farmers and ranchers, and the communities built around them in the United States, have systematically been reduced and destroyed by the industrialization of agriculture by large corporations, with governmental approval and assistance.

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 180. Jennings makes this same point but in terms of gender as well as racial identity when he discusses plantation life in the South: “the land disappeared as identity-facilitator and reappeared as private property facilitated by the racial landscape and determined by whiteness. In the formative years of the United States, geographic-based identity was turned on its head. Rather than a peoples’ identity coterminous with its landscape and its realities—water, trees, seasons, animals— the land was identified with its white male owner,” 240. In this section he is primarily concerned with literacy being kept from black slaves. The Bible was a central source for learning to read and for becoming a Christian in Protestantism. Protestants were (and still are in many places) concerned with personal Biblical knowledge as fundamental to their faith and even salvation. Thus, by their denial of literacy to blacks during slavery was a dark theological prohibition toward black salvation, *The Christian Imagination*, 236.

My point in drawing this connection is not to say that black slaves stolen from their homelands and forced to work without pay in white spaces is an equivalent abuse to the largely white farming families Berry speaks of who were (and still are) being forced off their land and from their way of life.<sup>220</sup> Rather, my point is to show how both Berry and Jennings criticize the ways in which economic growth for a few people at the top of society is often something governments and private entities work together on to the detriment of those below them on the social hierarchy. This is but one way that working class people from a host of different background (racial, ethnic, gender, educational, etc.) can unite in resistance. It is why hooks' emphasis on the nexus of race, gender, *and* class is powerful in understanding and acting against oppression, something I will reflect on more extensively below.

Jennings and Berry also share disdain for capitalistic mechanisms such as the market and incentives like profit that detach economics from local lands and peoples, and in turn, destroy them. Jennings and Berry both write about the ways in which the abuses of the powerful (governments, corporations, plantation owners, ship captains, etc.) were performed during slavery and presently in the industrialization of agriculture. For both of them, these abusive and destructive tendencies result from the desire for maximizing profit at any cost. In addition to saying captains were always invested in “maximizing profitability”<sup>221</sup> of their slave cargo,

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<sup>220</sup> A very important aside is that though Berry often has white agricultural workers in mind as he writes, the exodus of small farmers and ranchers being pushed off their lands correlates with the general trend that has witnessed an even greater decrease in the number of black-run and black-owned farms, Hiroko Tabuchi and Nadja Popovich, “Two Biden Priorities, Climate and Equality, Meet on Black-Owned Farms,” *New York Times*, Feb 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/31/climate/black-farmers-discrimination-agriculture.html>.

<sup>221</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 176.

Jennings additionally notes how slaves were kept illiterate in the American South to assume continued forced servitude and economic well-being for plantation owners.<sup>222</sup> In reaffirming this insidious economic dynamic to slavery Jennings pointedly states: “The lens through which the masters looked at the slaves and taught slaveholding society to look at black flesh was one of use-value. How useful is black flesh? Was the black body docile, friendly, loving, industrious, and positive? Or was it malicious, rebellious, deceitful, lazy, and haughty? I am careful to say ‘body’ and not ‘person,’ because black flesh was first a commodity.”<sup>223</sup> Jennings here pulls no punches in describing how slaves were evaluated and given worth principally in terms of their economic benefit to the master.

Again, to put Jennings’ description of the slave trade in appropriate conversation and comparison with Berry’s vision demands the special note that the horrors of slavery are not to be seen as equivalents to the kinds of abuses Berry describes among white, rural, agricultural communities. (In fact, this very idea serves as the basis of my critique of Berry in the next chapter.) And yet, I do believe there is a striking relationship between the abuses of Africans on account of the colonialist project and the reason for the abuse of local farming communities and the land, at present in the United States. Berry, like Jennings, is clear that monetary gains for a few power-brokers at the top, whether they are ship captains, plantation owners, corporate executives, shareholders, or the like, is the cause of tremendous abuses of both people and land. Berry makes this very claim when he says that modern shifts in American agriculture are the

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 242.

result of industrialism which is in service of capitalism.<sup>224</sup> Berry's critique of "capitalism" has grown over the years.<sup>225</sup> This previous reference is from his early *The Unsettling of America*. And though, obviously, Berry is privy early in his career to the ways in which capitalism, in the form of agricultural industrialism, wreaks havoc on rural communities, his disdain of the abuses of capitalism and the free market is much more consistent and forceful in his later writings.<sup>226</sup>

Berry rejects capitalism in that he rejects waste and excess and the consolidation of wealth for a select few elites. He is fully aware of the need for economic well-being but he thinks

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<sup>224</sup> Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 9ff; "Living With The Land," 392. In "Living With The Land" Berry also critiques industrial communism which he believes does not have significantly different interests than industrial capitalism.

<sup>225</sup> Berry employs his critique of "capitalism" frequently in his writing. The term is undoubtedly loaded and not always clear, even in his writing and, thus, my discussion of his critique of capitalism might also seem insufficient. But having read many of Berry's critiques of capitalism, let me venture to describe what I think he is criticizing when he speaks disparagingly about it. If Berry took "capitalism" to simply mean the private ownership of property and the means of production, he seemingly would critique capitalism less in his writing. Even if it seemed that a capitalistic society like our own was one in which, like Milton Friedman claimed, moved from economic freedom to political freedom (*Capitalism and Freedom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), again, Berry might soften his criticism. But when Berry critiques capitalism, what he is rejecting are the ways that the United States' economic system so often allows corporations and politicians to "plunder" places and communities. In one instance, he even says the U.S. economy and "free market" is "less and less distinguishable from warfare" given its enormous destructive ability, "The Failure of War," in *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2003), 27. Berry has watched corporations in Kentucky line the pockets of their executives and shareholders for decades while they destroy lands (i.e. through the coal industry's mountaintop and strip mining practices) and human communities living off those lands. And because of this, he sees little to be praised in the "developments" in capitalistic economies that do not first of all seek to curb wealth accumulation for society's elites and healthy environments for all who live on earth, "Going to Work," in *Citizenship Papers*, 36. He also believes that American capitalism, in its present stage, has led to a consumerism that is anything but sustainable. Norman Wirzba reads Berry well when he says "global capitalism" turned us "all ultimately [into] shoppers," "Placing the Soul: An Agrarian Philosophical Principle," in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 84. For a thoughtful exploration of late-stage capitalism, that Berry is so critical of, and the extreme excesses it affords to elites, see David Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury: Economic Excess in a Consumer Age* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 145-174.

<sup>226</sup> Cf. Wendell Berry, "A Forest Conversation," in *Our Only World: Ten Essays*, 46-7; "Caught in the Middle," in *Our Only World*, 92ff; "Our Desert Country," in *Our Only World*, 106-07, 112, 114, 125; *The Art of Loading Brush*, 36ff.



people can achieve such well-being while also caring for ecological well-being. The beauty of uniting economic and ecological ethics of care rests at the heart of Berry's notion of agrarianism. Agrarianism, as Berry conceives of it, is a culture of care formed by a standard of excellence which stems partly from its focus on livability (economics) and partly from its focus on sustainability (ecology).<sup>227</sup> In this culture one places a necessary emphasis on patience to do the work right. One must attend to the work and the land because only when one attends closely to the intricacies of these can one achieve the greatest possible ecological sustainability and care. Berry's agrarian focus on patience and attentiveness leads to his rebuff of the agri-industrial culture founded on efficiency and productivity.

Berry largely believes that industrialism was viewed by many as an effort to make farming more efficient and productive and though this has been the case, Berry argues the agri-business emphasis on efficiency and productivity has led to greater inequity and destruction of the land and people's lives.<sup>228</sup> Berry points to the end of the Civil War as a period in which efficiency and productivity kicked into gear in the United States as an effort to center the country ever more on the global stage as a major economic power. He says the geo-political and economic environment following World War II was the point at which the realization of this goal kicked into its highest gear.<sup>229</sup> But what drives this desire for efficiency and productivity is economic growth and superiority, not greater care of nature and human life.

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<sup>227</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 38.

<sup>228</sup> This comparison and conflict between efficiency and equality is the central thesis of Arthur Okun's classic *Efficiency and Equality: The Big Tradeoff* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1975).

<sup>229</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 23.

Berry opposes this wealth and power accumulation in the hands of the corporate and political elites not simply because he thinks they are inherently evil or selfish, though he does question the morality of cultures of surplus, waste, consumerism, greed, and power.<sup>230</sup> He also does not simply blame these elites by suggesting they are too dull or poorly trained. To the contrary, he suggests they might be *too* well-trained, *too* schooled, at least in the formal sense.<sup>231</sup> Berry's critique of a system in which executives, economists, politicians, and academics thrive off of their knowledge and societal power results primarily from, as it appears to me, their *distance* from the actual worlds they "advise" and "control." Using the example of the Appalachian coal industry Berry says: "it hardly needs to be said that in the Appalachian coal fields the benefits of the coal economy to a rich and distant few has never adequately been measured against its impoverishment of the local people and their land."<sup>232</sup> He certainly is not sparing of harsh words for those who are rich but he seems more fixated on the immorality of the wealthy and powerful not arbitrarily because of their wealth and power but rather because of the ways wealth and power distance them from the lands and peoples they control.<sup>233</sup> As those in power become more remote from the work, the land, and people who perform the work and live on the land, their inability to know intimately how to correct destructive practices diminishes all the more. Thus, the ideas of smallness and localness both become all the more important for

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 9; *Our Only World*, 14.

<sup>231</sup> Berry, *Our Only World*, 48; 65.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 98.

Berry who believes that an intimacy with the work, land, and people is necessary for the health and well-being of all things.

This turn to universal well-being is one of the most profound ways Berry's project (as well as Jennings') connects to the projects of Walker and hooks. But as I am structuring this chapter, my immediate concern is not the more hopeful visions cast by Walker and hooks as much as I feel the need to first describe the ways cultures of domination prevent notions of universal care from transpiring. Whereas Jennings exposes how theology was in service of the Atlantic slave trade's culture of domination, Berry lays bare its continuation in the present through agricultural industrialism. It is time now that I turn to Walker and hooks and their unmasking of how racial and ecological abuses coalesce in the womanist tradition.

### **The Intersectionality of Domination**

For the womanist tradition the methodological paradigm of race-class-gender serves as the foundation for all evaluations and attempts at dismantling systems of oppression.<sup>234</sup> Walker and hooks (as well as Melanie Harris) draw no hard lines between their deconstructive efforts. This shows that these figures think about the world and their writings with a sort of universalism (or as I am calling it, an eco-cosmopolitanism) in mind that concerns itself with a host of oppressive systems. Walker and hooks work to demonstrate how oppression operates similarly across its different instantiations around the world and throughout history. And as Melanie Harris claims, womanist intersectional analysis engages in understanding "the complex ways that

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<sup>234</sup> Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 42ff.

racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism operate in situations of environmental injustice.”<sup>235</sup>

The reality of the multidimensional deconstructive project of womanism arises from the unique ways in which women of color, and particularly black women, in the United States have borne the brunt of a host of systemic abuses at the hands of varying structures of domination.<sup>236</sup> In this way, as Harris has shown, ecowomanism looks to the interplay between social and ecological justice, never shying away from how they inform each other and keep alive hopes of universal well-being for all things on Earth.<sup>237</sup>

It is no surprise that Harris relies so heavily on the life and work of Alice Walker. Walker has spent the better part of her life struggling against cultures of domination and the multitude of ways in which they destroy the possibility of life for so many. Walker highlights the ways in which a “logic of domination” can be traced through much ecclesial, political, sexual, agricultural, and racial history.<sup>238</sup> These varying forms are not independent from each other but rather interlock to form a dynamic structure of oppression that is inherently difficult to navigate and nearly impossible to untangle. Given this multiform system of domination, as Harris suggests, it follows that womanism uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines resources

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<sup>235</sup> Melanie Harris, “An Ecowomanist Vision,” in *Ethics That Matters: African, Caribbean, and African American Sources*, eds. James Logan and Marcia Y Riggs (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 191-192.

<sup>236</sup> This history for black women Walker refers to when she details the abuses of black women in America and refers to them by what she says is their folkloric title that so aptly describes their status in society: “the mule of the world.” Cf. Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, 237.

<sup>237</sup> Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 17-20.

<sup>238</sup> Walker, “Introduction,” in *We Are the Ones We have Been Waiting For*, 1-14.

and methods from many different fields.<sup>239</sup> These varying forms of domination and how they affect the well-being of women of color showcases the vital significance of not siphoning off sexism or racism or classism from each other, as if any one of these oppressive apparatuses is not constantly interested in the preservation of the others.

In *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, bell hooks puts on display this very emphasis on intersectionality that Walker and Harris praise. Throughout the book hooks calls for the dismantling of “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” which serves any effort to “colonize the minds” of all people of color, with black women placed squarely in the crosshairs.<sup>240</sup> Throughout hooks’ writing she condemned these cultures of oppression and even at times adds “imperialist” to the list, seemingly in an effort to note the ways in which the world’s most powerful nations degrade and abuse poorer nations and their resources in spite of a supposed end to the colonialist era.<sup>241</sup> Hooks’ writing is a good example of the ways oppressive systems intersect with each other to promote a narrative that keeps power and privilege reserved for those who already have it and works to continually exclude those who do not. Given the severity of how the deck is stacked against black women on account of their race, class, and gender, hooks devoted herself to deconstructing these dominator cultures.

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<sup>239</sup> Melanie Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>240</sup> hooks, “Introduction: Healing Darkness,” in *Sisters of the Yam*, 1.

<sup>241</sup> hooks, “Kentucky Is My Fate,” in *Belonging*, 20

Hooks directly connects the oppression of white supremacy with the degradation of blackness, not only in the minds of whites but also in the minds of black people.<sup>242</sup> Core to this idea for hooks is the conviction that the erotic and sensual parts of the self must be nurtured. This nurturing leads to greater embodiment which allows for enjoyment of the world.<sup>243</sup> When a black woman finds union with the natural world and one's natural inclinations, hooks suggests she is better prepared to love herself and thus transform and heal her life as well as the life around her.<sup>244</sup> But as hooks reveals, the love of oneself and the love of the world around oneself is a sort of chicken-and-egg scenario. Rather than one necessarily preceding the other, hooks claims that they mutually affirm and uphold each other. For one to love the self properly, one must also love the world.<sup>245</sup> For hooks, this sort of self love and love of the world is readily of interest to black women given the ways in which they carry such extensive trauma regarding the host of abuses they have endured for centuries.

These long endured abuses, Walker suggests, root themselves deeply not only in her African and American heritages but also her Christian background. In Walker's essay "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven" Walker explores her Christian upbringing and the ways in which it drove her toward what she calls the "pagan self."<sup>246</sup> The diverse forms of domination

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<sup>242</sup> hooks, "Dreaming Ourselves Dark and Deep: Black Beauty," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 61ff.

<sup>243</sup> hooks, "Moved by Passion: Eros and Responsibility," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 87.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>245</sup> hooks, "Walking in the Spirit," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 146-47.

<sup>246</sup> Alice Walker, "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is," in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, 3-27.

noted above come into view in this essay in which she details her disillusionment with Christianity. She tells of the Methodist church she grew up in and how her mother cleaned and cared for it, replacing things when they were worn out and decorating it with flowers from her own garden,<sup>247</sup> while her father and brothers took care of most of the yard work around the building.<sup>248</sup> And though these were moments in which young Walker's respect and love grew for her parents, her mother especially as Walker often worked alongside her, Walker recognized from early on the incongruities in how men and women were treated in church. In spite of her mother's devotion to the well-being of the church, she was never allowed to speak in it.<sup>249</sup> Never far from Walker's mind is this strict gendered hierarchy of her ecclesial upbringing and her absolute disdain for it.

Such sexism naturally formed her—and her Christian community's—understanding of God. But God was not just seen as a man but as an old, bearded, white man who was supposed to have authored the whole Bible, which as far as Walker could tell was filled with awful, non-divine acts that were attributed to the freewill of this deity. The calls for obedience and repentance to a God who commanded the Israelites to murder the Canaanites and Midianites and gave these conquered peoples' young women as war spoils to the men of Israel were repulsive

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<sup>247</sup> Walker details in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" how her mother not only decorated the church but also their family home. In the ways that Walker's mother cared for her garden and used its beauty to beautify the places she cared for most, Walker recognizes her mother as an artist and creator, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 241. It also seems to me that Walker's description of her mother's care for the family church echoes Walker's description of Celie in *The Color Purple*, 43.

<sup>248</sup> Walker, "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is," in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, 12.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

stories to Walker who could not possibly believe such a God was worth serving.<sup>250</sup> In a moving quotation these varying systems of oppression reveal themselves:

We know now with what absolute heartlessness the male leaders of the orthodox Christian Church—not unlike those of orthodox Judaism and Islam—stamped out, generally after robbing them of their land and enslaving them, pagans and heathens, our ancestors and theirs, around the globe: a campaign of such unspeakable cruelty, which has lasted for so long, and which still continues, that few have had the heart to encounter it in art, politics, literature, or consciousness until the present era. If our awareness is beginning to change, it is thanks in large part to feminism and feminist scholarship, and to a resurgent belief in the sacredness of the feminine, which was deliberately erased, demonized, and disparaged in all major religions. But thanks also to indigenous peoples who, though a mere remnant of their former selves, before the invasions of conquerors professing Christianity, have risen up to speak in defense of the ancient Goddess/God of all pagans and heathens, Mother Earth.<sup>251</sup>

All of this for Walker pushed her toward what she calls her “pagan self.” She says this self allowed her to form the belief that if women were listened to throughout history, humanity might have better cared for the Earth and all her creatures.<sup>252</sup> For Walker the church she knew as a child served as a microcosm for the structures of domination that held women of color bound to fear and the inherited sense of their gender and racial inferiority. She is explicit that Jesus remains a

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 13, 21ff. In “I Call that Man Religious,” in *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, Walker notes that she rejects any religious teaching and the ideological system upholding it that calls for the submission of women to men and the inferiority of certain types of peoples to others, 117. This latter point seems to stem from her abhorrence of the Indian caste system’s designation of *Dalits* as inferior to all others in Indian society, a critique she holds against Hinduism though the relationship between the cultural and religious motivations in India’s caste system is complex.

<sup>251</sup> Walker, “The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven Is,” in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, 20-21.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 14. Interestingly, Walker does not negate the possibility that such holistic and caring expressions of such a deity are incompatible with certain tenets of Christianity. She even admits the deep love and admiration she still maintains for the representations of Jesus throughout the Gospels, 18, 25. In “This Was Not an Area of Large Plantations,” in *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, Walker describes how she does not identify as a Christian or even a “follower” of Christ but rather attempts to “embody” who he was, as an “enlightened” being worthy of imitation, 94.



very beautiful and influential figure in her mind though she places his significance for her alongside other equally meaningful spiritual figures such as the Buddha.<sup>253</sup> A recurring feature in Walker's praise of certain religious, spiritual, and even political leaders is their commitment to humanity *and* the Earth.<sup>254</sup> This, again, affirms Harris' claims that womanism concerns itself with maintaining the unity of care for people and the Earth and a condemnation of the host of oppressive systems that dominate them.

For hooks, Christianity receives a slightly gentler characterization. She frequently quotes from the Bible<sup>255</sup> and even speaks of her positive engagements with Christian mysticism and prayer.<sup>256</sup> But she, like Walker, finds sexism and racism firmly rooted in church life which made it difficult to stay grounded in the fundamentalist expressions of Christianity from her childhood.<sup>257</sup> Hooks articulates clearly how fundamentalist Christianity rejects affirming the sensual, embodied nature of human life. It seems to be no coincidence that Jennings too shares criticism of Christianity's rejection of eroticism, sensuality, touching, and being.<sup>258</sup> For Jennings, and even more so hooks and Walker, negative Christian views of embodied human experience

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<sup>253</sup> Walker, "I Call That Man Religious," in *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting for*, 118.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 111ff.

<sup>255</sup> Cf. hooks, "Living to Love," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 97; "Seeking After the Truth," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 11; "Walking in the Spirit," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 146.

<sup>256</sup> hooks, "Introduction: Healing Darkness," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 2; "An Interview with bell hooks," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 169.

<sup>257</sup> hooks, "Seeking after the Truth," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 20; "An Interview with bell hooks," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 169-172.

<sup>258</sup> Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 11. For a very intimate consideration of sensuality see Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

results in an inability to love the world, each other, and oneself. For my purposes here, it is also a significant cause of the perceived detached notion of human life from the earth, or at least the ignorance of the interrelatedness, that is never far from projects of ecological degradation.

Christianity, by no means, serves as the only location for oppression in Walker and hooks' minds. It is hard to pick up a work by Walker and not find at least some opprobrium of global nuclear proliferation and more specifically the nuclear arms race between the United States and the USSR. In fact, her evaluation of the Cold War and its destructive bifurcation of the world along ideological lines of capitalists and communists, supposed free societies and repressive ones,<sup>259</sup> cannot be seen as anything but an affirmation of her belief that empowered women would have settled the world's problems in a much different manner than the men who ruled it. Throughout Walker's corpus she bemoans how the "national interests" of the United States serve to promote the interests of America and its global allies with utter disregard for the well-being of other countries that are not so cosy with the United States. Furthermore, she is privy to the ways in which this "promotion of American interests" is typically only in service of American elites, as I will explore momentarily. In these ways, much of what Walker writes about comes from her very global, universal focus on human well-being rather than some sort of provincialism. Again, this connects with Jennings' desire to embrace and commune. Though Jennings notes the complex nature of colonialism's destructive force, what this force prevented in every situation was authentic community and relationships between people and the land.

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<sup>259</sup> Walker, "Nuclear Madness," in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 343-46; "Good Morning, Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Social Protest," in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 171-77.

