



PROJECT MUSE®

A Theory of the Bottom: Black Ecofeminism as Politics

Jennifer C. James

Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 10,
Number 1-2, Winter 2022/Spring 2023, pp. 46-52 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/res.2022.a904101>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/904101>

A Theory of the Bottom

Black Ecofeminism as Politics

JENNIFER C. JAMES

“It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom.”

Toni Morrison, *Sula*

In 1997, the postcolonial scholar Ariel Salleh offered her groundbreaking environmental intervention into Marxism, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*. There, she argues that eco-socialists’ theory of the intersection of labor and environmental destruction has failed to account for the experiences of women, who constitute the “global labour majority” if we acknowledge the unpaid “gift” of biological and social reproductive labor alongside their industrial labor.¹ She posits that the “unlivable exploitations” women endure resulting from performing that labor under patriarchal forms of capitalism have profound environmental consequences.² For Salleh, “ecofeminism” is an elastic term that can unify “socialism, ecology, feminism, and postcolonial struggle” into an overarching framework that merges these interconnected struggles into a single politics.³ As expansive and persuasive as her idea of ecofeminism is, I am thinking through what happens when we un-submerge race—an absent term—and Blackness specifically, from Salleh’s analytic. I am not invested in critiquing what might be missing from Salleh; instead, I want to consider what a Black, anti-capitalist, intersectional ecofeminism might produce.

When I first began teaching and writing about Black ecofeminism, I was invested in how the historical fungibility of Black women’s “flesh” within property relations—a history of being owned, mapped and mined, bestialized and bartered, commodified and consumed—has im-

printed Black women writers' perspectives on the nonhuman natural world. In other words, as the title of my in-progress book *Captive Ecologies: The Environmental Afterlives of Slavery* announces, I was interested slavery's ecological aftermaths.

Black women's literature is filled with examples. There are, for example, Black women literary figures women haunted by slavery, such as Pilate from Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, who refuses the material trappings of capitalism and who becomes, to use Stefanie Dunning's term, a "natural woman."⁴ We can turn to Janie Starks from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who learns the language of love and sex from flies, bees, and a pear tree; who rejects her formerly enslaved grandmother's admonishment to take refuge in the protection of a "decent," respectable marriage; and who retrieves her original vision of relation laboring with a man named Woods in the muck.⁵ We can turn to Esch in Jesmyn Ward's Katrina novel *Salvage the Bones* who lives in Bois Sauvage, Mississippi—a geographical legacy of slavery—and who learns transspecies identification as a form of emotional and physical survival. If we consider the Black women writers themselves, we have bell hooks who claims that Black migration, the move away from Southern soil, caused a mind/body rupture in Black people that can only be remedied by relearning the earth and who, herself, returned to Kentucky from her academic sojourn north. We have Lucille Clifton who famously wrote: "being property once myself/ I have a feeling for it,/ that's why i can talk about environment";⁶ or Alice Walker who looks at a beautiful horse in her essay "Am I Blue"—a single, lonely horse who has been violently deprived of his mate—and sees grief in his eyes, sees slavery in his condition, sees herself, and spits out the meat she is served for dinner; or we can read the writer Alexis Pauline Gumbs who gleans Black feminist lessons, as she writes, from marine animals. It's there. Once you look for the ways Black women claim a connection with the earth and non-human life through identification, it's everywhere.

But increasingly, I have started reading Black women's environmental literature for content foregrounding the intersection of race, gender, the environment, and political economy. I am interested in the way Black ecofeminism asks us to rethink how racial capitalism operates at the same time it provides a way of conceptualizing relation disruptive to capitalism's machinery.

To return to Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics* argues that capitalist

patriarchy forces “women to live out their lives right at the bottom” of a “hierarchy of oppressions,” and that bottom is where the experiences of “Women and Nature meet.”⁷ As I began to outline my ideas for thinking about “the bottom,” I also began wondering how the embodied experiences of Black women who, as the Black socialist feminist Combahee River Collective asserted some twenty years before Salleh, are at the “very-bottom of the American capitalistic economy,”⁸ could become the site of a politics for thinking about the planetary future. For it is at the economic bottom where Black women and environments that have been exploited, disrupted, and contaminated come into contact, whether those environments are natural or humanmade. Think Esch, again, in *Bois Sauvage*; think of working-class and poor Black women in Flint, Michigan, or those living in the flood zones of the Ninth Ward of New Orleans.

After noting that the influential feminist Michelle Wallace had asserted that Black women, “being on the bottom,” remain “stranded” and isolated in their fight against sexism and racism, the Combahee River Collective swiftly reimagines the bottom as space for collective action. “We might use our position at the bottom . . . to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”⁹ They convey two important things here. First is that the bottom can be a productive, unifying space where like beings are no longer alone and are instead conjoined in struggle. And secondly, that liberating Black women would require that we dismantle what they call the “interlocking” oppressions: patriarchy, heterosexism, white supremacy, and, not least of all, capitalism itself.¹⁰

But what if we took another “leap into revolutionary action” and re-wrote the Collective’s concept of the bottom to center planetary life: “If the earth were free, it would mean that everyone and everything else would have to be free since the freedom of the earth would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”

Where would that take us?