In “Everything Is a Human Being” Walker describes how American political action and policy around the world operates with the same sort of impunity as do those who have perpetrated sexual and racial violence throughout American history.<sup>260</sup> Not far from Walker’s mind in these discussions of the Cold War (and more broadly American exceptionalism) is the reality of the ways in which violent conflicts and notions of national superiority are detrimental to America’s “enemy” but also to the land. Walker explores the idea in her essay detailing a trip she took to Ghana in the late 1990s to attend a conference on female genital mutilation (FGM) in West African countries. The subtitle of the essay “If the Women of the World Were Comfortable, This Would Be a Comfortable World” came from a comment a Ghanaian friend made to her while they were talking about the tribal scarring he received unwillingly in his childhood. The phrase struck Walker for its connections to her conviction about the ways in which the Earth and women shared so many abuses and experiences of trauma. Walker says this results from self-hatred and a belief in the efficacy of violence. Too often when a stronger party (physically, societally, etc.) experiences anger or shame it takes out such feelings on those who are “weaker”: women, children, the poor.<sup>261</sup> For Walker and Harris, these abuses of women, children, and the poor

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<sup>260</sup> Alice Walker, “Everything Is a Human Being,” in *Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1973-1987* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1989), 139-53. Dorceta E. Taylor has in recent years written a very impressive and sweeping work, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), exploring—among many themes—how race in America has impacted environmental movements throughout its history.

<sup>261</sup> Walker, “You Have All Seen: If the Women of the World Were Comfortable, This Would Be a Comfortable World,” in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, 42. In Walker’s “I Call that Man Religious,” in *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For* Walker repeats this line of thinking by quoting a Hopi saying: “When the grandmothers speak (and are listened to) the world will begin to heal,” 123.

bleeds over into abuses of the earth.<sup>262</sup> This dominating (almost inevitably masculine) figure is the very image Jennings depicts when he speaks of the culture of domination on slave ships and plantations that valued individuality and commercialism regardless of their destructive nature toward humans and the land.<sup>263</sup> The through line here is that if one party can dominate the other through strength or knowledge or willpower, even though such domination is inevitably harmful, so be it.

What I am describing here is the ways in which the womanist tradition has internalized what Jennings articulates so vividly. Womanism recognizes that harming people, particularly those who are least likely to respond to violent acts with violence, regularly results in harming the Earth. As Jennings suggest, the same motivation to enslave Africans drove colonialists to “conquer” lands. Womanism makes clear that even in our contemporary period this same dynamic is at play when power enables privileged classes of people to decimate the lives of less powerful peoples and the land through, among other things, overconsumption. If one acts with indifference in regard to care for the Earth it is likely one will act with indifference the care of people, especially if those people are not within one’s immediate circle.

In contrast to Walker’s interests in geopolitics, hooks (like Berry) turns her social and political gaze toward more domestic concerns. Hooks attends closely to the lived experiences of local people, primarily in her home state of Kentucky though at times (as in her critique of capitalism—considered below) she broadens this out. For hooks, belonging to a place, to specific

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<sup>262</sup> Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 81-86.

<sup>263</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 172-73.

people, to a certain time, to one's own natural environment give life meaning. As such, it makes sense that for so many years of her life her writing has revolved around understanding the mechanisms that prohibit the notion of belonging from serving as the central orienting feature of one's life. The opening chapter of *Belonging* explores the meaning of home and rootedness to a place. She comments at length about her upbringing in Kentucky and how it was shaped by the contrast between "the hills" and "the city." She says that what mattered most was the "line" separating these two places, and this line was marked as "nature."<sup>264</sup> Though hooks acknowledges that racism extended even into the hills she interestingly admits that distinctions were less prevalent between whites and blacks in rural Kentucky and that even the racism she experienced seemed rather mild to what she encountered in the city.<sup>265</sup> Though her view of the divide between urban and rural life is nuanced, these experiences from her childhood ground her identity firmly in nature and many of her reflections on the notion of belonging ground themselves in making connections with animals, plants, and soil.

For hooks the ability for the black community to belong to a place and to find meaning there has been harmed by the dominator cultures of imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. According to hooks, dominator cultures consist of a series of hegemonic systems that wrest control of black people's lives away from them by setting up barricades which diminish black self-determinacy and well-being. These epithets, noted above, find a home

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<sup>264</sup> bell hooks, "Kentucky Is My Fate," in *Belonging*, 7.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 8. The importance of this idea and the love she expressed, especially later in her career, for rural Kentucky are points interpreters often obscure in their depictions of her, Clay Risen, "bell hooks, Pathbreaker Black Feminist, Dies at 69," in *The New York Times*, December 15, 2021.

together, according to hooks, because of their equal commitments to the dehumanization of people and the destruction of life, more generally.<sup>266</sup> She specifically connects race and class dynamics with rural and urban life. For her, even as a black woman, rural life has always allowed for unique freedom from white dominator culture that urban life never afforded her.<sup>267</sup>

In addition to how hooks says the countryside “protected her from racism” she also suggests a much deeper meaning for her love of rural life. Many times in *Belonging* hooks praises the sense of groundedness she experienced in her native Kentucky rural community. Its familiarity never left her and as the years passed, resulting in a host of different living situations and locations, she consistently reminisced on the soil of those Kentucky hills, the accents that distinguished its people, and the ethic of care-of-neighbor its inhabitants possessed— which she makes a point to note was far beyond any rule of law imposed by elites from far off places.<sup>268</sup> However, she contrasts this sense of grounding and belonging and the life-giving aspects of this heritage with the sort of intractable nature of rural Kentuckians who very openly reject change.<sup>269</sup> Hooks seems to attribute this dynamic between groundedness and inflexibility, in part, to a desire for self sufficiency and determinacy that she frequently notes in her descriptions of rural Kentuckians throughout *Belonging*.

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<sup>266</sup> hooks, “Reclamation and Reconciliation,” in *Belonging*, 49. It is noteworthy that in this essay hooks turns immediately from discussing the dehumanization of dominator culture to considering the substantial loss of farm land ownership (and, land ownership generally) by blacks during the 20th century, 50.

<sup>267</sup> hooks, “Kentucky Is My Fate,” in *Belonging*, 8, 11.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 11ff. She contrasts this with her experiences at Stanford as an undergraduate when she felt excruciatingly lonely and disconnected from any sense of home and the Earth, 13.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

The parallels here with Berry are striking. One cannot miss the similarities in hooks and Berry's descriptions of hospitality and recalcitrance among rural Kentuckians. Yet, what strikes me most in reading hooks, Berry, and even Jennings together are the ways each take aim at distant politicians, business executives, academics, and clergy. But what exactly are they criticizing these elites for? As I noted above in my reflections on Berry, it appears to me that what is at the center of hooks and Jennings challenges to power and those who hold it is the distant it creates between the powerful and those the lead (or rule). Even for Walker she describes a "separation" which she believes leads to an illusion or an inability to perceive and act properly toward all things. This separation and its ensuing state of illusion, accordingly to Walker, is the principle that allows for the powerful to detrimental determine the futures of less powerful people and the Earth.<sup>270</sup>

For hooks, Walker, Berry, and Jennings there is mutual critique of the powerful determining how people should live and how the land should be treated when they know, and experience, so little about them. As I noted earlier, Berry is very critical of these "decision-makers" not because he rejects participation in wider society or regulations to protect people and land. Rather, he believes these power-brokers do not possess adequate knowledge of local concerns and well-being and thus often make ill-informed decisions that adversely affect the well-being of people and land at the local level. In other words, Berry is not rejecting participating in society or adhering to standards to regulate what participation looks like. To the contrary, he is criticizing "distant" decision-makers from *their lack of participating* in the

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<sup>270</sup> Walker, "Introduction," in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 5.

communities and on the land whose futures and well-beings they are governing. In a way, this is exactly Jennings' point too. Jennings is clear in his desire for cosmopolitanism, for embrace and camaraderie across societal and cultural divides. But that was not the interest of colonial powers who took bodies by force and reconfigured and extracted resources from far off lands, all the while showing no interest in knowing anything of these people or land's indigenous and local character.

When Walker turns to more directly address the destruction of the natural environment and her inhabitants it is striking that Walker addresses the adverse effects of global capitalism for universal well-being. Walker details the sinister inner mechanisms of destruction in current expressions of global capitalism when she states:

[Capitalism] cannot possibly sustain itself without gobbling up the world. That is what we see all around us. Women and children in Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, Haiti, Mexico, China and elsewhere in the world forced into starvation and slavery as they turn out the tennis balls and cheap sneakers for the affluent. . . The lone wolf [capitalism] is the hungry ghost (in Buddhist thought) that can never get enough; whose mouth may be small but whose stomach is boundless. We cannot afford him. Even those seduced by the notion of becoming rich by playing the stock market will learn they are investing their lives in a system that feeds the vampire: the lone wolf of Profit by Any Means Necessary.<sup>271</sup>

Clearly for Walker, the destructive nature of capitalism is not one that simply ransacks the lives of the world's most vulnerable humans but extends also to land: "Ancient trees leveled to make more housing while housing that could be saved and reused is torn down and communities heartlessly displaced. Mining the earth for every salable substance she has. Fouling the waters

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<sup>271</sup> Walker, "All Praise to the Pause," *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 77-78.



that is her blood. Murdering innocents, whether people, animals or plants, in pursuit of oil.”<sup>272</sup>

This echoes Berry’s incessant observation that the industrial, capitalistic goals of efficiency and productivity lead to a singular focus: profit at whatever cost. This makes the corporate—and often the political and academic—elite at extreme odds with any sort of sensible environmental ethic of care. Walker speaks emphatically a word that rests at the center of the convictions of both Jennings and Berry: we cannot afford the limitless appetite of the capitalistic wolf who would just as quickly stamp out the lives of vulnerable peoples as consume all the world’s resources for profit.

Hooks also powerfully echoes these sentiments from Walker. In the lengthy quotation below hooks brings together a host of rejections of varying cultures of domination. Though the interplay between these cultures displays the intersectionality of womanism, I specifically want to focus on the economic emphases of her comments for they foretell the ecological ramifications of such cultural values held by those who oppress and dominate. She says:

In dominator culture the will to power stands as a direct challenge to the cultural belief that humans survive soulfully because of a will to meaning. When the will to meaning is paramount, human life retains dignity. The capacity of humans to create community, to make connections, to love, is nurtured and sustained. For those [of] us who believe in divine spirit, in higher powers, the issue of mountaintop removal [in the coal industry] and all practices wherein the earth is

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 77. Walker’s words on mining and “fouling waters” are prophetic for our own time but not only for the extraction of oil but also for the manufacturing of batteries that are suppose to give us “clean” and “environmentally friendly” transportation options in electric vehicles. Cobalt and lithium are essential components for lithium-ion batteries in many electric cars but given that “metal mining generates more toxic waste than any other industry in the United States” means we have a long way to go before we celebrate the environmentally friendly-nature of something like the EV movement, Michael Holtz, “Idaho Is Sitting on One of the Most Important Elements on Earth: The Dark Side of the Clean-Energy Revolution Is Reviving Old Mines—and Old Questions—in a Remote Forest,” in *The Atlantic*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2022/01/cobalt-clean-energy-climate-change-idaho/621321/>.

plundered and the environment wasted is as much a spiritual issue as it is a political issue. In order to justify dehumanizing coal mining practices, the imperial capitalist world of big business has to make it appear that the planet and human life that is under attack has no value. It is not difficult to see the link between the engrained stereotypes about mountain folk (hillbillies), especially those who are poor, representations that suggest that these folk are depraved, ignorant, evil, licentious, and the prevailing belief that there is nothing worth honoring, worth preserving about their habits of being, their culture.<sup>273</sup>

Hooks' notion of a "will to meaning" as opposed to a "will to power" brings to mind Berry's comments about the value of "meaningful" work rather than the reductionist thinking of politicians and economists who speak as if "having a job" is what matters most. Certainly people invested in keeping the capitalistic system of the United States afloat work to maintain focus on jobs given this keeps the mechanisms working that firmly root these elites on society's summit. But Berry critiques governmental metrics of economic health based on jobs.<sup>274</sup> He points out that "having a job" is not sufficient in understanding whether people are healthy, whether the economy is healthy, whether the natural environment is healthy. Think back to Chapter 2 when Berry specifically went after the "good" jobs reports celebrated by economist Martin Feldstein. Berry suggested such economic metrics as unemployment are misleading and so "narrowly focused" that they distract armchair observers from *actually* knowing much about human and ecological health.<sup>275</sup> I cannot help but remember Walker making a similar claim when, defending farmers, she says: "[We should not be] willing to stand quietly by as farmers are destroyed by

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<sup>273</sup> hooks, "Moved by Mountains," in *Belonging*, 29-30.

<sup>274</sup> Berry, "Thoughts of Limits in a Prodigal Age," in *Art of Loading Brush*, 19-21.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

people who have never farmed, and plants are engineered to self-destruct.”<sup>276</sup> These faux notions and measurements of “economic health” too often prohibit any real possibility for policies crafted by economists, lawyers, regulators, and the like to positively affect those who work the land and the land itself.<sup>277</sup> Without immediate knowledge of local peoples and places, the ability for well-being of both the land and people becomes a near impossibility.

What exactly then constitutes well-being? To adequately answer this question I must carefully examine what constructive suggestions each figure gives following the heavily deconstructive elements of their writings. But before I do so, I would like to weave together, as a sort of summary, the threads of connection I find in these thinkers’ conceptions of dominations. For Walker, hooks, Berry, Jennings, and Harris the emphasis placed on ecological and social care rises to the surface of each of their conceptions of justice and right living. For them, the cultures of domination (as noted above) reduce social and ecological well-being to rubble. For example, hooks says that the “human spirit is violated, diminished when humans violate and destroy the natural environment” through procedures like coal extraction via mountaintop removal. In this

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<sup>276</sup> Walker, “Introduction,” in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 3.

<sup>277</sup> Berry says that “the fact is that if the land and the people are ever to be saved, they will be saved by local people enacting together a proper respect for themselves and their places. They can do this only in ways that are neighborly, convivial, and generous, by also, and in the smallest details, practical and economic,” “Local Economies to Save the Land and the People,” in *Our Only World*, 63. One telling suggestion Berry gives for how this might be accomplished, and which speaks to the point I am trying to make is above, is: “The people who do the actual work and take the most immediate risks in the land economies have almost always been the last to be considered and the poorest paid. And so we must do everything we can to develop associations of land owners and land users for the purpose of land use planning, but also of supply management and the maintenance of just prices. The nearest, most familiar model here in Kentucky is the federal tobacco program, which gave the same economic support to the small as to the large producers,” *Ibid.*, 65-66. Berry’s expression that the people who actually work(ed) the land are the most at risk *and* the most poorly considered speaks inclusively to not only contemporary agricultural workers but also the millions of black and indigenous peoples forced into slavery and indentured servitude throughout colonial history and Jim Crow (specifically in the United States).

idea one can see hooks' connection between the social and ecological.<sup>278</sup> For Berry, the unity between ecological and social well-being is at the forefront of his mind, as explored above, when he criticizes not just the ecological destructiveness of industrial farming practices but also the ways in which large, national (even multinational) corporations with governmental blessings—through their embodiment of Benson's "get big or get out" mentality—decimate small farmers and the communities that support them.

Hooks and Walker share Berry's criticism of "big business" and its indiscriminate ability to wreck the lives of people and land.<sup>279</sup> Hooks, for one, believes that her black ancestors had "dignity of labor" in their agrarian past in spite of the abuses perpetrated against them by white landowners. What gave them dignity, according to hooks, was the ground itself and the construction of a culture that rooted its existence, its meaning in the earth.<sup>280</sup> She says: "Collective healing for black folks in the diaspora can only happen as we remember in ways that move to action our agrarian past. . . . Healing begins with self-determination in relation to the body that is the earth and the body that is our flesh."<sup>281</sup> Walker minces no words when she says contemporary corporate practices are "enslavement on a global scale" and that corporations act like vampires in their inability to die through the ever-present craving for "the earth's and the people's lifeblood."<sup>282</sup> As shown above, Walker's description of capitalism comes with noting

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<sup>278</sup> hooks, "Moved by Mountains," in *Belonging*, 26-7.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-30

<sup>280</sup> hooks, "Reclamation and Reconciliation," in *Belonging*, 46.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>282</sup> Walker, "I Call that Man Religious," in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 116.

how often the capitalistic pursuit of wealth occurs “by any means necessary” which inevitably carries tremendous social and ecological cost.<sup>283</sup> According to Walker, such a pursuit of financial well-being and gain does not actually result in greater universal well-being, for in our “dominating and stealing” from the earth we are in fact dominating and stealing from ourselves.<sup>284</sup> This turn to the universal and how it relates to the interrelatedness of human and planetary (animals, plants, soil, etc.) well-being is a central feature I am trying to draw out in my evaluation of Walker and hooks in this section. But given I started with Jennings and Berry, it is my goal to show how each of these figures is exceedingly attentive to the ways that the desire for power and monetary gain separated the colonialists as well as contemporary politicians, business leaders, and other powerful individuals from local people’s lives and their homelands.

### Conclusion

How might we conclude this evaluative comparison between Jennings, Berry, Walker, and hooks? If we take a cue from Jennings, I believe it is safe to conclude that when Christianity forgot (or misplaced) its sense of belonging to the land and life together it carried with it a cataclysmic destructive force. Paralleling the cultures of domination I have articulated in this chapter, it seems right to say that what Jennings diagnoses as the fundamental problem in American culture—the divorcing of meaning-making and life from the land—is at the center of the respective cultures of domination Berry, Walker, and hooks describe. Berry laments the loss of human and ecological well-being on account of the decimation of local, rural communities

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<sup>283</sup> Walker, “All Praise to the Pause,” in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 77.

<sup>284</sup> Walker, “Introduction,” in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 1.

and their land through governmental and corporate sanctioned industrial agricultural practices.

Likewise, Walker and hooks critique sexism, racism, mercantilism, and ecological degradation resultant from a colonial history that embedded itself thoroughly in religious, political, and even familial life. What I have attempted to demonstrate above is the mutual groans of these thinkers for the varying ways that cultures of domination oppress not just their intended targets but subsequently the world in its entirety.

The religious heritages of Berry, Walker, and hooks bear strong resemblances at times. And though all of them have taken varying paths that distance them from their Christian upbringings there remains in each of them remnants of the teachings of Christianity. This is particularly true if one understands authentic Christian faith (as Jennings does) in terms of belonging and the possibility of life together that is grounded in our shared materiality. Given that Berry, Walker, and hooks all bemoan cultures of domination, and the blockade they place on allowing things to flourish, I find a sort of spiritual holism running through each of these figures. And this holism requires a level of intimacy, a closeness, that at present is a distant dream in politics, business, academics, and even families.

In the final chapter of this project I will use the wisdom of these thinkers to chart out some constructive avenues that might facilitate their envisioned preferred future for the world. To do so, one must not overlook their similar criticisms of cultures of domination and what unites them is their enduring sense that environmental and social injustices are never disconnected. Whether it is the ways these authors speak specifically to the harm perpetrated against workers and the earth in the coal industry, or whether it is the ways that each of them

stands opposed to cultures of violence—embodied in the United States’ militarism or the “profit by any means necessary” in big agri-business—Berry, Jennings, Walker, hooks agree that life should be one in which all things have the ability to flourish. Cultures of domination, and the separation they create between dominator and dominated, prevent any such notion of universal flourishing.

But before I turn to make more constructive claims using the thought of Berry, Walker, and hooks, I must attend to certain lacunas in Berry’s decades of writing. Jennings and the ecowomanists are painfully aware of the ways abuses of land and people of color are necessarily related. And though Berry shows a level of recognition for how race and land are inextricably bound together, he too often leaves out significant consideration of the interrelated nature of racial oppression and land oppression. In fact, as I will show, one can read the majority of Berry’s writings and not be forced in any meaningful way to think of how racial domination and the domination of the land are always bound together.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SIN OF INATTENTION

From the beginning of this project I have built much of what I have said upon Willie Jennings' notion of a good cosmopolitanism, and what I am calling an eco-cosmopolitanism. This chapter will be no different. In this chapter, I will focus on what I believe is a major insufficiency in Wendell Berry's writings. At the end of Jennings' second chapter in the *The Christian Imagination* he critiques modern theology's lack of addressing colonialism. Jennings holds out Gustavo Gutierrez as one of the only modern theological voices to break the "imperialistic matrix" of much of theological writing for more than one hundred years. Jennings posits that most of Western Christian theology has sufficiently left out the history and detrimental effects of colonialism for theological discourse.<sup>285</sup> Like Jennings' criticism of Western theologians, this chapter demonstrates how Berry and some of his interpreters have left out vital cultural and agricultural histories—namely the histories of America's black community—in their efforts to defend and promote agrarianism.

I argue in this chapter that for Berry to most adequately maintain the valuable role he occupies in agricultural and ecological ethics, this lacuna must be noted, critiqued, and amended.

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<sup>285</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 115.



Even though Berry wrote a book specifically addressing racism in America early in his writing career, *The Hidden Wound*,<sup>286</sup> I will show below how throughout his writing career he has frequently overlooked and left out the plight of black Americans (and other historically marginalized groups) in his explications of the history and experience of agrarian life in the United States. My claim does not assume that every writer must comment on every issue, as if any and all possible audiences should determine the material one chooses to write about. (This would be an impossible task which would paralyze any writer from ever writing anything.) My point is that so much of what Berry writes has direct connections to the black experience in the America, something he acknowledges powerfully in *The Hidden Wound*.<sup>287</sup> And yet, a glaring omission remains in much of Berry's writings when it comes to the history of black life in America.

W. E. B. Du Bois' remark on Black Reconstruction that "The slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun; and then moved back again toward slavery,"<sup>288</sup> illustrates the enduring struggle against white supremacy for black liberation and equity in the United States. Below, I will lay out how true this statement was for black Americans, and specifically with regard to Berry's understanding of historic agrarianism in the United States, in rural and agricultural

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<sup>286</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1970).

<sup>287</sup> I will only introduce *The Hidden Wound* here and will return to offer more commentary on its contents at the end of the chapter.

<sup>288</sup> As quoted in Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 20. Alexander masterfully reveals the insidious nature of white supremacy in our contemporary period through the War on Drugs and the United States' unparalleled culture of mass incarceration, with black men bearing the prejudiced brunt of such draconian penal practices. As she says, echoing Du Bois, for black Americans during Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and even after the Civil Rights Movement, "[s]unshine gave way to darkness," 20.

America. My criticism of Berry, plainly put, is that his telling of agricultural life and history in the United States does not give sufficient attention to this history and its powerful hold on agricultural life and land. What makes this criticism most salient is that too often I believe he ignores basic insights that he has shown to be aware of in other writings, as in *The Hidden Wound*. This problem is compounded by the fact that he often speaks and writes in a way as if his word is the definitive one on the matter, speaking of “better” times that were “preferable” to the present.

As we have seen above, when Berry describes the good life it is almost always in terms of living on and with the land. As noted in Chapter 2, Berry frequently promotes “old” and “traditional” ways of life. He prefers using animal- and human-powered machinery to perform agricultural work just as he prefers writing on a typewriter to writing on a computer. As I argued earlier, much of the motivation behind Berry’s desire for more old-fashioned ways of life can and should be celebrated. His farming methods certainly come with less harm done to the earth and a greater emphasis on local care and responsibility for human, animal, and land well-being. However, as I will show below, when he speaks of the farming practices of the past as being preferable to the practices of the present, he regularly also praises the social well-being of people

during those times. And by doing so, he nearly always leaves out a more holistic telling of America's past that considers the well-being of the black community.<sup>289</sup>

I believe the stakes here are high. If Berry's admirers and interpreters do not address this inadequacy in his work, the power and beauty of his writings to effect change will never achieve their maximum impact. Therefore, my critique of his work comes not from a desire to discredit it but rather from a place that seeks to clarify what is most important to Berry and suggest that not even Berry himself always upholds and pursues his own values. In a way, then, I will be reading Berry against himself. I firmly believe in the efficacy of Berry's thought for my own generation and many generations to come. But I also believe that each generation must consider with a critical eye those who have paved the way before us. This is not to show disrespect or a lack of gratitude for the worlds these figures have passed down to us but rather to sharpen their ideas so that we might be positioned well to return, time and again, to their work to reclaim it for our own time and place. As such, Berry's thought can help move us toward an eco-cosmopolitanism but, first, it must be critiqued and reframed.

### **Defenses of Berry**

In recent years several scholars have defended Berry's account of race in his writings. Joshua Hochschild, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the publication *The Hidden*

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<sup>289</sup> My project focuses heavily on the how Berry significantly leaves out the history and experiences of black agricultural life in the United States. One could certainly also critique his leaving out of the history of many other non-whites in the agricultural history of this country. Though my project is not specifically aimed at Berry's lacuna in terms of the massive importance of Latino/a history and influence in American life (not less of all in agricultural) I do not believe that what I am saying is antithetical to considering the experiences of other groups as the ways Berry's frequently ignores them. But, to narrow the scope of my project I have chosen to focus primarily on Berry's writing and the black community in America.

*Wound*, argues that Berry makes himself vulnerable in writing *The Hidden Wound*. “This vulnerability,” Hochschild says, “seeks to [heal], grow stronger, and foster broader social reform.”<sup>290</sup> Hochschild compares *The Hidden Wound* to more recently popular accounts of whiteness and racism in America such as Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*.<sup>291</sup> If one takes DiAngelo as a torchbearer of white anti-racism<sup>292</sup> then Hochschild’s wants to hold up Berry as an alternative to what Hochschild sees as white “defensiveness and avoidance of culpability for racism” in DiAngelo’s work.<sup>293</sup> I think this comparison between DiAngelo’s writings and *The Hidden Wound* is helpful. But as I will argue below, what is problematic is the narrowness of this argument in that it is solely based on Berry’s writing of a single book rather than taking a more comprehensive look at his corpus of writings.

Hochschild suggests that given *The Hidden Wound* was written on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, “Berry was also trying to articulate a sense of [racial] solidarity, connecting his acknowledgment of woundedness with the choice to turn away from dominant standards of

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<sup>290</sup> Joshua Hochschild, “Race and Anti-Fragility: Wendell Berry’s ‘The Hidden Wound’ at Fifty,” in *Commonweal Magazine*, August 5, 2020. Though Hochschild has writing peer reviewed articles and a critical monograph on Wendell Berry, there are not many such evaluations of race in the thought of Wendell Berry. Given that Hochschild is a professor of Philosophy at Mount Saint Mary’s University and that his piece to be thought-provoking and well-written, it seems a very appropriate conversation partner for this section of the project.

<sup>291</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Race* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

<sup>292</sup> Which appears to be the case with her enormously popular and profitable anti-racist consultation work with large corporations and non-profits around the United States. For more on DiAngelo’s consultation work see Kelefa Sanneh, “The Fight to Redefine Racism,” *The New Yorker* (August 13, 2019).

<sup>293</sup> Hochschild, “Race and Anti-Fragility.”

success and take up a life close to the soil.”<sup>294</sup> This sense of solidarity was informed also by the Berry family’s ownership of black slaves, and later black hired-hands, and the stories Berry’s family passed on generation after generation about the African Americans who worked the family’s land. As Hochschild shows through his essay, but especially at the conclusion, what he values most from *The Hidden Wound* is the humility and hopefulness with which Berry approaches the subject of race. “*The Hidden Wound* risks the kind of speech needed for healing, and offers a vision for community restored.”<sup>295</sup>

As a reflection on *The Hidden Wound*, Hochschild’s arguments are insightful and mostly convincing. I, like Hochschild (and even bell hooks), was delighted to discover *The Hidden Wound*. Hooks and others (as Hochschild points out) have mined Berry’s thoughtfulness and reflections on race in classroom settings with great effectiveness and I hope for further promotion of *The Hidden Wound* in many such settings for a long time to come. However, the central claim of this section is not that Hochschild’s reading of *The Hidden Wound* is incorrect but rather that it is insufficient for understanding Berry’s writings (or lack there of) on race. Put differently, my argument is that Berry has written so extensively that commenting solely on *The Hidden Wound*, as Hochschild does, certainly begs a larger question of what Berry has had to say (or has not said) elsewhere about race. In fact, Berry seemingly recognizes this omission in his writings when at the beginning of *The Hidden Wound* he offers a telling insight: “It occurs to me, for a man whose life from the beginning has been conditioned by the lives of black people, I

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

have had surprisingly little to say about them in my other writings.”<sup>296</sup> As I will argue below, a content analysis of Berry’s nonfiction writings (beyond *The Hidden Wound*) confirms Berry’s admission of omission stated here.

But before I turn to make my argument against Berry, let me consider one more defense of Berry’s account of race. Perhaps the most thorough evaluation of race in Berry’s thought appears in the work of Joseph Wiebe. Wiebe has argued that in Berry’s writings, particularly in Berry’s fiction, a vision is cast that encourages people to love the places and spaces that ground their lives. To accomplish this, one must embrace one’s imagination to view things not only rationalistically but also, and even to a greater extent, with affection. In this way, Wiebe argues that imagination is the hermeneutical key for Berry.<sup>297</sup> From Wiebe’s notion of imagination he argues against claims that Berry embodies a “racialized agrarian vision.”<sup>298</sup> Rather Wiebe argues that “some of Berry’s advocates” are the ones who “illustrate the kind of unacceptable imagination Berry’s critics rightfully indict.”<sup>299</sup> Put more plainly, Wiebe argues that some of Berry’s interpreters and admirers hold racialized agrarian visions but not Berry himself. To an extent, as my argument went in Chapter 3, I agree with Wiebe. However, as I will show, some of the very language Wiebe criticizes Berry’s interpreters for, such as the terms “settlements” or

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<sup>296</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound*, 3

<sup>297</sup> Joseph Wiebe, *The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics Community, Affection, and Identity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

<sup>298</sup> Joseph Wiebe, “Race, Place, and Radical Remembering in Wendell Berry’s *Andy Catlett: Early Travels*,” in *Literature and Theology* 32, no. 3 (September 2018): 340-56.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

“settlers” and their connections with colonization,<sup>300</sup> are not terms only used by Berry’s interpreters but by Berry himself. Moving beyond the use of very specific language, I believe that Wiebe (and Hochschild) have not sufficiently considered the fullness of Berry’s corpus and particularly the way he tells America’s history.

Of particular import for my project is Wiebe’s use of Willie Jennings. Specifically, Wiebe suggests that Berry fulfills Jennings’ notion of radical remembering by “joining” and “reimagining” the kinds of relationships that bring health and holism to one’s life and the world around them.<sup>301</sup> As Wiebe puts it: “Berry and Jennings share a mutual respect for the soil engendered by a vision that in turn patterns affections; both Berry and Jennings argue that fidelity to place shapes inner lives—affections and commitments—the virtues and qualities of which are dramatised and embodied in biography.”<sup>302</sup> This seems right to me, at least in a certain regard, being that Berry (along with Jennings) builds his social and ecological ethics on a love and commitment to one’s place on the land. However, when Wiebe suggests that “radical remembering” allows for an “imagined new space for communion” I cannot but disagree with Wiebe that Berry’s remembering is always radical, if we take “radical remembering” to mean one’s memory enables liberation and the construction of a better, more hopeful future. As I will

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 344. I find Wiebe’s reading of Berry and Jennings together to be affirming of what I am trying to do in this project. I came upon Wiebe’s work after bringing Berry and Jennings together for this project. And though Wiebe has been a later addition to the project I find much of what he and I are doing to be complementary. Obviously, I do not necessarily read Berry as charitably alongside Jennings as Wiebe does, but the overall trajectory of my project, as was on display in Chapter 3 and will become even clearer in the the next (and final) chapter of this project, will reveal that I believe the core of Berry’s thought is in fact aligned well with Jennings as well as the womanists I engage with in my project.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

show in the next section, Berry too often remembers (especially when it comes to agricultural history) in a way that does not include the history and experiences of black Americans, thus jeopardizing Berry's agrarian vision to liberate people from systems of oppression and grant them hope for a better future.

Toward the end of this chapter and in the final chapter of my project, I will argue something very close to what Wiebe (and Hochschild) does, especially when he reads Berry and Jennings together. However, for Wiebe and Hochschild's arguments to be convincing, we must also carefully consider the places in Berry's thought where Berry is *less radical* in his racial consciousness. To not do so reduces Berry's ability to most effectively assist his readers in understanding more adequately American agricultural history and the ethics he believes results from his understanding of that agricultural past. As I will show in the remainder of this chapter, significant differences exist between how American history is understood from Berry's point of view and one that takes the black American experience seriously—including the histories told by Jennings and the ecowomanists. One must attend to these differences if one desires to most constructively move forward in casting a more holistic vision, not only for creating community with other humans who are "radically different" from oneself, but also with the natural world in its fullness.

### **Developing Attention**

The rural and agricultural past of the United States holds special prominence in Berry's thought. He speaks of America's past as a sort of "golden age" for agriculture, when technologies were simpler, local communities more self-sufficient, and subsistence farming the norm. As



noted in Chapters 2 and 3, Berry sees the period immediately following the Civil War as a crucial moment when America's desire for global relevancy (particularly in economic terms) burgeoned. However, according for Berry the most prolific "developments" in agricultural techniques and mentalities came in the years following World War II, especially during the 1950s. Berry understands this shift to have been from more antiquated, small farming and ranching enterprises to an agricultural matrix dominated by fewer and fewer large industrialized corporations, and in these ways, Berry tells an accurate story.<sup>303</sup> The problem with Berry's telling of American agricultural history is the way he conflates the demise of American agriculture, on the one hand, and the decline of American culture and society, on the other. My argument is that Berry's story of "American" demise and decline is incongruent with the multitude of experiences across the diverse communities of the United States. In short, Berry tells *a* story about *some* (white) Americans who work the land, not *the* story of *all* American agriculturalists.

I will rely on Iris Murdoch's notion of attention to challenge Berry's telling of America's agricultural and rural history given that I argue it represents mostly the heritage of white, landowning farmers and ranchers. I argue that Berry's celebration of some universal ideal past is not only false but that if remained unchallenged it also serves to cover over (and possibly excuse) the mechanisms that enabled that past to come into being. In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch

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<sup>303</sup> Wendell Berry, "Starting From Loss," in *It All Turns on Affection*, 73. In Berry's mind this shift began directly following the end of WWII. He says ". . . in that spring of 1945 the war was about to end. Before long the country, as never before, would be full of people with money to spend. Men's demands on nature were about to begin an increase that would continue until now," Wendell Berry, "The Long-Legged House," in *The Long-Legged House*, 118. 1952 is a more precise date since that was the year of the Eisenhower administration's declaration of "Get Big or Get Out" to farmers across the country, "Starting from Loss," 75. As I discuss elsewhere in the project, Berry believes the "Get Big" mentality came to a fuller fruition during the years Earl Butz served as Secretary of Agriculture under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford (1971-1976).

principally critiques the work of Stuart Hampshire and what she calls the “existentialist-behaviorist tradition.”<sup>304</sup> As she understands this tradition “the true person [possesses] the empty choosing will, and the corresponding emphasis upon the idea of movement rather than vision. This emphasis will go with the anti-naturalistic bias of existentialism. There is no point in talking of ‘moral seeing’ since there is nothing *morally* to see. There is no moral vision.”<sup>305</sup> Murdoch does not fully reject the public and outward nature of morality held by these existentialists,<sup>306</sup> but rather wants to leave open the moral value of beliefs, feelings, other “internal” processes, and most importantly, one’s gaze or attention.<sup>307</sup>

Murdoch associates one’s attention with the role of “private” or more personal “mental concepts” for helping one understand and embrace a moral life.<sup>308</sup> This does not mean that attention is simply a private matter but that it is something each person has control over. Murdoch asserts that “progressing” in one’s life means nurturing the ability to “reassess” and “redefine” one’s beliefs about the world. As she shows, this has everything to do with an “individual history,” by which she means a sort of interior, private self.<sup>309</sup> One’s ability to reassess and redefine one’s ideas about things necessitates a level of human freedom. Freedom,

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<sup>304</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1970), 1-15. She argues most extensively against Hampshire’s *Thought and Action* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), saying that Hampshire’s philosophy stems from a history that traces its lineage from Rene Descartes to the English Empiricists and finally to the formally ethical projects of deontology and utilitarianism.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 20-22.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 22ff.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 25.

as such, is a “function of the progressive attempt to *see* an object clearly.”<sup>310</sup> Only upon seeing something clearly does one have the best chance to act in a moral fashion.

Murdoch says extreme versions of existentialism close off the possibility of any freedom and thus tend toward fatalism or total determinism, an extremity she desires to avoid.<sup>311</sup>

However, she also wants to protect against an image of total freedom that assumes a sort of ability to fully rise beyond one’s boundedness in the world. This option would seem to find a home among certain forms of transcendentalism. To counteract both of these (in her mind) inaccurate understandings of human nature, she argues freedom is “a small piecemeal business” which is continually happening “unimpeded,”<sup>312</sup> or as she says a little later, freedom is the “continual slight control over the direction and focus of [one’s] vision.”<sup>313</sup> What moves one morally in the right direction is one’s ability to use this “slight” freedom to turn one’s gaze, as best as one can, to “see clearly” or “what is really the case.”<sup>314</sup>

Attention works in tandem with this modest level of freedom and helps one achieve such vision. As Murdoch suggests, attention is crucial for helping one achieve clear rather than “distorted vision.”<sup>315</sup> One strives to see clearly though it is an imperfect venture given all people

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 23. Italics added for emphasis. To “see clearly” for Murdoch is intimately related to “seeing truly.”

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 35

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 26.

are bound by their finitude. And yet, Murdoch asserts that if performed as honestly as possible and to one's best ability, one can "counteract. . . states of illusion"<sup>316</sup> and thus see the world as it really is.<sup>317</sup> And though one's freedom is modest and the possibility of attending is taking place continually, and thus in the most mundane moments, Murdoch powerfully reveals that such freedom and attention can "have such important cumulative results."<sup>318</sup> I will return to the power of the mundane in Chapter 5.

According to Murdoch's analysis, attention serves a crucial role in moral life. Though one's freedom to attend remains meager, it is nevertheless a powerful and essential aspect of moral living. Murdoch believes that tuning one's gaze and attending to a person or object—or in Berry's case, to experiences and histories not his own—prepares one to see most clearly the reality of that which one gazes upon. This attention enables one to then act most appropriately toward the person or object because one has, at least attempted, to see and understand that thing for what it really is. At this point, one must still act rightly but Murdoch believes the actor who attends first to a situation (or a person or a group of people) before acting, in an effort to see and understand the situation well, prepares oneself to act in the best way possible.

With Murdoch's analysis on attention before us, let me now return to Berry. I claim that Berry's understanding of American agricultural life has not attended well to the fullness of the American experience, particularly as it relates to black life in America's agricultural past. In this

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 42.

way, I am arguing that his historical descriptions reveal a partial “state of illusion” which clouds his understanding of American history and thus problematizes and his descriptions of a bygone, golden era to which he desires to return.

### **Berry’s Failing to Attend**

Berry suggests that within American rural and agricultural communities a quality of life was achieved prior to, and directly following, World War II that the United States has since known little about. Berry laments the loss of this way of life. In “Living with the Land” Berry writes, “Rural American communities, economies, and ways of life that in 1945 were thriving and, though imperfect, full of promise for an authentic human settlement of our land, are now as effectively destroyed as the Jewish communities of Poland [during World War II].”<sup>319</sup> I do not disagree that aspects of the rural life that Berry speaks of are now destroyed. Without doubt, there were promising features of these communities that diminished with the introduction of agricultural industrialization. However, Berry's claim that rural communities were “thriving” before 1945 ignores the horrors for black communities that resulted from white Americans’ destruction of Black Reconstruction in America following the Civil War, the construction of Jim Crow laws, and what Douglas A. Blackmon has called the “re-enslavement” of black Americans.<sup>320</sup> I will turn shortly to consider these histories but the questions to be posed at this

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid. Berry usage of the Nazis’ attempted eradication of Jews in Poland is certainly a strained, even problematic, comparison to what is happening to rural American communities. I share Berry’s concern for the demise of farming and ranching communities in the United States and the ways that big government and big corporations are systematically decimating them. But the kind of destruction rural American communities are facing is vastly different than Nazism’s destruction of Jewish life and property during the Shoah.

<sup>320</sup> Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

point are: If the agricultural communities that Berry has in mind were thriving prior to the industrialization of 1950s, why were they thriving and to whom was the benefit of this prosperity? Furthermore, if Berry thinks these were better times for agriculture, the environment, and life in general, would Walker, hooks, Harris, and Jennings agree with Berry's assessment *and* desire to return to these periods? Put differently, does a more holistic look at American history support the historical claims Berry makes, and the value he attaches to these claims? Answers to these questions might be obvious but what I show in this chapter indicates that Berry often does not operate with this holistic view of American history.

Berry's obstructed and diminished vision is on full display when he says that the "Get Big or Get Out" agricultural policies of the Eisenhower administration were "maybe the cruelest, most undemocratic proclamation ever made to American citizens."<sup>321</sup> Berry notes such a proclamation was issued "to farmers,"<sup>322</sup> and yet, he broadens out the horrors of these agricultural policies to "American citizens." Unquestionably, U.S. agricultural policies have affected every person living in the U.S., as well as many people around the globe. But it seems that even in the cases of these unjust, evil "proclamations" against small farmers, it is incorrect for Berry to suggest them to be more cruel and undemocratic than the far-reaching policies which

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<sup>321</sup> Wendell Berry, "Starting From Loss," in *It All Turns on Affection*, 75.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*

kept (and continue to keep) black Americans from being afforded the full rights of American citizenship.<sup>323</sup>

One might conclude that Berry's notation above from "Living with the Land" about the "imperfect" nature of rural communities prior to 1945 includes the recognition of America's racist past, and certainly it might. But given the extraordinary scar slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow laws has left on the black (if not also the general) American psyche it seems to be a monumental omission by Berry to not offer even a sentence in an essay like "Living With The Land" about the ways in which 1945 was not a year in which America's black community was "thriving" in the same manner as its white community. The period Berry speaks of might have been "full of promise" for whites, but it was certainly not full of promise (at least in the same way) for non-whites.<sup>324</sup> 1945 marked the middle point of the Great Migration, or what Isabel Wilkerson has called "perhaps the biggest underreported story of the Twentieth Century."<sup>325</sup> This is the story of the internal migration of approximately 6 million black Americans from the South to northern cities such as Chicago, New York, and Detroit, as well as western cities such as Los Angeles, Oakland, and Seattle.

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<sup>323</sup> David Waldstreicher, *Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009). Waldstreicher argues that though the Constitution, famously, never mentions slavery the institution of "Persons Held of Service" was not only of grave importance to those who composed the Constitution but, in fact, was at the very heart of the Constitution.

<sup>324</sup> Even Berry's language of "authentic human settlement of *our land*" shows a striking insensitivity to North American indigenous populations and the white-centric framework that, at times, Berry relies on in his retellings of America's past.

<sup>325</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 21.

Stewart Tolnay has argued the impetus for the massive black migration from 1910-1970 (the years generally accepted as encompassing the “Great Migration”) is varied.<sup>326</sup> As Tolnay suggests, the rampant and suffocating constraints of white supremacy on black rural Southerners during the Jim Crow era has widely been accepted as the major cause of the migration. As the story goes, rural blacks were fearful of the real threats of losses of property, beatings, and lynchings and their minimal economic stability through sharecropping and tenant farming pushed them to seek out new, more stable forms of work and social life. As manufacturing jobs in America’s northern and western cities increased, and more restrictive immigration laws at the beginning of 20th Century prevented sufficient levels of southern and eastern European immigrants to keep pace with hiring demands, black Southerners seized opportunities to leave the South in hopes of better futures to the north and west.<sup>327</sup>

Tolnay has challenged that it was black rural dwellers and agricultural workers who made up the majority of those who migrated, showing evidence exists that a significant number of black southern urban dwellers also exited for better opportunities north- and westward.<sup>328</sup> And yet, Tolnay does make clear there is also good evidence to support the widely held belief that black agriculturalists and rural folks were those most interested in seeking better opportunities “up north” and “out west.” Sharecropping and tenant farming presented dangerous, exploitative agricultural and economic conditions as well as few educational opportunities for rural

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<sup>326</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay, “The African American ‘Great Migration’ and Beyond,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 209-11.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-14.



communities, a climate that drove many black individuals and families to seek new possibilities elsewhere.<sup>329</sup>

Like Tolnay, Wilkerson's account of the Great Migration stands in sharp contrast to Berry's depiction of flourishing agricultural communities before the introduction of mechanized farming following the World War II. As Wilkerson puts it: "[The Great Migration] would force the South to search its soul and finally to lay aside a feudal caste system. It grew out of the unmet promises made after the Civil War and, through the sheer weight of it, helped push the country toward the civil rights revolutions of the 1960s."<sup>330</sup> Wilkerson holds the more traditional position that most of these black migrants were from rural, if not specifically agricultural contexts.<sup>331</sup> And though Kentucky (Berry's home State) opted for neutrality during the early years of the Civil War, and later associated more strongly with the Union, Wilkerson specifically notes that black rural migrants from Kentucky joined those who left deep southern States for "an uncertain [though perceived better] existence in nearly every other corner of America."<sup>332</sup>

What Wilkerson and Tolnay reveal stands in contrast to the picture Berry paints of rural, agricultural communities before the 1950s. This is not to suggest that the specific communities

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 22.

<sup>331</sup> Wilkerson notes that "townspeople" and "tradesmen," 23, also migrated from the south to the north but she seems to think these numbers were smaller than "the good portion of all black Americans alive. . . [who] left tobacco farms. . . rice plantations. . . cotton fields. . . villages and backwoods," 22. This difference of opinion on who exactly migrated, Tolnay notes, results from a lack of good data on the migration, "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond," 212-214. Thus, it would be safe to say that both authors find evidence for black migrants leaving the south from many social locations but that Wilkerson believes more exited rural, agricultural contexts while Tolnay is less certain about rural migrants outnumbering urban ones.

<sup>332</sup> Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 21.

Berry has in mind were not thriving. But the historical portraits drawn by Wilkerson and Tolnay make clear that America's black communities, even in rural and agricultural contexts, did not experience the prosperity Berry describes. Thus, Berry's general claim that rural communities were better off before industrialized agriculture must be criticized for not being as universal as he implies.

This contrast is on full display again when in "Living With The Land" Berry speaks about the ways that industrial agriculture resulted in "exhausted cotton-fields of the plantation South."<sup>333</sup> To be fair, Berry is describing regions of the United State and how their landscapes and previous agricultural ventures had been destroyed through industrial agricultural practices. But, in this instance, Berry is (once again) utterly inattentive to the plight of America's black community to speak of the "plantation South" and its "exhausted cotton-fields" given that their productivity prior to industrialization largely resulted from the work of black slaves and sharecroppers—something he says nothing about in the essay.

As Sven Beckert has shown, global fear (primarily in Europe) increased during the years directly following the Civil War about the decline of U.S. cotton production as a result of the loss of slave labor.<sup>334</sup> What exacerbated the concern from European business and political leaders of the decline of U.S. cotton exports was the fact that the growth in usage of mechanical cotton spindles in Europe doubled the demand of cotton from 1860-1890 and then doubled again by

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<sup>333</sup> Berry, "Living with the Land," 391.

<sup>334</sup> Sven Beckert, *The Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 274-78.

1920.<sup>335</sup> What this meant for the European leaders, as well as leaders in the United States, was that “new forms of labor” were needed to meet this growing demand. Beckert notes that these new forms of labor also meant the development of “new forms of coercion, violence, and expropriation. . .” Many expressions of these new, destructive forms were experimented with, with sharecropping becoming the standard agricultural instantiation of such violence and expropriation of blacks during and after Reconstruction. As Beckert argues,

The new systems of labor that emerged from these sometimes violent but almost always asymmetrical struggles between industrialists, merchants, agricultural producers, workers, rulers, and bureaucrats became the mainspring of the production of cotton until the advent of the commercially viable mechanical harvesting in the United States during the 1940s, and of a new global political economy.<sup>336</sup>

Undoubtedly, workers and those performing the “grunt work” in these varying cogs of the global cotton economy were those most abused and under-compensated. On the American scene, those most disadvantaged in this new agricultural climate were the newly freed black slaves.

It is significant that Beckert confirms the rough timeframe Berry points to for the demise of American agrarianism on account of increased mechanization in agricultural. But Beckert’s analysis reveals the very lacuna I am suggesting in Berry’s work. Berry’s comments above on how mechanized farming practices exhausted cotton-fields make no mention of the coercive, violent, and expropriated nature of cotton-farming for slaves *and* black sharecroppers prior to the introduction of mass mechanization. As Beckert’s analysis reveals, what preceded mechanized

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 280.

cotton farming in the plantation South was no “better” agricultural period we ought desire to return to, certainly not without a good deal of qualification.

Berry’s emphasis on the destructive practices of industrialized agriculture appears to play a part in his inattentiveness to America’s historical reality. Again, Murdoch’s notion of attention helps illuminate Berry’s chimera concerning the agricultural “good times” of pre-1950s America. Murdoch understands attention to be necessary to achieve what is good—which includes a commitment to what is beautiful and just.<sup>337</sup> As Murdoch notes, the precondition for ethical *right action* is *right seeing*, a point also stressed by important Christian thinkers.<sup>338</sup> My claim is not that Berry’s critiques of industrialized agriculture are not legitimate, as Chapter 3 brought to light. Rather, I am suggesting that his heavy focus on how agri-industrialism adversely affected *his* white, landowning family obstructs him from seeing how the past he views as preferable to his present was *not preferable for all*.

In Chapter 3 I also noted Alice Walker’s description of people’s “separation” from the Earth being a mere illusion since, as Walker notes, humanity is inherently and intimately connected to it. She surmised that people are able to treat the Earth with such disregard not

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<sup>337</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 45-74.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 64. The relationship between right action and right seeing or vision, especially as Murdoch evaluates them, has been of particular interest to Christian theologians and ethicists. Stanley Hauerwas, for one, has in *Vision and Virtue: Essays In Christian Ethical Reflection* (South Bend, IN: University of Norte Dame Press, 1981) used Murdoch’s “seeing the world rightly” to argue for what he calls “living truthfully,” 46. This he believes allows for a person to be “free” to see the world as it actually is. Such freedom enables one to see things from the “mode of the divine” which gives one a sense of one’s proper place in the world, 46. For Hauerwas, this has import for theological topics such as finitude, contingency, and sin, among other things. In addition to Hauerwas, James Gustafson in his *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, vol. I*, suggests that a correction of ethical values from an anthropological view to a theocentric view demands an alteration and enlargement of one’s vision, 308. This for Gustafson allows for one to see the world from a more divine vantage point which decenters humanity and places God squarely at the center of all ethical discourse, evaluation, and action.

because of an inability to sympathize with our degraded Earth but rather because we are distant from it. I submit something similar is taking place with Berry's inattentiveness and illusion. From the writing of *The Hidden Wound*, it is obvious that Berry is aware of the grave harms white supremacy enacted upon black bodies. However, as I have detailed in this chapter, it is also clear that he loses this perspective with some frequency—or perhaps does not value it highly enough to incorporate it thoroughly in all his writings. Given the powerful testimonies of Jennings and the ecowomanists throughout the project—and to which I will turn again below—it would make sense that Berry's inattentiveness might result from a distance (physically, ideologically, or both) from the horrors of American racial apartheid. I take Jennings seriously when he details how Christians for centuries twisted and corrupted their own teachings and beliefs to construct a rickety edifice to hide and justify their abuse of people and land.<sup>339</sup> My criticism of Berry is less severe than this, in a sense. Berry is in no way abusing people and land as colonizers did. And yet, it does appear that Berry exists in a state of illusion that, as I am arguing, has not fully attended to the ways pre-1950s America was not agrarian bliss for all Americans, or even all Americans who worked the land. This would indicate that the sins of colonialism run deep in the Earth and in our bodies and minds. Their presence, though faint, skews our ability to see rightly and to attend to, with due vigilance, our incomplete memories.

My criticisms of Berry might be less severe than the ones Jennings level against colonial Christianity. But the pervasiveness with which Berry leaves out the experiences of black Americans in his praise of agrarianism is alarming. Another instance of this appears in Berry's

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<sup>339</sup> Cf. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 69ff.

praise of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's belief in the necessity of small land owners occupies an honored place in Berry's agrarian vision.<sup>340</sup> Berry's appreciation for Jeffersonian democracy is understandable, particularly, when one understands the fullness of Berry's contempt for industrial and corporate farming and Jefferson's high regard for small, self-sufficient agriculturalists. In theory Jefferson's advocacy of the goodness of small farming ventures and their necessity for a successful society are commendable.<sup>341</sup> And it makes sense that Berry would promote Jeffersonian democracy's vision that "a people must be stable, economically independent, and virtuous. . . [and that Jefferson] believed. . . that these qualities were most dependably found in the farming people."<sup>342</sup>

It is obvious how Jefferson's vision of economics and agriculture appeal to Berry. In fact, for many people who believe in hard work, self-determination, and groundedness in a place, there is inspiration to be taken from Jefferson's writings on the ideal early American farmer. But, I would conjecture, that for this inspiration to be most effective at least some reckoning or even

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<sup>340</sup> Wendell Berry, "A Long Ancestry," in *The Art of Loading Brush*, 217-225; "It All Turns on Affection," in *It All Turns On Affection*, 19.

<sup>341</sup> Andrew M Holowchak, "Jefferson's Moral Agrarianism: Poetic Fiction or Normative Vision?," *Agricultural and Human Value* 28, no. 4 (2011): 497-506. Holowchak's interesting study details two diametrically opposed views of Jefferson's famed agrarianism. On the one hand, some scholars understand his advocacy of agrarianism to be core to his understanding of the good life and essential for the success of the young, fledgling nation of the United States. In this way, he truly believed in the ideals he spoke and wrote about in regards to the value and efficacy of small, self-sufficient landowners. This is the camp Berry would, obviously, belong to as does Holowchak. On the other hand, a community of scholars exists, as Holowchak describes, who view Jefferson's agrarian ideals as mere propaganda which Jefferson put forth to garner political support from farmers and landholders. It is not necessary for me to stake a claim in this debate. Whether Jefferson's defense of agrarianism was sincere or not, Berry takes it to be. My argument is that Jefferson's lifestyle, particularly his enormous landholdings and his ownership of slaves make Berry's praise of Jefferson's agrarian ideal problematic.

<sup>342</sup> Wendell Berry, "Jefferson, Morrill, and the Upper Crust," in *The Unsettling of America*, 147.

mentioning of Jefferson's personal life and relationship to farming must be noted. And it is here that Berry's praise of Jeffersonian agrarianism requires pause. Jefferson was a very wealthy land and slave owner. His property, businesses, and slave holdings placed him among the wealthiest members of early American society and still rank him among the wealthiest U.S. presidents of all time. Throughout Jefferson's lifetime he owned more than 600 slaves who were the ones who worked his lands and businesses.<sup>343</sup> Therefore, when one recognizes the distance between Jefferson himself and the type of "farming people" and culture he advocated for, his celebration of the small farmer who is "independent" and "virtuous" loses some of its gusto. Or, at least, one would have to admit that Jefferson himself was a far cry from being such a farmer. But these are realities that Berry never addresses when he writes about Jefferson's agrarianism.

In fact, in the opening paragraph to Berry's essay "Jefferson, Morrill, and the Upper Crust" he goes so far as to quote and praise a section from a letter Jefferson penned shortly before his death. In this letter Jefferson says: "the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."<sup>344</sup> This quotation appears in a letter Jefferson wrote in response to the invitation to attend the celebration of the 50th anniversary of his signing of the Declaration of

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<sup>343</sup> John H. Bickford and Ryan C. Hendrickson, "An Inquiry Into Liberty, Slavery, and Thomas Jefferson's Place in American Memory," *The Social Studies* 111, no. 1 (2020): 1-10; Henry Wiencek, "The Dark Side of Thomas Jefferson: A New Portrait of the Founding Father Challenges the Long-held Perception of Thomas Jefferson as a Benevolent Slave Holder," *Smithsonian Magazine* (October 2012); "Slavery at Monticello FAQ—Property," Thomas Jefferson Foundation, accessed November 11, 2021, [www.monticello.org/slavery/slaveryfaqs/](http://www.monticello.org/slavery/slaveryfaqs/).

<sup>344</sup> Berry, "Jefferson," 147. Jefferson's letter is longer but this is the only section Berry quotes. The full letter can be found at "Letter From Thomas Jefferson to Roger C. Weightman," *Library of Congress: Declaring Independence: Drafting the Documents*, June 24, 1826, accessed Feb 11, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/rcwltr.html>.

Independence. Jefferson expressed his regret that his health would not allow him to attend<sup>345</sup> and made use of the moment to celebrate the principles embodied in the Declaration, which he summarized in the above way. Berry seems to also celebrate and advocates for these principles by saying, “liberty was. . . a privilege to be earned, deserved, and strenuously kept; to keep themselves free. . . people must be stable, economically independent, and virtuous.”<sup>346</sup> But nowhere in Berry’s essay, devoted to praising the principles of Jeffersonian democracy and how they uphold the agrarianism he cherishes, does Berry even hint at the hypocrisy of Jefferson’s words. Jefferson’s independence, stability, and “realization” of a uniquely American agrarian dream came at the expense of hundreds of black slaves. Jefferson might have thought small, virtuous farmers were necessary for a sustainable agricultural future in America but he certainly was not among the practitioners of such a future. And it is shocking that Berry would heap such high praise on Jefferson without even a brief acknowledgement concerning Jefferson’s agrarian pretense.

As a final example of Berry’s nostalgia for agricultural life in pre-1950s America, and the ways that I believe it reveals his inattention to the plight of black Americans, I will briefly note

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<sup>345</sup> It is interesting to note that both John Adams and Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration. I am indebted to Bill French for pointing this fact out to me. The second and third presidents of the United States did not speak to each other for years following Jefferson’s winning of the 1801 presidential race, even after Adams sent him a congratulatory note shortly after Jefferson’s assumption of the presidential office, John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (New York: Holt and Henry Co., 1992), 431. The two former presidents rekindled their relationship some years after Jefferson’s presidency ended, maintaining a friendship through letter correspondence until their same-day-deaths. Though their letters were personal in nature, important details about their lives remained undiscussed between them, including Jefferson’s ownership of slaves and other financial and domestic concerns at his Monticello estate, David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 634.

<sup>346</sup> Berry, “Jefferson,” 147.



several examples from his writings. I save these examples for last because I think their subtlety reveals Berry's deep-seated presupposition that pre-1950s America was a preferable time to live in as compared with post-1950s America. In the first example, from "The Loss of the Future," Berry talks about the "lost hopefulness" and the "disciplining sense" that Americans in previous generations possessed in their pursuit in creating a better future for themselves and their children.<sup>347</sup> In this instance, Berry is not actually all that subtle in that he says "it is deeply disturbing, and I think true, that as a nation we no longer have a future that we can imagine and desire."<sup>348</sup> Meaning that in a previous time (this essay was published in 1965), the nation had an imagined and desired future.

In "The Thought of Limits in a Prodigal Age," Berry mourns the loss of local rural communities that, among other things, were disintegrated through "drugs and various electronic screens."<sup>349</sup> Berry says that farming communities and their agricultural programs<sup>350</sup> importantly "supported the traditional family and social structure" but with the passage of time and the expansion of industrial agriculture families have disintegrated and these social structures have

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<sup>347</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Loss of the Future," in *The Long-Legged House*, 46.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Thought of Limits in a Prodigal Age," in *The Art of Loading Brush*, 28. The cause of disintegration he says was also the result of "cities and chain stores, diseased by urban and media culture, cheap energy, [and] family disintegration," 28. The reason I highlight drugs and "screens" is because through the next several pages of "The Thought of Limits in a Prodigal Age," Berry returns many times to the problems caused by drugs and screens.

<sup>350</sup> For Berry's area tobacco programs helped set fair pricing for small and large producers as well as the promoted good practices of land conservation that were interested in the future well-being of the local communities who farmed the land.

fallen apart.<sup>351</sup> In a similar manner in “Living with the Land,” Berry talks of the “worsening conditions” and “decline” of rural communities, and assumes that his readers agree there was a more “whole” or “fruitful” period for these communities prior to “the attitudes of the industrial economy.”<sup>352</sup> Again, my challenge of these ideas is not that nuclear families and “traditional” social structures and agrarianism did not support each other. It is also not argue against worsening conditions in many of these rural communities instigated by agricultural industrialism. It is rather to suggest that those “better times” must be put in context and thus we must be honest about how these times and places were not ubiquitously better for all Americans.

To bring this section to a close, I would like to contrast Berry’s tellings of American history with insights from Willie Jennings and Alice Walker. I believe what Jennings and Walker write finds much coherence with Wilkerson, Tolnay, and Beckert’s analyses above and thus reveal an American history, even specifically an agricultural American history, that stands against the one Berry articulates. Jennings and Walker never describe pre-1950s America as an environment in which their communities had ample opportunity to thrive. In the first paragraph of *The Christian Imagination* Jennings reveals his family (before he was born) was among the 6 million black Americans who moved during the Great Migration, settling in Grand Rapids, Michigan.<sup>353</sup> Even once his family arrived in the north, Jennings says that his parents retained “the knowledge of the deepest struggles and contradictions of black folks living among white

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<sup>351</sup> Berry, “The Thought of Limits in a Prodigal Age,” 28.

<sup>352</sup> Berry, “Living with The Land,” 390.

<sup>353</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 1.

folks.”<sup>354</sup> And, it must be noted, this experience for Jennings was deeply agricultural, deeply connected to the land. In speaking of his mother’s love of the earth he says: “She also knew from her own experiences the lives of poor folks in the South who picked cotton, got cheated for their back-breaking labor, and worked diligently to stay of our harm’s way with whites. The experience of agricultural labor, life in the dirt, also brought her into a contradictory but very intimate relationship with the land itself.”<sup>355</sup> Such sentiments make clear post-Reconstruction America (after 1877), through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, was not viewed as a “golden age” for Jennings’ family. Though they were people of the land, just as Berry’s family was, it is clear that such a commitment to the earth did not afford the same life-giving experiences for blacks as it did whites in pre-World War II America.

Throughout this chapter I have been bifurcating American history on the fulcrum of the 1950s. I have done so because that is the demarcation in Berry’s mind when the wonders of rural agrarianism shifted significantly for the worse. My argument has rested upon the case that no such golden era existed for the many black Americans, even black agriculturalists like Jennings’ family, during the era Berry praises. But it also must be said that for Jennings, Walker, and hooks the 1950s to the present has also not necessarily been a golden era. Yet, without doubt, the post-civil rights era has afforded the black community (along with other minorities) in America unparalleled privileges in American history. And yet, they maintain the difficulties of black life

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

even in this “better” time.<sup>356</sup> What contrasts even more severely the different histories told by Berry and Jennings, Walker, hooks, and other black thinkers, is that for people like Jennings’ family if there is a “better” time in America it has certainly been *after* the 1950s *rather than before* the 1950s.

Let me illustrate this point with a couple examples from Walker. Walker describes her family’s sharecropping history (in pre-1950s America) as one of “criminal exploitation” and “outright terrorism.”<sup>357</sup> Given white landowners controlled the land, seeds, tools, and records, she says that sharecroppers “were often worse off than slaves.”<sup>358</sup> Of course, America’s black community showed extraordinary resilience in its ability to create beauty and sustain hope in troubling times.<sup>359</sup> In fact, the mass migration of blacks from the South the North and West along with the push for civil rights during the 1960s were powerful examples of such resilience as well as exemplify that post-1950s America was a period in which blacks saw a brighter future for themselves than pre-1950s America.

In her essay titled “Orchids,” Alice Walker asks: “What is it that makes us black? What, in fact, does it mean to be black?”<sup>360</sup> She says she was reflecting on this question while living in

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<sup>356</sup> Cf. bell hooks, “Introduction: Race Talk,” in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995), 1-5.

<sup>357</sup> Walker, “The Only Reason You Want To Go To Heaven,” in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, 16.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Cf. bell hooks, “The Integrity of Black Women,” in *Killing Rage*, 77-85; bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*; Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Save*, see especially section 6’s essays, 153-184.

<sup>360</sup> Alice Walker, “Orchids,” in *We are the Ones we Have been Waiting For*, 222.

the United States and that what first came to her mind when she reflected on this question was the association of being black and being “locked up.” According to Walker, the black community’s self-reflection always takes them back to slavery and Jim Crow as well as forces a present reckoning with the reality that blacks in America are much more likely than whites to be “locked up forever” for crimes deserving of much less. She calls this a “prison plantation system” in which “hundreds of thousands black people” experience contemporary America as if time stopped “somewhere in the fifteen to the nineteenth centuries.”<sup>361</sup> This analysis of Jennings and Walker, in tandem with Tolnay, Wilkerson, and Beckert, reveals the insufficiency of Berry’s portrayal of a “thriving” rural and agricultural America during the years between the end of the Civil War and those following the Second World War.

In spite of Walker's very different narrative from Berry's, as told in her essay “Orchids,” an opportunity would be missed if I did not explore, even briefly, her concluding reflections on blackness in the essay. As I noted in Chapter 2, so much of Walker’s work holds a tension between directly addressing the difficulties of being black in America with a refusal to lose sight of the good and her resounding hopefulness for the future. In the second half of “Orchids” Walker explores how this hopefulness expresses itself in the black community. With her characteristic honesty she admits the overwhelming sadness and pain in remembering the past

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid. Again, Michelle Alexander’s work comes to mind for its thorough consideration of how the American prison complex, the war on drugs, and policing has disproportionately targeted brown and black people. Alexander, a celebrated civil rights attorney, gives extensive legal and historical evidence for the anecdotal accounts like Walker’s of these ongoing and systemic forms of oppression. In many ways, Alexander’s work also helped raise American consciousness around extrajudicial killings of black people by law enforcement and vigilantes such as George Zimmerman.

for people of color in the United States.<sup>362</sup> In her reflections on the horrors these abuses to black and indigenous peoples in North America (in the U.S. and Canada) Walker turns to address despair. She asks again, “What is blackness? What is it that makes a us black?” She says that blackness is about being a whole, united person and community. Given her earlier considerations, it seems implied that part of this unity of the self is a recognition of and coming to terms with the past, including all its good and all its bad. But Walker then says that this unified personhood for black people means:

*we care. To be black means we care. About everything. About orchids, and ancestors, about children and old people, about hair and history. It means accepting the pain and suffering of that condition, without drugs, or overeating, or sex addiction, or workaholism. It means trusting, as well, that the Universe will respond to our fidelity to our true nature by teaching us ways of being that will help us carry our unique burdens—our deep, inevitable, irrevocable caring about people and the the world. . . What saves me from total pessimism about our Being in America is that I have experienced whole and healthy, mentally and spiritually sound, deeply happy black people. . . What did these people have in common? A love of the earth.”<sup>363</sup>*

My point in bringing Walker to bear here in my reflections on Berry is to show how for many black people there is no imagining of the past or even the present without the stark recognition of how the black experience in America is always colored by bondage. But it is also to reveal that for someone like Walker, and I would argue many within the ecowomanist tradition, the

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<sup>362</sup>Walker, “Orchids,” in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 227-240.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 240-41, 243. Walker notes this ability to care results from a unity in the person. Or as she says it: “to have a body and soul together,” 240. She notes the trauma many black people live with but suggests that when black people have “ensoulment” they are empowered to care for all things. These ideas will come back around in my final chapter.

oppressiveness of the past (and even present) is held in tension with a beautiful hope for a better future that is not simply a return to some glorified imagined past.

In an attempt to read Berry fairly, it is important to note that I believe his inattention to the plight of the black experience throughout many of his writings results of his hyper focus on the adverse effects of industrialism in agriculture. But I also think it is fair to say that it results from his lacking closeness to the black experience in America and the inattention resultant from such a distance. His preference for the past renders him blind from seeing much good in the present or future and from adequately acknowledging how the past disproportionately favored people like himself. I take issue with Berry in these places not because I am questioning whether there was prosperity in past rural communities Berry was apart of. Rather, it is that those rural, agricultural communities were by no means representative of all rural, agricultural communities in America during those periods. I also find problematic Berry's negativity (in sharp contrast with Walker) toward the present and future in that he often ignores the ways that life, in many ways, has improved significantly for people of color (particularly America's black population) during the very periods he speaks about disdainfully.

Let me be clear. I do not take Berry to be a racist. I think such a claim is sloppy and, frankly, of little use. At least one "young professor" made those claims against Berry to which he characteristically responded with great thoughtfulness and humor.<sup>364</sup> Rather, I have argued in this section that Berry, at times, has been inattentive to histories and experiences not his own. As noted above, Walker cannot speak about American history, *at any point*, without acknowledging

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<sup>364</sup> Berry, "The Thought of Limits in a Prodigal Age," in *The Art of Loading Brush*, 6-14.

(even if implicitly) the oppression suffered by blacks through the perpetuation of white supremacy. On the one hand, as Berry waxes lyrical about farming, farmers, and farming communities in the United State prior to the 1950s, the ecowomanists and Jennings speak of their ancestors who were enslaved, forced into abusive practices like sharecropping, endured Jim Crow, and struggle even in the present from violence, societal suspicion, and self-hate.<sup>365</sup> On the other hand, as Berry speaks of the decline of society in post-1950s America, Walker, hooks, Harris, and Jennings speak of the opportunities to attend university, to protest with legal protections, to build wealth, to hope, and to live into that hope. As I noted above with Walker, each of these figures, in their own right, do not underestimate the enduring abuses, prejudices, and challenges facing them and their communities today. And yet, there is a fundamental difference in the ways they speak of the past as compared with Berry in that they possess a gratitude for their current situations and hope for even a better future to come.

I value the more appreciative portrayals of Berry's writings on race from scholars like Wiebe and Hochschild. I believe these are essential perspectives for understanding the contours (racial and otherwise) of Berry's thought. But, even though I agree with much of what they say in their important studies, I cannot help but see another—perhaps more insidious—emphasis in Berry's writings. Being that Berry views pre-1950s America with the proverbial rose-colored glasses, it must be acknowledged then that such a view is a distorted vision that disables him from seeing clearly. Murdoch asserts that people are inherently self interested<sup>366</sup> and the “ego”

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<sup>365</sup> Cf. Walker, “Orchids,” 242; hooks, “Dreaming Ourselves Dark and Deep: Black Beauty,” in *Sisters of the Yam*, 59-73.

<sup>366</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 76.



causes selfishness to manifest in “personal fantasy” which allows for “the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.”<sup>367</sup> This sentiment does not hold true for so much of what Berry has written about. However, I do believe Murdoch’s assertion holds true when one considers Berry’s telling of America’s “thriving” agrarian past. It appears to me that Berry can only speak of such a past because he has not sufficiently considered the ways people of color in the United States were barred from experiencing the prosperity he describes. This same distorted vision also obstructs him from seeing how the present and future are not viewed so dimly by populations who knew nothing of the agrarian golden age he routinely praises.

### **Conclusion: Wendell Berry Reframed**

I began the chapter by reviewing the defenses of Berry’s account of race put forward by Hochschild and Wiebe. Both scholars hold Berry to be a valuable resource in the contemporary period for understanding and addressing the wounds of America’s racial history. It should be apparent by now that I take a much different stance about the efficacy of Berry’s account of race in America. As I suggested at the end of my analysis of Hochschild and Wiebe, I believe they are right to find value in Berry’s writing of *The Hidden Wound* and some of Berry’s fiction like *Andy*

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 59.

*Catlett: Early Travels*.<sup>368</sup> In a way, I agree with their overall conclusions, though I think it is more responsible to reach these conclusions by a different route. Crudely put, Hochschild and Wiebe seem to believe that Berry “gets it right” on race, or at least (according to Hochschild) more right than a popular contemporary voice like Robin DiAngelo. What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to argue that Berry’s racial sensitivities, particularly as expressed in a work like *The Hidden Wound*, are without doubt powerful contributions to discussions of race in America. And yet, I have argued that his attention to race in *The Hidden Wound* is not paradigmatic of his attention to race throughout his corpus. As I showed above, Berry’s very introductory remarks to *The Hidden Wound* reveal his self-recognition of the lacuna of race in much his writings, at least early in his writing career. As I have detailed in this chapter, this inattention remains even after the writing of *The Hidden Wound*.

Some might suggest this makes a recovery of Berry’s agrarian vision for racial solidarity a foolhardy task. But let me defend why I still believe in the value of Berry’s thought for discussions of race and place. In my defense of Berry I will employ Willie Jennings, bell hooks,

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<sup>368</sup> Wendell Berry, *Andy Catlett: Early Travels* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2006). As Wiebe point out, Berry’s novel *Andy Catlett* follows some of Berry’s autobiographical sketch of his childhood reflections in *The Hidden Wound*, especially his reflections on Dick and Sarah Jane (Berry’s fictional characters representing Nick Watkins and Aunt Georgie—the black couple who worked the Berry family farm). Insightfully, Wiebe notes “[t]he truth of Dick and Sarah Jane is not found in the extent to which they reflect the lives of Nick and Aunt Georgie but in the invocation of a consciousness in which they are dynamically present. In short, the novel reproduces the reality of memory,” “Race, Place, and Radical Remembering,” 345. Wiebe contrasts this with Berry’s earlier writing *A Place on Earth*, in which Berry first fictionally depicted Nick and Aunt Georgie. Wiebe notes a section in *The Hidden Wound* where Berry reveals that he did not like his initial fictionalizing of Nick and Aunt Georgie because Berry felt he has given them “an imaginative stability at the cost of oversimplifying them,” 49-50. Wiebe feels Berry’s reattempt to portray Nick and Aunt Georgie in *Andy Catlett* avoids Berry’s early crime of oversimplification of Nick and Aunt Georgie by keeping them “dynamically present,” meaning that Wiebe believes Berry honored the particularities of Nick and Aunt Georgie and did not reduce them to some figment of Berry’s imagination, “Race, Place, and Radical Remembering,” 345-351.

and finally, Berry himself. As detailed in Chapter 3, Jennings' overarching argument suggested that the most horrifying and seismic accomplishment of European colonialism was its ability to separate peoples from their lands. I suggested in that chapter that what Berry describes in agricultural America is not totally dissimilar. As Berry has argued well for decades, the U.S. government and agri-businesses during the middle part of the 20th Century shifted away from small farming and ranching enterprises. This led to an agricultural climate where what was biggest and most efficient was synonymous with what was best. As Berry describes vividly, these values and the practices that followed from them might have produced cheap food and extraordinary profits for some but they also decimated local agricultural communities as well as the land and animals cared for by smaller agriculturalists.

In bell hooks' *Belonging* she expresses extraordinary praise of Berry's agrarian vision saying that once she moved back to Kentucky and rediscovered Berry's writings, she "read everything he had written that [she] could find."<sup>369</sup> In an interview with Berry, hooks connects powerfully with his notion of place and localness, suggesting one's deep care for and attention to particular places and people serves a key role in limiting practices that harm the earth and all living things.<sup>370</sup> Hooks also says she deeply appreciated Berry's reflections in *The Hidden Wound*, but specifically Berry's reflections on his childhood relationships with Nick Watkins, a black man who worked the Berry family's land during Wendell's childhood, and Aunt Georgie who "came to live with Nick in the little two-room house perhaps the third year he worked for

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<sup>369</sup> hooks, "Returning to the Wound," in *Belonging*, 174.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid, 184ff.

us.”<sup>371</sup> Hooks notes that Berry’s descriptions of Nick and Aunt Georgie in *The Hidden Wound* revealed the closeness to the land that was characteristic of many black people in that generation, something she thinks Berry attends to well in his descriptions of Nick and Aunt Georgie.<sup>372</sup>

Though hooks is very explicit about her love of Berry’s writing, I also revealed in Chapters 2 and 3 that other black female figures like Alice Walker and Melanie Harris share important compatibilities with Berry’s thought. I have argued in this chapter that these compatibilities do not negate Berry’s inattention to the black experience. However, my argument here is that I think Berry’s oversights of the black experience, particularly in American agricultural history, does not render his agrarian vision valueless or any less compatible with womanist ecological care.

Finally, it must be mentioned that Berry *has shown* a higher level of racial consciousness when it comes to American history and whites decimation and theft of American Indians and their lands. For instance, Berry opens *The Unsettling of America* with this reflection: “One of the peculiarities of the white race’s presence in America is how little intention has been applied to it. As a people, wherever we have been, we have never really intended to be. The continent is said to have been discovered by an Italian who was on his way to India.”<sup>373</sup> Berry recognizes this telling of white America’s heritage is “too simply put” but I think he is largely correct when he says that this telling does portray “the dominant tendency in American history.”<sup>374</sup> In Berry’s subsequent thoughts at the beginning of *The Unsettling of America* he quotes extensively from

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<sup>371</sup> Berry, *The Hidden Wound*, 30.

<sup>372</sup> hooks, “Healing Talk: A Conversation,” in *Belonging*, 201.

<sup>373</sup> Berry, “The Unsettling of America,” in *The Unsettling of America*, 5.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

historian Bernard Devoto's work and paints a picture of countless moments in early American history where European explorers, settlers, and conquistadors who sought land, animal pelts, and gold wreaked havoc on native populations and the land wherever their prospects of financial gain took them.

This rendition of America's history is not unique to only the introduction of *The Unsettling of America*. On several other occasions Berry claims Americans would do well to imitate the ways that native peoples lived in greater harmony with the land, suggesting North American indigenous practices far outshined European ones in living carefully on the Earth.<sup>375</sup> Again, to draw connections to Jennings' claims about the colonial emphasis on displacement, Berry contrasts whites who "displaced themselves" with America Indians. "The Indians did, of course, experience movements of populations, but in general their relation to place was based upon old usage and association, upon inherited memory, tradition, and veneration. The land was their homeland."<sup>376</sup> Berry believes, and I think Jennings and even Walker<sup>377</sup> would agree, that native peoples were stable in a way that allowed them to care for the ground beneath their feet. A reality that Jennings argued European colonialists were uninterested in and that Berry has argued industrial agricultural over the past many decades has also neglected.

Berry's attention to the contrasts between North American Indigenous peoples and European peoples approaches to the land indicates to me that it would not have been an

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<sup>375</sup> Berry, "Three Ways of Farming," in *The Gift of Good Land*, 75; *The Hidden Wound*, 107.

<sup>376</sup> Berry, "The Unsettling of America," in *The Unsettling of America*, 6.

<sup>377</sup> Cf. Alice Walker, *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1984); "My Big Brother Bill," in *Living by the Word*, 41-50.

enormous step for Berry to also have shown greater sensitivity and recognition of the black experience in America. To evoke Murdoch once again, I believe it would only take but a slight turning of his gaze to more justly consider the black experience in the agricultural history of the United States. This slight attuning I think would have caused him to realize that though industrial agriculture has destroyed American lands and communities in a uniquely horrible way, there have also been other forces just as destructive, if not more destructive, in America prior to mechanized farming. As I have tried to suggest, this does not render his history inaccurate but it does render it more limited than he thinks it to be.

I do not take Berry to be a man of excessive hubris. And though I have detailed the insufficiencies of his telling of America's past, I do believe his social and ecological sensitivities would allow for that slight correction of his attention to experiences not his own—for, in fact as just noted, he has already shown the ability to attend to such experiences. This is powerfully revealed in the following passage from the *The Hidden Wound*. Berry says:

And so I write with the feeling that the truth I may tell will not be definitive or objective or even demonstrable, but in the strictest sense subjective, relative to the peculiar self-consciousness of a diseased man struggling toward a cure. I am trying to establish the outlines of an understanding of myself in regard to what was fated to be the continuing crisis of my life, the crisis of racial awareness—the sense of being doomed by my history to be, if not always a racist, then a man always limited by the inheritance of racism, condemned to be always conscious of the necessity *not* to be a racist, to be always dealing deliberately with the reflexes of racism that are embedded in my mind as deeply at least as the language I speak.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Berry, *The Hidden Wound*, 48-49.

I submit that if this sentiment had followed Berry more closely throughout his writings his telling of America's past would have been more complete. These words here and throughout *The Hidden Wound* and *Andy Catlett* reveal Berry's radical remembering on race that Wiebe argues for. However, I believe that this chapter suggests that Berry's life's crisis of racial awareness, sadly, was an often forgotten crisis.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### WORKING TOWARD CONSTRUCTIVE ENDS

Chapter 4 was my attempt to criticize what I believe to be a major gap in Wendell Berry's thought: the history and experiences of black Americans in his agricultural history of the United States. I ended the chapter though with, what might be seen as only a meager attempt, to recover his thought for the present argument of this project: that Berry and ecowomanism share mutual resources that move us toward a world in which human and nonhuman things thrive on our planet—or what I am calling an eco-cosmopolitanism. In spite of Berry's lack of attention to plight of black Americans, I believe the core of his social and ecological vision remains deeply conversant with the ecological and social visions of Alice Walker, bell hooks, Melanie Harris, and even Willie Jennings. In this way, this chapter attempts to bolster my claims made at the end of Chapter 4, namely that I believe Berry, read alongside the ecowomanist tradition and Jennings, can move our world toward a more hopeful future in which all things flourish on Earth.

In this chapter, I will focus on what I believe is an overarching feature in all of these thinkers that allows them to be read together in a constructive manner. I will suggest that by reading these thinkers together a holism emerges that is both social and ecological. What is more,



by considering Berry, Walker, and hooks together and with Christian theologians such as Willie Jennings and Melanie Harris, I will suggest that this inseparability between social and ecological ethics also allows for a sort of spiritual and theological holism. By spiritual or theological holism, I am suggesting each of these figures believes strongly in the need for spiritual convictions and practices to give life meaning and direction. Core to these convictions is the sense that spirituality must have actual ramifications for how one lives in the world. It is also a holism in that I argue the social and ecological visions of care expressed by Berry, Walker, and hooks are compatible with what is most significant in the Christian thought of theologians like Willie Jennings and Melanie Harris.

To make these arguments, the chapter will follow the subsequent outline. I have selected three areas to apply the social and ecological wisdom of Berry, the ecowomanists, and Jennings. These include a political section where I consider two ecological tragedies that bear profoundly on the human communities living close to them: the plastics spilled from the sinking of the Singaporean X-Press Pearl transport ship off the Sri Lankan coast and the severe depletion through agricultural overuse of the Ogallala Aquifer of the High Plains in the United States. The second section will focus on education. There I will explore three subsections that each have significance for the project's interlocutors: educational eroticism, educational economics, and educational specialization. Finally, I will focus my final section of the chapter on the church and show what sort of ecclesial changes might be in order given the arguments of the project. I will return to some of the resources from Chapter 1 to first argue for a greater emphasis on ecological theology ecclesial contexts. However, to accomplish such a development of an ecotheology I will

argue there must be a sharp challenge of the Christian doctrine of divine transcendence. I will end the chapter by drawing conclusions from these three areas and suggest that if we take Berry, the ecowomanists, and Jennings seriously on these matters, we will be better positioned to make meaningful efforts at developing a better eco-cosmopolitanism that cares deeply not only for the well-being of people but the natural environment as well.

### **Where Might We Venture?**

The considerations that follow are not meant to be exhaustive but rather illustrative. I address these particular areas not because they are the only areas worth considering but that they fit well within the arc of this project, given they are of particular interest to my interlocutors and myself. I will approach each area with a deconstructive tone that reveals the insufficiencies of certain contemporary beliefs and practices and how they are leaving our world in an increasingly uninhabitable state. My constructive suggestions might seem cursory to some but that is because I can only venture to put forward how these areas need to change in each particular time and place. I also do not intend this “list” of “areas” to be complete but rather the first steps along what will certainly prove to be an arduous and extended task of tearing down and building (or maybe growing) a better future.

### **Political**

In this section I will address two specific political issues, the X-Press Pearl shipping disaster and the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer. I chose these examples not because of their uniqueness (sadly) but rather because they illustrate well the political nature of environmental issues facing our planet. By no means are these *simply* political concerns or failings. But I argue

they are important to be considered from a political point of view given the lack of regulation, the collusion between governmental and corporate actors, and even the governmental encouragement and enabling of practices that are known to be destructive to natural and human environments.

### **Political: X-Press Pearl**

On May 20, 2021 the Singaporean X-Press Feeder container ship, the Pearl, caught fire off the coast of Sri Lankan capital, Colombo. After burning for 12 days, the container ship sunk. The ship was carrying a variety of materials including nitric acid, cosmetics, various other chemicals, and polyethylene pellets. Initial fears were that the oil spill from the ship, along with the nitric acid on board, were the gravest environmental threats. And without doubt these substances' toxicities were no friends to the Indian Ocean's coastal waters and their marine life off of Sri Lanka. But after months of observation and cleanup, it appears the most enduring problem from the ship's sinking is the spillage of nurdles (lentil size plastic pellets that are the key ingredient for plastic manufacturing)<sup>379</sup> that have washed up by the millions along the Sri Lankan coastline as well as discovered in the bodies of countless fish. As Karen McVeigh reports, enormous damage has already been recorded in the months since the spill to both marine

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<sup>379</sup> Nurdles, according to Jace Tunnell, a researcher at the University of Texas at Austin, are shipped around the world in their lentil size state for facilities to melt down and form into whatever plastic products they desire, "Science vs. Plastic: Nurdles," *Parley for the Oceans*, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://www.parley.tv/updates/2019/7/22/science-vs-plastic-nurdles>.

life *and* the local communities who rely on it.<sup>380</sup> In July 2021, the U.N. reported that the X-Press Pearl incident was “the largest on record” plastic spill in the world.<sup>381</sup>

How exactly do I understand this catastrophe to be political? And what is its significance for my project? To answer the first question, activists and journalists argue that what enables disasters like the X-Press Pearl to occur are lax federal and international regulations pertaining to toxic plastic substances like nurdles. Jace Tunnell and his “Nurdle Patrol” research group suggest that the loss of plastic pellets to the environment is “100% preventable” through more stringent regulations in how nurdles are handled and transported.<sup>382</sup> According to Tanya Cox, a marine plastics specialist at Flora and Fauna International, nurdles should be classified as hazardous material (along with more obvious hazards like explosives, flammable liquids, etc.) which would mean that when transported on container ships they would have to be stored below deck, packaged more thoroughly, and clearly labeled.<sup>383</sup> However, in McVeigh’s words, “the nurdle can have been kicked down the road,” with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) secretariat saying they will address the case at next year’s “pollution, prevention, and response” committee meeting, which will occur nearly one year after the spill. As McVeigh and others have noted, this

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<sup>380</sup> Karen McVeigh, “Nurdles: The Worst Toxic Waste You’ve Probably Never Heard Of: Billions of these tiny plastic pellets are floating in the ocean, causing as much damage as oil spills, yet they are still not classified as hazardous,” *The Guardian*, November 29, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/29/nurdles-plastic-pellets-environmental-ocean-spills-toxic-waste-not-classified-hazardous>.

<sup>381</sup> Hassan Partow, Camille Lacroix, Stephanie Le Floch, and Luigi Alcaro, “X-Press Pearl Maritime Disaster: Sri Lanka,” *UN Environmental Advisory Mission*, July 2021, [https://postconflict.unep.ch/Sri%20Lanka/X-Press\\_Sri%20Lanka\\_UNEP\\_27.07.2021\\_s.pdf](https://postconflict.unep.ch/Sri%20Lanka/X-Press_Sri%20Lanka_UNEP_27.07.2021_s.pdf), 3.

<sup>382</sup> “Science vs. Plastic: Nurdles.” See also Nurdle Patrol’s website hosted by the University of Texas: <https://nurdlepatrol.org/Forms/Home/index.php>.

<sup>383</sup> McVeigh, “Nurdles.”

is not nearly a fast enough response given the numerous other nurdle spills in the past few years in places like the North Sea (2020), off the South African coast (2018 and 2020), and in Lavaca Bay off Texas' Gulf of Mexico Coast—which in 2017 a US federal judge ruled that the petrochemical company Formosa Plastics would be held liable for dumping, for years, millions of nurdles into the bay.<sup>384</sup>

What troubles McVeigh on such a delayed timeframe of working to hold corporations accountable, is that while governments and international governing bodies work to get organized, corporations like X-Press continue practices that have proven harmful. McVeigh's reporting importantly discloses the harm enacted through the spill *not only* damages marine ecosystems *but also* the human communities who depend on healthy waters and marine life for food and income from industries like fishing and tourism.<sup>385</sup> And with every passing day that no political action is taken, the history of nurdle spills indicates yet another catastrophe might be just around the corner.

Now let me consider the second question posed above. What advice might Berry and the ecowomanists offer about the X-Press Pearl tragedy? First, McVeigh's claims that the impact of something like X-Press Pearl catastrophe is always social *and* ecological exemplifies the claims made by Berry and ecowomanists in Chapters 2 and 3. Berry and the ecowomanists frequently attest to the interconnected nature of the world and the ways harm enacted on one part of the

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<sup>384</sup> Amal Ahmad, "Nurdle by Nurdle, Citizens Took on a Billion-Dollar Plastics Company—and Won," *Texas Observer*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.texasobserver.org/nurdle-by-nurdle-citizens-took-on-a-billion-dollar-plastic-company-and-won/>.

<sup>385</sup> McVeigh, "Nurdle."

world always results in at least some level of harm to all other parts. In the face of the ever-growing ecological crisis it appears this point cannot be overemphasized. Ecological degradation never affects only “natural” environments, but always, also adversely affects human life.

Scholars, journalists, and activists must constantly seek to make connections between ecological degradation and the ways it inevitably leads to social or human degradation. For better or worse, it appears that Thomas Hobbes was right in his identification of people as inherently interested in self-preservation.<sup>386</sup> In other words, existential threats have the ability to galvanize people to act in unique, and even more expeditious, ways that more altruistic motivations for action do not always possess. Though self-preservation might prompt more immediate action, in a case like the ecological crisis, it is important to note that Berry and ecowomanist’s vision of an interconnected world means that self-preservation gives way to a sort of altruism given the fact that ecological and human health are not zero-sum or necessarily in competition.

A second consideration concerning the thought of Berry and the ecowomanists and the political ramifications of the X-Press Pearl catastrophe is the local and national/global dynamic. As detailed throughout this project, Berry frequently touts the value of local solutions for local problems. As revealed in Chapter 2, Walker more frequently speaks about the value of focusing on universals that move beyond the “local.” The X-Press Pearl nurdle spill reveals that neither a purely local nor global emphasis sufficiently addresses such a problem. Given the global nature of international waterways and trade it would be impossible to effectively address such a catastrophe through local action alone. At the same time, Berry correctly diagnoses that too often

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<sup>386</sup> Tommy L. Lott, “The Psychology of Self-Preservation in Hobbes,” *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales* 61 (1982): 37-55.

local needs and wishes receive little consideration by regional, national, and global leaders. Thus, leaders at all levels of society and industry are needed to make change happen in a case like the X-Press Pearl tragedy. However, a “reversal” of interest would be necessary given that historical motivations for companies and governments to act might not be sufficient reasons presently for (in)action.

By this I mean that local people and ecosystems would be firstly considered by these leaders rather than other motivations such as profit or convenience or any other motivation that inordinately benefits governments and corporations and harms local people and places. This is not to say that there are not other important factors to consider in how container ships move and what they move. But it is to affirm McVeigh and Tunnell’s suggestions for a more rapid response from regulatory agencies on issuing stricter rules governing how toxins are package and transported so that local communities and ecosystems do not bear the burden of tragedies like the sinking of the X-Press Pearl.

### **Political: Ogallala Aquifer**

Let me now turn to a political issue that is much closer to my geographical and vocational home. The Ogallala Aquifer is the second largest aquifer in world (second only to Australia’s Great Artesian Basin) underlying nearly 174,000 square miles of the Central United States.<sup>387</sup> It is a fairly shallow water table that stretches from South Dakota to Texas, underlying portions of

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<sup>387</sup> Matthew R. Sanderson and Vivian Hughes, “Race to the Bottom (of the Well): Groundwater in an Agricultural Production Treadmill,” *Social Problems* 66 (2019): 392.

eight States.<sup>388</sup> The Aquifer is replenished through snow and rainfall runoff from the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains States, following several large regional tributaries (North and South Platte, Republican, Arkansas, Red, and Brazos Rivers) of the Missouri-Mississippi river system. Large scale well-drilling efforts began in the post-World War II environment with demand for crops increasing, diesel water pumps being readily available, and the development of center pivot irrigation technology.<sup>389</sup> These demands and technologies made bringing aquifer water to the surface all the more important for crop irrigation and production. And even though nearly 3 million people receive the majority of their water from the Ogallala Aquifer, approximately 90 percent of all water withdrawals from the Aquifer go to crop irrigation.<sup>390</sup>

In many regions, water levels in the Aquifer have drastically reduced over the past 75 years, with the most severe drops occurring in the past three to four decades. The causes for the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer stem from overuse of aquifer water for crop irrigation as well as climate change.<sup>391</sup> Overuse, according to researchers, is defined simply as a discrepancy in extraction of water from the Aquifer and its natural “recharge” rate through precipitation and

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<sup>388</sup> The Ogallala Aquifer is the principal member of the Central High Plains underground water system. The northwestern edge of the system dips into Larimer County, Colorado where I live and grow trees.

<sup>389</sup> Center pivot irrigation is a method of irrigating farm land by rotating a sprinkler around a pivot point (the well shaft) in a field. It is a more efficient method of irrigating, as compared to traditional flood irrigation, and yet its success has also led to its extensive use in industrial farming, resulting in the depletion of groundwater sources.

<sup>390</sup> Sanderson and Hughs, “Race to the Bottom,” 392.

<sup>391</sup> Kayla A. Cotterman, Anthony D. Kendall, Bruno Basso, and David W. Hyndman, “Groundwater Depletion and Climate Change: Future Prospects of Crop Production in the Central High Plains Aquifer,” *Climate Change* 146 (2018): 187-200.



runoff.<sup>392</sup> As water levels in the Aquifer diminish it becomes increasingly clear that current irrigation and crop patterns are unsustainable.<sup>393</sup> In the 1990s, estimates placed the Aquifer's depletion at one-third of its pre-World War II levels,<sup>394</sup> meaning current levels are likely much lower. If current usage rates continue it is predicted that by 2070 most ground water supplies from the Ogallala Aquifer will be exhausted and will not be replenished for thousands of years.<sup>395</sup> Starkly put, the depletion of the Aquifer and its slow recharge rate (by human standards) has rendered the Aquifer a nonrenewable resource.

Cereal crops—principally corn, wheat, and sorghum—and soybean production drive irrigated water usage throughout much of the Ogallala Aquifer's reach. Crop production on land overlying the Aquifer accounts for one-quarter of all U.S. agricultural production,<sup>396</sup> and supports \$35 billion in crop production a year.<sup>397</sup> The usages of these crops is multifaceted and makes analysis of their benefits complex. For example, Kansas' corn production is more than

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>394</sup> Stephen Lauer and Matthew Sanderson, "Irrigated Agriculture and Human Development: A County-Level Analysis 1980-2010," *Environment, Development, and Sustainability* 22 (2020): 4408.

<sup>395</sup> S. J. Smidt, Haacker, E. M., Kendall, A. D., Deines, J. M., Pei, L., Cotterman, K. A., et al., "Complex water management in modern agriculture: Trends in the water-energy-food nexus over the High Plains Aquifer," *Science of the Total Environment* 566 (2016): 989.

<sup>396</sup> "Analysis of High Plains Resource Risk and Economic Impacts," *National Protections and Program Directorate Office of Cyber and Infrastructure Analysis*, August, 2015, accessed December 29, 2021, <https://rbwp.nebraska.gov/Reference/OCIA%20-%20Analysis%20of%20High%20Plains%20Resource%20Risk%20and%20Economic%20Impacts%20%282%29.pdf>.

<sup>397</sup> Matthew R. Sanderson, Burke Griggs, and Jacob A. Miller, "The Government Pays Farmers to Pull Water from the Ogallala-High Plains Aquifer—now they're depleting it," in *Green Biz*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.greenbiz.com/article/government-pays-farmers-pull-water-ogallala-high-plains-aquifer-now-theyre-depleting-it>.

60% greater than its next largest crop soybeans and nearly three-times greater than its wheat production.<sup>398</sup> As the USDA has reported, the two major uses of corn are as the main energy ingredient for livestock feed and for fuel, in the form of ethanol.<sup>399</sup> The data reveals that not only is the agricultural production of land sitting atop the Ogallala Aquifer an enormous part of agricultural production in the United States but it is also far-reaching. The horrific negative effects on the subterranean natural environment is clear. But, at a glance, it appears such water usage from the Aquifer, at least in the short term, has been beneficial for human development and well-being, given the Aquifer has long provided America with its breadbasket. But is this *actually* true that human well-being has followed from people's extreme use of the Aquifer?

Matthew Sanderson, Burke Griggs, and Jacob Miller have called the industrial agricultural depletion of the Aquifer a “production treadmill” whereby farmers are encouraged by government payments to draw water out of the Aquifer at unsustainable levels and thus, in turn, buy more efficient and bigger equipment with subsidies so they can till, plant, and irrigate more land.<sup>400</sup> “At first glance,” they say “farmers on the Plains are doing well in 2020. Crop production increased this year. Corn, the largest crop in U.S., had a near record year, and farm incomes increased by 5.7 percent over 2019.”<sup>401</sup> But as the authors point out, what this “good

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<sup>398</sup> “2020 State Agricultural Overview: Kansas,” *United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service*, accessed December 29, 2021, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick\\_Stats/Ag\\_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=KANSAS](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=KANSAS).

<sup>399</sup> “Feedgrains Sector at a Glance,” *Economic Research Service U.S. Department of Agriculture*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/crops/corn-and-other-feedgrains/feedgrains-sector-at-a-glance/>.

<sup>400</sup> Matthew R. Sanderson, Burke Griggs, and Jacob A. Miller, “The Government Pays Farmers,”

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

news” does not reveal are the massive governmental payments farmers received that were an increase of a staggering 65 percent from the previous year (2019). This sum includes payments for lost revenue from the fallout of escalating trade wars and Covid-19 relief. The authors note that “[c]orn prices were too low to cover the cost of growing it this year, with federal subsidies making up the difference.”<sup>402</sup> As research shows, “Government payments create a vicious cycle of overproduction that intensifies water use. Subsidies encourage farmers to expand and buy expensive equipment to irrigate larger areas. . . . Growing larger amounts floods the market, further reducing crop prices and farm incomes. Subsidies support this cycle.”<sup>403</sup>

Using the Human Development Index, Sanderson and his Kansas State University colleague Stephen Lauer have argued there is no quantifiable benefit between water usage (and thus depletion) from the Ogallala Aquifer and human well-being.<sup>404</sup> Their research notes very marginal gains in income increase for farming communities and nearly no increase for the non-farming communities in the Ogallala Aquifer region.<sup>405</sup> One might argue that benefits are best evaluated at the national, rather than regional level (as Sanderson and Lauer do). However, as my project demonstrates, Berry, the ecowomanists, and Jennings require attending first to local well-being. If there is little to no measurable benefit of extracting a local resource for the local community, then things must change. And if there is little to no benefit for local people *and* a very measurable harm being done to local environments, then things must change quickly.

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid. Cf. Matthew Sanderson and Vivian Hughes, “Race to the Bottom (of the Well).”

<sup>404</sup> Lauer and Sanderson, “Irrigated Agriculture and Human Development,” 4408ff.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 4419.

Jennings reveals how colonial powers extracted bodies and resources from their homelands and shipped them around the world in an effort to line the pockets of government officials, business leaders, and the like, while local places were left abandoned and destitute. In more recent times, Berry and the ecowomanists have shown how Neo-colonialism in the form of national and multi-national corporations, with governments' approval, have performed similar extractive practices that again leave local ecosystems and human populations worse off while distant politicians and business executives enrich themselves.

The Aquifer crisis demonstrates the grave danger of violating Berry's core principle that local problems require local solutions, or at least solutions that benefit local lands and peoples. The federal government of the United States is pouring billions of dollars worth of subsidies into agricultural production in the Great Plains because it is more concerned with keeping the economy "going" at current levels. Governmental agencies should be well-aware of the unsustainable extraction of water from the Ogallala Aquifer but for "bigger" reasons beyond the local environment and people the U.S. government and its business partners cannot reduce, in a meaningful way, the negative consequences its subsidies and policies bring about to the land and those who work it. The agricultural production of the lands overlaying the Ogallala Aquifer have created tremendous food and economic stability for decades. But it has come at the expense of irreparable ecology degradation that make current usage rates unsustainable.

### **Political: Conclusion**

Any number of other examples, in other locations, could be explored and analyzed with similar effect, such as the water crisis of the southwestern United States, the "Dead Zone" in

Gulf of Mexico, or the toxic oil swamps of the Niger Delta, just to name a few. But the X-Press Pearl catastrophe and the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer especially highlight the ways that ecological and social disasters often go hand-in-hand. Berry and the ecowomanists' refusal to not parse apart social and ecological harms again bears witness to the universal nature of damages to world and to the need for unified efforts against them. Their wisdom would suggest that the first step in finding solutions to these problems would be to reject short-term solutions, most especially those that prioritize excessive monetary gains for a few, and rather to prioritize environmental and local populations first in decisions about toxic substances and water usages.

A second conclusion is the need to take seriously the enormous power political and corporate actors have in these situations and the distance existing between their lives and well-beings and the well-being of local communities and ecosystems. One can read interviews, for instance, with Kansas farmers and coastal Sri Lankans and recognize these local residents and workers are not interested in destroying their home environments.<sup>406</sup> These folks depend on their local waters, animals and fish, and land to live and make their worlds meaningful. It would be naive to suggest that local folks always act in ways that promote health for the natural environment, and yet, given their well-beings depend so totally on the ground and water sustaining their lives it would be utterly self-defeating to consistently act in ways that jeopardize these sources.

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<sup>406</sup> Kane Farabaugh, "Kansas Farmers Work to Prevent Depletion of Ogallala Aquifer," *VOANews*, March 21, 2014, <https://www.voanews.com/a/kansas-farmers-work-to-prevent-depletion-of-ogallala-aquifer/1876717.html>; Zinara Rathnayake, "'Nurdles Are Everywhere': How Plastic Pellets Ravaged a Sri Lankan Paradise," *The Guardian*, Jan 25, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/25/nurdles-are-everywhere-how-plastic-pellets-ravaged-a-sri-lankan-paradise>.

By contrast, Berry and hooks describe the ways distant decision-making corporate executives disregard the well-beings of local communities and natural environments in the removal of mountaintops and strip mining practices for coal extraction.<sup>407</sup> This separation is also on display when one considers the scale of the decades of oil pollution in the Niger Delta and the distance between these degraded ecosystems and the communities dependent on them and the corporate and state owned companies who degraded them.<sup>408</sup> In a similar way, the X-Press executives living and working in Singapore are thousands of miles removed from the sinking of their ship and its destruction of local places and people. By looking to Berry, the ecowomanists, and Jennings one gleans from their insights the importance of embodying an ethic of closeness. That for good choices to be made for all people and all places, decision makers must be close enough to all people and places that their decisions affect.

Finally, humanity must move ever closer to Berry and the ecowomanist's vision of an interconnected world. When Berry speaks disdainfully of "new" technologies or bemoans American culture's disregards for "old" wisdom, his deep respect for the past and a vision of continuity in world history is on display. When Walker and Harris speak of the power of engaging with ancestors and finding comfort and guidance in these interactions, one experiences

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<sup>407</sup> Berry, "The Landscaping of Hell," in *The Long-Legged House*, 12-29; hooks, "Moved by Mountains," in *Belonging*, 25-33.

<sup>408</sup> Rebecca Ratcliffe, "'This Place Used To Be Green': The Brutal Impact of Oil in the Niger Delta," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/dec/06/this-place-used-to-be-green-the-brutal-impact-of-oil-in-the-niger-delta>; Rose Alani, Davies Nwude, Adaeze Joseph, Olumide Akinrinade, "Impact of Gas Flaring on Surface and Underground Water: A Case Study of Anieze and Okwuibome Areas of Delta State, Nigeria," *Environmental Monitoring Assessment* 192 (2020): 166; Tavleen Bains, "Oil Spills at the Niger Delta: A Look at How Nigeria Is Swimming in Oil," June 14, 2021 <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/fcaf622f4b5647c88eb5581443a5caf6>.

the cohesiveness of their worldviews. Something like the Ogallala Aquifer's depletion and its nonrenewable nature in our lifetime reveals the pertinence of the wisdom of Berry and the ecowomanists. We must reject myopic visions of the world that encourage us not to think about the past or the future. We must not be so selfish or so fatalistic to deny that what we do and how we live bear powerfully on the livability of our planet for our children and our children's children for many generations to come.

### **Educational**

I will now turn my attention to the educational realm. If one takes seriously the ecological and social visions in Berry, the ecowomanists, and Jennings how might education—and theological education, in particular—be reconceived? How might we think, again, how institutions, curricula, and pedagogies shape the intellectual and moral lives of students? How might such a rethinking even transform the lives of those who teach and administer the functions of such educational spaces? And how might those newly formed students, teachers, and administrators shape the well-being of societies and the planet?

### **Educational Eroticism**

Willie Jennings argues that theological education is uniquely positioned to shape Western education as a whole. Jennings believes education should first be an endeavor in forming and guiding desire, specifically the formation of desire to embrace another.<sup>409</sup> Jennings contrasts his vision of education with what he understands to be the dominate educational framework at play in much of Western education. This dominate framework he says “has always been inside the

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<sup>409</sup> Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 143.

energy of colonial design.”<sup>410</sup> By this he means that Western education—and “modern theological education”—has been chiefly interested in forming students to be self-sufficient, autonomous person. This self-sufficiency downplays the value of collaboration, communion, and a “pedagogy of belonging.”<sup>411</sup> Instead promoting communion and belonging, Jennings argues that education in the West took its values from the European colonial project and sought to develop students who had absolute control, possession, and mastery of knowledge.<sup>412</sup> This self-sufficient individual (in its purest form) is a white male who learns to defend his ideas from all its detractors with ease and confidence.<sup>413</sup> It would be unfair to Jennings to suggest he finds all white men in the Western or even theological academy to be committed presently to this vision. And yet, any one educated or educating in a Western context likely can relate to Jennings’ description to some extent.

Though theological education has not served the transformational role Jennings believes it can, he nevertheless attempts to inspire a sort of reformation within theological education’s ranks. What positions theological education to transform education in the West, according to Jennings, is his conviction that “God comes, aiming for ecstasy in the body of creatures.”<sup>414</sup> Like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jennings puts forward a vision of a life together that is interested in a mutual exchange of knowledge and experience and togetherness that desires to form “deeper

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<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 6ff.

<sup>413</sup> Cf. Ibid., 32, 44.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 143.



habits of attending to one another and the world around us.”<sup>415</sup> Jennings says this life together will require “a new sense of shared habitation,” one in which all voices are heard but not forced to articulate or exist according to a singular (white male/master) pattern.<sup>416</sup>

This life together, in Jennings’ mind, should be at the heart of the Christian witness. A witness, he says, that attests to the “desire of God to make embrace the vocation of creatures.”<sup>417</sup> In this way, those gathered in such an educational space become “a destination and not a means to an end. The goal of cultivating those who can gather people centers theological education in its erotic power.”<sup>418</sup> This makes education much more about nurturing and forming rather than mastering and controlling, meaning that—in concert with what Jennings suggests—that theological education can serve as a model for more “secular” forms of education. In *After Whiteness*, Jennings puts on display—as he did in *The Christian Imagination*—that the Christian community has not adequately performed the type of embrace he is convinced grounds our lives as Christians. And yet, he rightly believes that Christian theology, particularly God’s embrace of our world through the Incarnation, sets a model for Christians whereby no differences between

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 59. One would be perceptive to notice Jennings’ language of “attention” here. Jennings builds on the thought of Simone Weil who also influenced Iris Murdoch’s notion of attention. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 149.

people justify their separation.<sup>419</sup> This, Jennings believes, is the task of theological education. As Jennings says, education should be about moving “us toward a true maturity that is a way of life together, a way that forms new life together.”<sup>420</sup> A way of life that settles not for separateness but desires unity and embrace, a desire so strong as to qualify it as erotic.

Hooks, like Jennings, highlights the power of eroticism to break down barriers that separate people. She argues that “eroticism” is not necessarily synonymous with “sexualization” though often they are used together. Hooks distinguishes sexuality and eroticism by saying sexuality, for black women has too often been associated with objectification. Therefore, she advocates for an eroticism centered on intimacy and pleasure, and thus, one that needs not necessarily be sexual in nature.<sup>421</sup> Rather, hooks emphasizes the erotic power of touch<sup>422</sup> and verbal communication,<sup>423</sup> forms of eroticism Jennings also celebrates,<sup>424</sup> as sites where love and authentic communication and care can transpire.

This rejects traditional educational emphases built on the notion of the autonomous student who seeks to master information. Like Jennings, hooks believes that the lie of self-

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<sup>419</sup> This is a rather bold claim given his exploration of the destructive nature of the colonialist project. It is appropriate here to note that many valuable connections exist here between Jennings’ reflections and Miroslav Volf’s writing on the power of the Christian witness of embrace and friendship even in the face of a war driven largely by ethnic and religious differences such as the Croatian-Bosniak war in the early 1990s, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theology Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>421</sup> hooks, “Move by Passion: Eros and Responsibility,” in *Sisters of the Yam*, 87.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>424</sup> Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 151ff.

sufficiency is particularly harmful to black people given so many in their community already suffer severely from self-doubt and self-hate.<sup>425</sup> Pursuing the figment of self-sufficiency also, according to hooks, inhibits efforts of collective action and care.<sup>426</sup> This seems right to me, even as one moves beyond the black community alone, as hooks describes here. When education is set up primarily as a self-seeking endeavor often less room remains for concern for collective learning and well-being. This does not necessarily require a total lack of self-interest (as hooks suggests) but that such self-interest aims for a good greater than self-edification alone.

Many conceptual and practical implications result from this analysis of education by Jennings and hooks. Principally, connections that relate to how we attempt to learn about our world and how we seek to care for it and each other. But before I turn to explore these conclusions I would like to consider two more specific aspects of modern education that I believe prohibit education from making the world more habitable for all things. I will first consider the economics of education and then end the section with reflections on educational specialization.

### **Educational Economics**

Berry's work on education—formed not systematically, but strewn aphoristically throughout his writings—affirms much of Jennings' critiques of education aimed at domination. A central critique Berry levels against educational institutions in the United States is that they have aided and abetted governments and agri-industrialists in the decimation of the land and its

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<sup>425</sup> hooks, "Dreaming Ourselves Dark and Deep: Black Beauty," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 59-73.

<sup>426</sup> hooks, "Sweet Communion," in *Sisters of the Yam*, 117.

people. Think back to Chapter 2 and Berry's criticism of Martin Feldstein, the preeminent economist, academic, and political advisor. Feldstein was the George F. Baker Professor of Economics at Harvard University and was the chief economic advisor to President Ronald Reagan, thus possessing significant power to shape education and policy. As I noted, Berry criticized Feldstein for his remarks about the health of the United States' economy. Such health, in Feldstein's mind, was determined by low unemployment, pay increases (even if marginal), and high levels of industrial production. As Berry says, Feldstein was able to speak glowing of economic health because he was "conveniently ignorant" of industrial and governmental abuses of the land and those who work it.

In "Going to Work," Berry iterates on these exact concerns, particularly as they relate to the ways students are educated in the United States. Berry questions any evaluation of "the economy" that does not thoroughly consider the well-being of "local households, livelihoods, and landscapes." Berry says that too often "politicians and school bureaucrats" are "servants of 'the economy,'" by which "they mean the corporate economy."<sup>427</sup> Berry believes many educational institutions prepare their students to further governmental or corporate interests that are almost always insufficiently concerned with local issues, the actual realities of people's lived experiences, and the well-being of the land. The governmental and corporate interests that Berry has in mind include many forms of domination, but perhaps the grandparent of all these forms is financial domination.<sup>428</sup> The supreme focus on making money means educational attention often

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<sup>427</sup> Wendell Berry, "Going to Work," in *Citizenship Papers*, 35.

<sup>428</sup> Wendell Berry, "Jefferson, Morrill, and the Upper Crust," in *The Unsettling of America*, 161.

turns away from qualitative measurements of success to purely quantitative ones.<sup>429</sup> By this, Berry expresses concern that a hyper focus on making money during one's education often leads graduates to pursue opportunities wherever money is attainable. I think it is right to fear that pursuing particular forms of work based largely high pay and the most prestigious opportunity often leads to less consideration of the health of communities and the land and how one's company or organization affects those places and people.

I find connections here with Jennings' remarks on education (and intellectual domination) in that Berry seems to think that much focus in the American university system has been concerned with economic output that keeps the United States in a position of global dominance. Per Berry's critique of Feldstein, this culture of domination expresses itself in keeping workers working with wages just high enough to keep them from quitting along with industrial production that keeps American companies among the most successful around the world. Such a system keeps low-wage workers severely disadvantaged to improve their economic standing (particularly when inflation is taken into consideration) and it places the reduction of environmental degradation resulting from industrial production on the strategic back-burner. In a

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid., 164. Berry words here are worth quoting in their fullness:

I am suggesting that our university-based structures of success, as they have come to be formed upon quantitative measures, virtually require the degeneration of qualitative measures and the disintegration of culture. The university accumulates information at a rate that is literally inconceivable, yet its structure and its self-esteem institutionalize the likelihood that not much of this information will ever be taken home. We do not work where we live, and if we are to hold up our heads in the presence of our teachers and classmates, we must not live where we come from, 164.

It is clear that Berry views economic and financial "success" within a broader framework that separates people based on their social and even geographical location. Bell hooks, rightly I think, would put this in class terms and made the point that educational institutions too often reinforce class hierarchies that make people disdainful of their places of origin and the particularities which make those places and cultures unique.

culture where global superiority and outshining domestic and international competitors are of chief importance (or as Jennings says—self-sufficiency, mastery, and domination) considering human and environmental ethical implications of the global economy are a mirage.

What other options might be available? In “Thoughts in the Presence of Fear” Berry says that education should be geared toward preparing students to be able “to put their lives in order.” For Berry, this means students are prepared to live lives that are “economically, politically, socially, and culturally responsible.”<sup>430</sup> It seems fair to say that Berry finds much of education to be insufficiently preparing students to live such responsible lives. What Berry says would be responsible education for our young people would be to teach them to not “spend and consume endlessly.” He calls for a “new economy” that is built on “thrift and care, on saving and conserving, not on excess and waste.”<sup>431</sup> Certainly this is not the type of economy Professor Feldstein promotes nor the educational pattern that guides many academic disciplines.<sup>432</sup> As I will show the next section, I believe, along with Jennings, that theological education and Christian institutions have extraordinary resources to address these specific concerns Berry presents here. The question then becomes, will they pursue these other options? Or will they remain—as Azurara, Acosta, and Colenso did—servants of a culture and society that pillages its people and its land?

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<sup>430</sup> Wendell Berry, “Thoughts in the Presence of Fear,” in *Citizenship Papers*, 21.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>432</sup> These sorts of “goals” were not what my theological education taught me to pursue. However, I have spent my entire university educational career at Christian universities and what Berry describes here is in line with the education friends and colleagues of mine received at these Christian institutions in business, economics, technology, and science programs.

## Educational Specialization

A final aspect of education I will consider here, that I believe holds significant consequences for any ethic which takes seriously both social and ecological care, is that of academic specialization. Specialization in any sphere of life is a cause for concern for Berry and, as I will suggest, it is also rejected in important ways by the ecowomanists. They do not reject specialization because of its emphasis on competency. Rather, their criticism of specialization grounds itself in a vision of a unified world harmed through isolationist mentalities and narrow expertise. This is on display in Berry's rejection of Feldstein's notion of economic health, which Berry sees as much too limited. When Berry says that well-prepared students would be those who are "responsible" in terms of economics, politics, society, and culture, the holistic vision I argued exists throughout Berry's corpus appears yet again.

One good example of this comes from Berry's "The Presence of Nature in the Natural World." Here Berry considers the notions of nature in several of his favor authors. He gives special attention to the French theologian and poet Alan Lille's (c. 1128-1202/3) work *The Plaint of Nature*. Berry claims that *The Plaint of Nature* "cannot be comprehended within the bounds of any of our specialties," and that this results from the mysterious, incomprehensible, multifaceted nature of "this living world" that Lille was particularly privy to.<sup>433</sup> Berry contends that a such living world as ours gives rise to questions that are always scientific, artistic, religious and "insistently economic." Seemingly, the notion of economic for Berry is rooted in the Greek etymology of οἰκονόμια, which for the Greeks was a term that encompassed how one managed

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<sup>433</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Presence of Nature in the Natural World," in *The Art of Loading Brush*, 117.

one's house(hold) or in the political sense, what proper participation in society entailed.<sup>434</sup> Berry suggests that academics and professionals “severely. . . penalize” us when they “divorce. . . the sciences and arts.”<sup>435</sup> Thus, for Berry, isolating disciplines and not conversing widely with information from a host of fields of study lead to narrow worldviews that harm social and ecological well-being.

Berry's insistence that “experts” move beyond their secluded specializations to converse and take interest in the enormity of our diverse world resonates strongly with ecowomanist intersectionality. Melanie Harris highlights how in her classrooms she often works to connect ecological justice and advocacy with a host of interests her students already have. Because Harris strongly believes in the interconnectedness of all things, specifically as it relates to the environment, she guides her students to find ways to connect their interests in literature, the arts, technology, science, and any other field.<sup>436</sup> Hooks argues something similar when she suggests that academics must work to diminish jargon and insider language. Rather, hooks thinks they should consider how to make their work more accessible for a wider audience so it might

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<sup>434</sup> Cf. Dotan Leshem, “Retrospectives: What Did the Ancient Greeks Mean by *Oikonomia*?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 225-238.

<sup>435</sup> Berry, “Presence of Nature,” in *The Art of Loading Brush*, 117. One would not be wrong to see, at least to an extent, important similarities here with the theology of Radical Orthodoxy as put forward by prominent figures of the movement such as John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock who reject, what they see as, liberalism's failed project of finding meaning in simply achieving what one desires. Radical Orthodoxy rather attempts to put forward a vision of meaning that grounds value and purpose in the vital sense of at-homeness in our world. Cf. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990); *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013); *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>436</sup> Harris, *Ecowomanism*, 133-141.



flourish, in a multitude of ways, among varying groups of people.<sup>437</sup> Hooks says that her experiences in academic institutions, though exceptions always exist, has consistently been that educational spaces keep intact social orders—principally class hierarchies.<sup>438</sup>

I would offer that educational specialization should not be demonized so much because it creates “experts” or those who are highly skilled in their craft. Rather, what I believe Berry and the ecowomanists are most interested in are skilled people integrating their abilities into our multifaceted world with its complicated problems. The spillage of nurdles serves as a good illustration here. To solve such a problem good journalists and activists would need to know something about community development, local practices and needs, environmental sustainability, and the problems arising which jeopardize those places and people. They would then need to report and advocate effectively about this information. This reporting would then reach people who would express these concerns to their elected representatives. Of course, for adequate action to be taken, domestic and international policy-makers would need to work to understand the multifaceted nature of holding varying interests in balance (corporate, local, environmental, etc.). This would require their learning about the situation, writing appropriate legislation, and enforcing it fairly. I would also note, good business leaders would be needed to understand the value of caring for local communities and environmental concerns rather than only paying lip service to following the rules. This would mean business partners would work to

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<sup>437</sup> hooks, “Feminist Education for Critical Consciousness,” in *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 19-24.

<sup>438</sup> bell hooks, “Coming to Class Consciousness,” in *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, 36.

actually understand local concerns and the laws protecting them, honor those laws and communities' needs, and support additional and appropriate restrictions elsewhere.

Berry, in particular, believes the only way to solve such complicated issues is to take more focused, localized views of things and seek solutions that work for each community. I do not take Berry's local approach as a rejection of a more macro effort to finding solutions for issues like the environmental crisis but rather it seems to be that Berry believes a move away from local concerns has contributed significantly to these now global ecological catastrophes. I see a strong connection here with the vision laid out by Harris and hooks in that they desire to make knowledge accessible to all people so that integrating specializations can help all people rather than continue to fortify the positions of the already privileged. They do not want to separate interests and particular experiences from any conversation, however seemingly disparate, because they believe a plurality of thought and experience is always an asset. This, again, fits well with Jennings' desires for educational spaces to be a places where all people can find a home and where those who inhabit those spaces constantly work to embrace and find communion with the others who also call them home.

### **Educational Conclusions**

I will conclude this section by suggesting what is a very immediate way for institutions of higher learning (particularly Christian ones) to embrace the visions of Berry, Jennings, and the ecowomanist. It is no secret that universities and colleges are perpetually sending their students

away with unpayable debt<sup>439</sup> while at the same time spending enormous amounts of money on new buildings and the salaries of coaches, presidents, vice presidents, provosts, deans, other administrators, and even faculty. If Jennings' vision of theological education that primarily embodies an ethic of embrace is to come to fruition, the enormous financial gaps that separate people on Christian campuses must be addressed in a radical way. At the conclusion of *After Whiteness* Jennings ruminates on what education in the West currently is and what it might be if the "one relentless goal" of domination was not the focal point. In this rumination he mentions the institutional struggle to stay "financially viable"<sup>440</sup> and to align "financial modelings with our desired outcomes."<sup>441</sup> Wrapped up in this I believe is the insidious and pervasive sin of oppressing students with financial debts that can cripple them economically for decades. This sacking of students with debt is paired with colleges and universities paying out massive amounts of money to maintain "relevancy" or "to be competitive" (through building new facilities, striving to attain and maintain high performing sports teams, developing better academic programs, etc.) in the ever-present struggle for institutional notoriety and dominance.

What could our academic worlds look like if we paid as much attention to whether students could attend our schools without accumulating massive debt as we do to where our institutions place in national school rankings? Jennings is right to note some of our academic institutions might not survive if priorities shifted. But what could our world look like if the

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<sup>439</sup> Francesca Fontana, "I Graduated from College Free of Student Debt. I Am Not a Model for Anyone," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/college-graduate-debt-free-11636811742>.

<sup>440</sup> Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 153.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

theological academy set the example to not allow institutional survival to be *the* motivating goal?

What kind of world could we help create if we committed to the task of reducing the gap between the financial well-being of our institutional elites (coaches, presidents, etc.) and those who take on enormous debt to attend our colleges and universities and those who often are paid an unlivable wage to clean our toilets or remove snow? Pursuing such a goal might be institutional suicide but it might also lead to a world that would be much more livable for all things and where the divides between “the haves” and “the have nots” did not continue to expand *ad infinitum*. Berry offers a template that I think could move us in the right direction:

The aim of the corporations and their political and academic disciples is large, standardized industrial solutions to be applied everywhere. . . The ruling ideas of our present national and international economy are competition, consumption, globalism, corporate profitability, mechanical efficiency, technological change, upward mobility—and in all of them there is the implication of acceptable violence against the land and the people. We, on the contrary, must think again of reverence, humility, affection, familiarity, neighborliness, cooperation, thrift, appropriateness, local loyalty.<sup>442</sup>

Certainly this would be a world where authentic embrace would be more possible and where the presence of God might be better displayed. For such a transformation to take place in our theological academic spaces, the church seeming will also play a crucial role. I turn now to explore this ecclesial role.

### **Ecclesial**

In this section I will first attend to the need to develop stronger ethics of environmental care within Christian communities. I will revisit some material from the first chapter to show,

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<sup>442</sup> Berry, “Local Economies to Save the Land and the People,” in *Our Only World*, 64.

again, that the tradition possesses helpful resources to care for our world and its manifold needs and desires. I will offer a few practical suggestions for how this might take place. In the second part of the section I will challenge the notion of divine transcendence which I suggest is a major obstacle for developing durable ecotheologies.

### **Ecclesial Education: Developing an Ethic of Ecological Care for Churches**

Christian failure to adequately care for the world begins with the problem of Christian “formation,” much of which takes place in churches. As I laid out in Chapter 1, there are ample resources in the Christian tradition to support a robust ecological theology. In fact, I believe it is a perversion (if not a denial) of the faith to claim that care of the natural world is not core to Christian identity. Though this may seem a bold claim, what I articulated in Chapter 1 indicates the opposite. For this reason, I place much of the culpability of the Christian community’s failure to value the natural world on ecclesial leadership and the education they offer lay people.<sup>443</sup> And yet, naturally, this failure by ecclesial leaders is also a failure by the educational institutions who prepare many of these minister for church service.

This is an obvious broad stroke of criticism, and thus, I admit its insufficiencies. There are some good examples of church leadership offering teachings that support ecological care rather than reject it or simply stay silent about it. For example, Pope Francis’ 2015 Encyclical *Laudato si’* is a clear instance of ecclesial leadership calling on not only the Catholic Church, but people of all religious and non-religious backgrounds, to care for the earth and avert wasteful and

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<sup>443</sup> I was surprised and delighted to find support for this idea (though, rightly, he broadens the leadership pool to all religious leaders rather than just Christian ones) in the writing of Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

destructive behavior. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, there are Protestant pastors like Tri Robinson who have thoughtfully, from the pulpit and in popular Christian literature, called church leaders and laypeople to “steward” the created world and to begin to understand such calling as an imperative aspect of their Christian witness in the world.<sup>444</sup> And, as I detailed throughout the project, over the past several decades many theologians have taken up the mantle of environmental care, detailing its presence throughout the tradition as well as offering effective ways for integrating ecological ethics of care into ecclesial and even secular life. However, it almost goes without saying that not enough has been done in church life to address the ever more dire situation of ecological degradation.<sup>445</sup> Thus, I would like to turn, again, to some practical insights that, I hope, can move churches to further instill in their teachings and life together ways to address environmental harm.

Norman Wirzba has diagnosed our situation well. He suggests that we are in an epoch where two defining features make it difficult for appropriate human behavior given widespread ecological degradation: (1) mass urbanization which has insulated much of humanity from the plants, animals, and water they depend, and (2) the overwhelming power humanity possesses to

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<sup>444</sup> An evangelical cohort of “stewards” of creation has emerged over the past few decades. They desire to be ideologically separate from “environmentalists” and ground their ecology in “a biblical doctrine” of caring for the world. Richard Cizik, the one time Vice President of Governmental Affairs at the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), has argued for an ethics of creation care from a “pro-life” perspective (a stance, that in part, led to his resignation from the NAE), “Rev. Richard Cizik on God and Global Warming,” *NPR: Fresh Air*, December 2, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97690760>.

<sup>445</sup> Norman Wirzba, “Waking Up To The Anthropocene: Theological Resistance to Climate Change Paralysis,” *The Christian Century*, September 27, 2017, 26-27, has also detailed the failings of Christian communities to effectively advocate for, in teaching and their life together, a concerted effort to correct ecologically destructive habits.

determine so many aspects of the natural world (through science and technology).<sup>446</sup> Wirzba writes:

Having entered the ‘epoch of humanity,’ the time when human power has attained what used to be thought of as divine proportions, how will these capacities be deployed when the insularity and hubris of so much urban life have shrunk human imaginations to the narrow registers of personal affirmation and acquisition? What hope is there for the world if the humans in control of its future lack a sympathetic understanding and respect for it?<sup>447</sup>

Wirzba is not suggesting that nature will not win out over humanity in the long run. He is rather suggesting that if humanity continues along its current trajectory of unabated consumption and destruction, the future available to the world when nature finally beats humanity back might be one in which Earth’s planetary well-being would not be much worth writing home about.

Wirzba suggests that in spite of ample knowledge about the state of the climate emergency, Christians lack the requisite sympathy, affection, and imagination to respond in accordance with our knowledge.<sup>448</sup> I would also offer that their knowledge is not sufficient or, at least, their communities are not tuned enough into the vital necessity of ecological care not only for the well-being of the planet but also for an authentic witness of their Christian faith in our present world. Wirzba offers two correctives he believes can reshape Christian people’s ecological insufficiencies. First, he suggests they return to the notion of God’s enduring presence in the world, one that reveals God’s deep intimacy with the very material nature of the world.

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<sup>446</sup> Wirzba offers a detailed account of this second point in first part of his *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3-60.

<sup>447</sup> Wirzba, “Waking Up To The Anthropocene,” 23.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

Second, he suggests the necessity for Christians (and all humanity) to challenge the prevailing supremacy of individuality.<sup>449</sup> Wirzba puts forward an agrarian alternative, which recognizes success not through “projected income statements or by economic growth, but by the health and vitality of a region’s entire human and nonhuman neighborhood.”<sup>450</sup> In contrast to the promotion of human well-being, an agrarian standard of success is predicated on the health of human and natural environments.<sup>451</sup>

Wirzba’s recommendations are consistent with Berry’s and as I showed in Chapter 1, consistent with the many resources from the Christian tradition for developing further doctrinal statements of environmental care as well as practical actions steps for addressing ecological harms. Wirzba has offered powerful reflections on the efficacy of sabbath observances as a means of embodying an ecological ethic of care<sup>452</sup> and certainly sabbath is a central tenet of Berry’s environmental care.<sup>453</sup> For Wirzba and Berry, an invaluable aspect of sabbath observation is about learning limits.<sup>454</sup> I would also offer up the Christian emphasis on moderation and self-

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<sup>449</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>450</sup> Norman Wirzba, “Introduction,” in *The Agrarian Standard: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>452</sup> Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering of the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).

<sup>453</sup> Much of Berry’s reflections on sabbath has taken the form of poetry over the years. Though several volumes of his sabbath poems have been published, a fairly comprehensive collection can be found in *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Publishing, 2013).

<sup>454</sup> Wirzba writes: “Sabbath rest assumes that the delight of the one cannot be premised on the misery of others. But for people to know if they are creating such misery, they must regularly stop to discern if the work they perform and the economic priorities they pursue are causing harm. . . . An opening is created where people can reflect communally and honestly about the importance of honoring limits and appreciating when enough is enough,” *This Sacred Life*, 149.



control in the biblical narrative, and with tremendous expansion in the monastic and ascetic traditions of Christianity, as an essential aspect of learning limits. I see Christian teachings on moderation to be valuable narratives for our highly consumeristic and wasteful tendencies in American culture.

Take for instance Maximos the Confessor's *Centuries on Love*<sup>455</sup> in which he details the importance of disciplines (i.e. fasting, giving, praying) and virtues (i.e. love, humility, simplicity) as vital counterweights to wasteful or self-centered practices.<sup>456</sup> Richard Foster's works<sup>457</sup> are a good contemporary rendition of this pervasive emphasis in Christianity. Practicing "spiritual disciplines" for environmental change might seem highly inadequate given the magnitude of the climate crisis as well as the nominal support such "formation" has received among Christian groups, particularly in the West. However, given the almost fetishistic attention Christian groups have placed on controlling the sexual lives of their members, it would seem a welcomed change for spiritual disciplines to shift their focus to other needs like addressing ecological degradation. Christians appear no better than secular society at controlling their wastefulness and disregard of the natural world and thus embodying a very traditional Christian spiritual practice like

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<sup>455</sup> Maximos the Confessor, *Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. by George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 33-98.

<sup>456</sup> There is an important critique of many Christian ascetics who often speak of practices that if not properly managed, lead to self-harm and even self-hatred. In spite of Maximos' high view of life and his very world-affirming cosmology, I do not believe he is not immune from these tendencies. And yet, there is some sort of middle ground to be found between self-pleasure and "self-care" that frequently enables a self-centeredness and individualism (that leaves little room for care of others—nature included) and an all-out asceticism that harms the self. Agrarianism, as Berry and Wirzba conceive of it, is a good attempt at finding this moderate middle-ground.

<sup>457</sup> Cf. Richard Foster, *Celebration of of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1978); *Freedom of Simplicity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981); *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life: Christian Reflections on Money, Sex & Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985).

moderation in consumption could have massively positive effects if taken seriously by Christians in the global north.

### **Ecclesial Education: Challenging Divine Transcendence**

In addition to the above practices and general need to include ecological care in Christian teachings, I would now like to put forward a challenge to a specific major emphasis in Christian theology, divine transcendence. This challenge results from the ways that notions of divine transcendence negatively influence ecological commitments and holistic teachings on creation care by Christian institutions. Said differently, I believe one of the major challenges to developing more powerful ecclesial ethics around environmental care is to challenge notions of divine transcendence which allow for the dismissal, if not outright denial, of the need to care for the Earth in its fullness.

Many people who grew up in Christian communities have ample examples of theologies that promoted an all-powerful, sovereign deity to whom one day those who lived their lives appropriately would leave the troubles of this world and enter eternal bliss. Such an escapist theology—at home among many Protestant ecclesiologies—fills hymnals with classic songs like “I’ll Fly Away” and “This World Is Not My Home.” According to this theology, the experiences of the material world are something to be “endured” as we wait for and “seek for the city that is to come.”<sup>458</sup> These ideas build upon New Testament teachings and reject the more ecologically friendly texts noted in Chapter 1.<sup>459</sup> As I noted in Chapter 2, for Berry, Walker, and hooks it

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<sup>458</sup> Hebrews 13:14.

<sup>459</sup> I.e. Philippians 3, James 4, the Gospel of John, and the much of Hebrews.

appears ideas like these were significant motivators that pushed them away from the Christian communities of their youth. Many theologians who have been associated with theologies emphasizing divine transcendence usually (and thankfully), upon a more thorough consideration of their writings, are not nearly as uncritical as many popular renderings of divine transcendence and sovereignty. And yet, there are theological explications of divine transcendence that lend themselves to such escapism. To illustrate this point, let me take perhaps the most influential 20th century protestant evaluation of divine transcendence.

Karl Barth, for instance, has classically been associated with a vision of God as “Wholly Other” whose revelation comes “vertically from above.”<sup>460</sup> Unsurprisingly, Barth is rather nuanced in his understanding of God's relationship with the world. On the one hand, Barth speaks of salvation of “the world”<sup>461</sup> and “redemption of all creation.”<sup>462</sup> He speaks of a God who is not bound by religion<sup>463</sup> but rather is “discovered and recognized. . . everywhere.”<sup>464</sup> On the other hand, Barth affirms *creatio ex nihilo* which for him means that a heavenly “creation is a new creation; it is not a mere new eruption, or extension, or unfolding, of that old ‘creative evolution’ of which we form a part, and shall remain a part, till our lives’ end.”<sup>465</sup> It is

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<sup>460</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 102.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 102.

noteworthy that Barth affirms an evolutionary vision of the material world but holds that God's new creation will be something that comes after "our lives' end" and that it is not "a continuation of the old."<sup>466</sup>

In arguing for a strong separation between our present world and the "next" Barth says, "The 'Something' which the Word of God creates is of an eternal order, wholly distinct from everything 'something' which we know otherwise."<sup>467</sup> Or, again, in commenting on Paul's vision of the "new world" in Romans 5, Barth says: "What is nonexistent in the first world forms the very existence of the second; and what constitutes the existence of the first is non-existent in the second."<sup>468</sup> In other words, as the spiritual realm is "non-existent" in our present material world so too will the material world be non-existent in the spiritual. As Barth will later argue, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ closes the gap of the first separation but it is not entirely clear what can be said of closing the second gap. His words above leave the impression that considering the closing of the gap between the material and the spiritual in the "next life" is of little interest.

But, again, when thinking back to my survey of biblical texts in Chapter 1, one should ask: what about the Noachic covenant that is formed with animals and the whole earth? Or the prophetic visions of an earthly renewal in Hosea and Isaiah that echo what God promises Noah? Or the end of Revelation which reads:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 165.

her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”<sup>469</sup>

These visions of divine renewal do not seem indifferent to the material world or a willingness to consider it with indifference or disdain. My point is not enter into an argument about Pauline theology in Romans or New Testament Platonism and its separation of the spiritual and material. My point is not even so much to critique Barth's belief that God will usher in a wondrous newness. My point is that we must be vigilant and wise enough to know when such a theology comes to inhabit the same ecclesial space as one that allows for denigrative views of the natural world. The circumstances for doing theology have shifted, even significantly, from where they were when Barth wrote. In the present time, it is questionable to think and write theologically without considering how such theology directly or indirectly could affect how people think about and treat the earth. Many theological models for God have been put forward over the centuries, with Barth's “Wholly Other” being just one, though an important one particularly for evangelical churches. From an ecclesial standpoint that must take ecological care more seriously, is there one that might help Christian people participate thoughtfully in working toward sustaining and renewing the earth?

Indeed there are virulent—and important—debates among theologians about *the* proper model for God.<sup>470</sup> Theologians and ministers have committed themselves to holding the tradition

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<sup>469</sup> Revelation 21:1-3.

<sup>470</sup> For a good overview of many of the major positions held throughout the centuries of Christianity see Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 187-197.

and its teachings (as best they can) in one hand while holding in the other (as best they can) a proper understanding of their time and place in history. (Or, as lore would have Barth saying, “hold the Bible in one hand the newspaper in the other.”)<sup>471</sup> But here at the end of this project it seems necessary to put forward theological models that can help us deal more effectively with ecological degradation and the sorely lacking attention it receives within many Christian communities. I will first reflect on a more orthodox theology of creation and then I will offer some brief comments on one that borrows heavily from process theology. My goal will not be to preference one over the other but rather to show that in both cases there is the possibility of an allowance for a robust ecotheology.

Wirzba, like Barth, argues for a more classical theistic Christian notion of a transcendent and immanent God who creates the world *ex nihilo*.<sup>472</sup> This means that “no other principle or power. . . can take credit for the life of anything.”<sup>473</sup> However, unlike Barth, Wirzba stresses that God’s making of the world is also *creatio ex amore*. This is significant as Wirzba says because it means that “divine love alone is the power at work in every created thing, which is also to say that every creature is cherished by God.”<sup>474</sup> By suggesting that God creates not only “from

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<sup>471</sup> It appears the colloquial attribution stems from a *Times Magazine* interview on May 1, 1966, in which Barth said: “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”

<sup>472</sup> Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life*, 162-65.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, 166. In making this argument Wirzba follows Ian McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 2014).

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, 166. Mark McIntosh affirms this very idea and notes its presence throughout Christian history in the often overlooked doctrine of the Divine Ideas. As McIntosh argues, everything that is in the world is held first in the mind of God. When God’s bringing forth all things in God’s creative acts it is right to understand such creativity as a fundamental expression of God’s love, *The Divine Ideas Tradition in Christian Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

nothing” but also “from love” results in Wirzba arguing that this creation in love demands a rejection of theological projects that “stifle and degrade places and creatures alike.”<sup>475</sup> To counteract any vision that “stifles or degrades places and creatures” Wirzba puts forward Jesus’ miracles in the Gospels.

Wirzba shows that throughout Jesus’s ministry he concerned himself with restoring people’s lives who suffered from both spiritual and physical ailments. Instead of speaking of divine acts in the world as “*interruptions*” in the natural processes of the world, Wirzba prefers to talk about them as “acts of *liberation* that free people from the conditions that impair, distort, or frustrate their ability to be. What Jesus is doing in his ministries is creating a world in which the divine life within creatures can more fully take root and thrive.”<sup>476</sup> Thus, Wirzba is attentive to my exact concern that often Christian theology has overlooked the implications of its claims about God for the material world. As with my argument against Berry in the previous chapter, I am not advocating for a total rejection of Barth’s strong transcendent theology. Rather, I believe

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid., 167. It is meaningful to note that at this point in Wirzba’s argument he quotes Jennings’ *The Christian Imagination*:

As Willie Jennings has noted, ‘the vision born of colonialism articulated a Creator bent on eradicating peoples’ ways of life and turning creation into private property.’ Rather than creating places and communities of mutual sharing, healing, and deep communion - places in which creatures come to share in God’s Sabbath rest - colonialists and imperialists created a world that fragments, segregates, and commodifies life. Having reject the logic of creation, we now live in a profoundly lost and disoriented condition that points to ‘deep physic cuts and gashes in the social imaginary of western peoples, but also to an abiding mutilation of a Christian vision of creation and our own creatureliness,’ *This Sacred Life*, 167. I appreciate and affirm Wirzba and Jennings’ use of the present tense to reveal that the “colonialists and imperialists” influence on the world still “fragments, segregates, and commodifies life.”

<sup>476</sup> Wirzba, *This Sacred Life*, 172-73. Italics are original.

there must be critiques of these great figures so that we might rework our current presentations of Christian thought to best address contemporary concerns.

The second theological account I will consider is Sallie McFague's "organic model" for God which understands the Earth as God's body. In Chapter 1, I highlighted McFague and Elizabeth Johnson's understanding of a panentheistic God. A God who is embodied and present in the world, but not necessarily and totally, like humans and nature. For McFague this takes very seriously the immanence of God's presence in the world while also allowing for the mystery and incomprehensibility of God to remain. She thus attempts to hold together the dialectic between God manifest in Jesus of Nazareth and something like the unknowability of God expressed in Moses' limited interaction with God's "backside" on Mount Sinai. This allows her to remain committed to a very material expression of God in divine immanence while also holding to a notion of divine transcendence, that she defines as God's "energy empowering the entire universe."<sup>477</sup>

For McFague this empowering energy is not one dependent on sovereignty or omnipotence but rather on care and "being with." "Being with" entails God suffering with the world and thus knowing the pains and needs of a degraded humanity and earth. "If the world is God's body," McFague write, "then nothing happens to the world that does not also happen to God."<sup>478</sup> This allows an intimacy on God's part with us that also does not collapse humanity into

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<sup>477</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 150. Much of McFague's model is even compatible with a more radical notion of formative power as expressed in someone like Catherine Keller who argues that God is not so much an omnipotent creator but a nurturing, non-coercive, non-violent fashioner of goodness in the world, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 155-238.

<sup>478</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 176.



God or vice versa. “If we live and move and have our being in God, then God, though asymmetrically, lives in us as well.”<sup>479</sup> McFague is thus interested in the classic distinction that recognizes God’s differentiation from materiality. However, it is also apparent that she believes this differentiation must not diminish God’s intimacy and profound care for the well-being of the physical world.

In both Wirzba and McFague’s accounts of divine transcendence one finds a divine presence firmly grounded in the material world. Whereas Wirzba’s argumentation affirms God’s power to bring the world into being from nothing, McFague’s theology builds more on a theological vision of God who is seemingly unknowable without the divine’s immanent expression in the world. Working through these accounts and their unique qualities is a task for another project. The reason it is meaningful to include them both here is to demonstrate that theologies with differing notions of God’s relationship with the material world can mutually and adamantly affirm a theology which rejects temptations to distance one’s existence and whatever comes after one’s material existence from care for our physical world.

Movement in this direction is necessary in Christian theology if we desire our churches to make a meaningful effort in addressing the severity of ecological degradation. Any theology that posits God as apart from the created world or indifferent to its situation must be heartily rejected. This means major shifts in hymn writing and selection, Bible class material, and preaching. Our churches must center spiritual formation ever more so in ecotheologies that take seriously God’s

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

presence in the world and God's work to redeem all things. They must take serious the witness of the tradition's prophetic voices who announce a world that God is utterly invested in renewing.

### **Conclusion: Laying the Groundwork for an Eco-Cosmopolitanism**

This chapter has attempted to bring together many of the major threads of my project. By considering the three "issue" areas (the political, educational, and ecclesial) I have sought to internalize many of the concerns of Berry, the ecowomanists, and Jennings to produce critical and constructive insights about them. In the political section, I demonstrated the unity of social and ecological concerns. By using the examples of the X-Press Pearl catastrophe and the Ogallala Aquifer depletion I am not claiming all social and ecological issues can be perfectly wedded, resulting in a sort of collapsing of one into the other. However, it was rather to indicate that the ecowomanist claim often holds true that social and ecological ethics of care are never far from each other. Given the significant role of humanity in the current expression of the natural, evolutionary processes of our planet, it makes good sense that when we explore and seek to understand "human issues" we should also attend to their frequent inevitable link to the non-human world. Also in the political section I put on display Berry and Jennings' concern about the collusion between corporate and governmental actors that too often results in nefarious actions which affect most adversely those nearer the bottom of society's hierarchy. In this way, these social and ecological concerns are intrinsically political.

In the educational section I highlighted Jennings and hooks' advocacy for greater eroticism in the academy, especially in terms of deeper social connections and intimacy. I also explored the detrimental effects of the economic status quo of universities and colleges which,

for example prioritize paying faculty and staff very livable wages (and in certain cases, exceedingly high wages), while they sack many of their students with debt unpayable over decades of loan payments. I concluded by advocating for greater attention being paid to Berry's criticism of specialization in academic fields, not on account of diminishing the importance of extensive knowledge about one's (sub)discipline, but rather so that one's expertise might contribute to valuable conversations that work beyond one's specialty.

In the final section I explored what specific ecclesial implications result from my project. I further detailed the value of the ecotheological resources in the Christian tradition which, if employed, could positively change lay people's opinions about environmental degradation, assuming they were taught effectively by clergy. I then challenged what I believe is a prevailing hurdle in this struggle, notions and teachings about divine transcendence. I surveyed the thought of two theologians, Norman Wirzba and Sallie McFague, arguing that in spite of their (vastly) different theological vantage points, they both maintain a strong commitment to a God who loves the world and declares its goodness and a tradition which is clear about Christian responsibilities to care for it.

What is all of this for, one might ask? By addressing concerns from political, educational, and ecclesial spaces I am trying to lay the groundwork for how what I am calling an eco-cosmopolitanism might care more adequately for people and the land. In the conclusion to this project, I will use my reflections above on these particular examples to offer more general suggestions about how this eco-cosmopolitanism might come to fruition in service of a good

world in which all things have the opportunity to thrive, and how a Christian witness serves a crucial role in that vision.

## CONCLUSION

### WORKING TOWARD AN ECO-COSMOPOLITANISM

In many ways, this project has been my attempt to fulfill Willie Jennings' call to form a "truly cosmopolitan citizenship," that he says is built on and rooted in "a deeper soil" than "an imagined democratic spirit."<sup>480</sup> As Jennings details throughout *The Christian Imagination*, intimacy and life together are more powerful than a "democratic spirit" because they possess the strength of communion and relationship which he believes runs deeper than the rights-based commitments lying at the ideological heart of modern democracies. Jennings says that in "a world of dwindling natural resources and the tightening global economic chains of commodification" that such life together is not only necessary but the only option for survival in our world.<sup>481</sup>

It has been the task of this project to argue that the social and ecological visions of Wendell Berry, Alice Walker, and bell hooks move us in the right direction and toward this goal Jennings articulates. It has also been the task of this project to suggest the visions (both social and ecological) of Berry, Walker, and hooks coexist well alongside Christian ecological thought. It also seems to be the case too that Berry, Walker, and hooks push Christian ecological witness

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<sup>480</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 10-11.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

to be a better version of itself. Rather than being wrapped up in parochial interests or an “us-verse-them” mentality Berry and the ecowomanists draw out powerfully the Christian resources for life together articulated by Jennings. Jennings suggests the “deeper soil” of life together that Christianity might imagine is not easily unearthed:

It is surely not resident at the surface levels of Christianity. Yet Christianity marks the spot where, if noble dream joins hands with God-inspired hope and presses with great impatience against the insularities of life, for example, national, cultural, ethnic, economic, sexual, and racial, seeking the deeper ground upon which to seed a new way of belonging and living together, then we will find together not simply a new ground, not simply a new seed, but a life already prepared and offered to us.<sup>482</sup>

My project has been an attempt to affirm this “God-inspired hope” and to press against the “insularities of life” by revealing that Berry, Walker, and hooks speak a common language that affirms the goodness and beauty of the world and one that also affirms the ecological teachings housed within the Christian tradition.

This is on full display when Berry lambasts industrial agriculture’s decimation of farming and ranching communities, their livelihoods and ways of life, and the land they care so intimately for. It can also be seen vividly when Alice Walker writes with passion about the goodness and divinity of the Earth and humankind that too often cultural and political forces seek to destroy. These very forces embodied in racism, sexism, and classism are the very things bell hooks devoted her so much of her writing and activism to. Each one of these figures thus divulges the emancipatory and life affirming quality of their work. But as I have shown that emancipation and affirmation of life rests also at the core of an authentic Christian witness.

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 11.

In this way, the outline of a true eco-cosmopolitanism begins to emerge. It is one that believes in the efficacy of healing connections not only between peoples but between people and the land. Following the examples of Berry, Walker, and hooks eco-cosmopolitanism advocates for intergenerational, intercultural, and interspecies work to revitalize our personal lives and our communal life on Earth. When personal, familial, regional, national, or global barriers struggle to siphon off certain concerns to the detriment of others, those committed to an eco-cosmopolitanism vehemently resist. They point toward a holism in the world that indicates that the denial of well-being to one thing necessarily results in the denial of well-being to all things. These harms might be successfully ignored for a time but no infected part can be kept isolated long without causing disease in every other part.

This eco-cosmopolitan vision embraced by Berry, the womanists, and Jennings dreams of and works toward the actualization of a world where all people and all things can thrive. One in which humans, animals, insects, plants, fungi, and even inanimate objects exist to their fullest. It does not negate or ignore legitimate conflicts but it never works to resolve them without a holistic perspective, one concerned not just with financial bottomlines but the interwoven nature of all materiality. Their visions, thus, mirror the sort of good, honest decision-making necessary for anything to flourish.

These principles get worked out well in a practical example of someone like a tree farmer. For the farmer to make a living, undoubtedly, the cost of the seedling must be considered as well as the forecasted sale price of the tree. But growing this tree from seedling to a more mature size, one that is still moveable by reasonable methods and with knowledge of whether the tree

will be healthy enough to become reestablished is quite a complex process. To grow the tree to size requires consideration of many variables: the health of the soil, access to regular water, good pruning techniques, protection from pests and weather, and whether this protection adversely affects the health of the surrounding environment. And if the farm is of a size that the farmer cannot work it alone, the farmer must also consider those who assistance in the care of it. How are those workers to be treated? What payment will allow for them not to just exist but thrive? Is the work meaningful and life-giving or mere drudgery? Finally, a good farmer must also consider those the farmer buys seedlings from and sells trees to. Who are they? What are their practices of tree care? How do they treat their natural environments and anyone who works for them?

Maybe this is a restricted or even puerile example for a high-minded academic conversation. But I offer it simply to affirm the eco-cosmopolitan ethic of interconnection and considering all things in a holistic manner. As the many additional examples throughout this project revealed, if interconnection, mutual respect, and holism are not at the forefront of the minds of those making important decisions, it is inevitable that social and ecological degradation will follow. This means that comfort, expediency, and infinite material gains can no longer guide our economics and politics, which is to say, our lives. We must rather take stock of our lives and decisions we make every day and ask: to what end? Is this sustainable? Is this healthy? Does this allow for me and all things in the world to thrive? But obviously, as the project argued, these questions are not meaningful only personally but must be considered by the powerful in the politics, education, the church, and beyond. Our world cannot go on forever if people do not take seriously the demands of the ecological crisis and its far-reaching and interconnected effects.



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## VITA

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