In saying that we might experiment with centering planetary life, I am not proposing that we repeat the errors of the “trees before people” environmentalism that reduces humans only to antagonists of nature or at most, relegates them to a secondary concern. Instead, I am sug-

gesting that a gendered and racialized intersectional environmentalism operates on a principle of inextricability in which the terms “Black women” and “the earth” are inseparable.

The ecological future as imagined from the bottom-up in Black ecofeminist literature does exactly that. It knows that the freedom of Black women—particularly queer Black women, as my larger chapter argues—and the freedom of the environment and the freedom of other planetary life are coterminous. Working for one freedom requires working for the other. I use the word “freedom” intentionally here because I see Black ecofeminism not simply as a way of seeing, feeling, or being. Black ecofeminism is liberation politics meant to be mobilized.

Audre Lorde provides an example of this thinking. Addressing women in her oft-quoted essay, “The transformation of silence into language and action,” she warns against the dangers of female silence: “The machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.”¹¹ I have always been struck by the way that she sees speaking out about an essential element of feminist labor, but that speech is not limited to unearthing buried truths about women’s lives as we liberate ourselves from silence. Inherent in her command is that we use our voices to acknowledge and speak about the condition of the earth.

Imagining Black ecofeminism as a bottom-up liberationist politics returns us to the problem of capitalism and racial capitalism. We know that Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* has convincingly argued that all capitalism began as racial capitalism. We can place Robinson in conversation with Jason W. Moore’s overarching idea in *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, which makes the provocative claim that capitalism is not primarily a social or economic system, but “a way of organizing nature” (original emphasis) within an ecology of profit.¹² Doing so returns us to a familiar idea, and one I have discussed elsewhere—that capitalism as a way of organizing the natural world does it so that non-human nature becomes an instrument of human economic oppression. If one is forced to mine the earth to make bare sustenance, the earth might very well be viewed as an adversary alongside the oppressor himself. As many scholars have

pointed out, even the discourse of nature—not merely nature itself—is instrumentalized in racial subjugation. Black women, my concern here, have been historically excluded from the category of the “human” and “naturalized” by those who see a human/ nature divide as dichotomous, with humans on the top of that (false) binary.

If the human, the top, is what Enlightenment discourses and its offshoots have taught us it is (i.e., white, western, heteropatriarchal, capitalist able-bodied male), with all other living things at the bottom, then I submit that the bottom is where we want to be. In contact. Entangled. Undifferentiated from other life.

Like Black feminism itself, Black ecofeminism is a theory of the bottom. Borrowing from a queer lexicon of intimacies, I have come to think of these writers as Black ecofeminist bottoms. I think of *myself* as a Black ecofeminist bottom.

In *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Animals*, Gumbs ruminates on the pain and the pleasure that can be discovered at those depths. She wonders about the slaves who ended up at the bottom of the sea during the Middle Passage. “Lucille Clifton says the Atlantic is a sea of bones,” she writes, then continues:

What is the half-life of the transubstantiation of the life into servitude. Does it ever dissolve? And the bones of those captives who freed themselves, or left their bodies and were thrown overboard became . . . what? Sediment. Filtered ultimately into the baleen of the Atlantic gray whale, right? There is digestive truth to the idea that the ancestors we lost in the transatlantic slave trade became whales.¹³

Thinking further about that interspecies connection, she concludes, “At the bottom, there is a love so complicated that it doesn’t dissolve.”¹⁴

Those who are on top—the enslavers—are the people who threw the enslaved overboard when they died from sickness or from disease, from abuse or from grief. Those who are on top are the people who threw the still-living overboard when their deaths would prove financially less costly than their lives. Those who are on top are the people who caused the enslaved to leap into the sea to escape becoming someone’s property. So, again: who would want to be on top with them?

I believe that this is what Black ecofeminist insight is getting at, and it is not entirely new—the idea that we are all part of a single interdepen-

dent ecosystem, and any practice that leads us away from that understanding, be it enslaving humans, poisoning rivers, or hunting whales into extinction, is a necrorelation that can only lead us away from life itself.

Black ecofeminist “bottoming” thus names a countervailing intersectional mode of relation to all planetary life, human and non. It names the way Black women ecofeminists envision the exploited and the imperiled—the objects of capitalism’s destructive desires and its detritus—as their kin, whether human or not. The “complicated love” at the bottom, produced in a space where we live and die together, then live again together in new forms, does not ever dissolve. Only boundaries do.

Jennifer C. James is associate professor of English at George Washington University. Her book *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature, the Civil War-World War II*. She is currently at work on two books: *Captive Ecologies: The Environmental Afterlives of Slavery and Black Jack: Andrew Jackson and African American Cultural Memory*.

NOTES

1. Ariel Salleh *Ecofeminism as Politics : Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern* (London: Zed Books, 2017): 1.
2. Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, xix.
3. Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, xix.
4. Stefanie Dunning, *Black to Nature :Pastoral Return and African American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021): 29.
5. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000): 13.
6. Lucille Clifton, *Good Woman : Poems and a Memoir, 1969–1980* (Brockport, NY: BOA Editions,1987): 58.
7. Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, xx.
8. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “The Combahee Collective River Statement.” In *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017): 18.
9. Taylor, “Combahee Collective,” 22–23.
10. Taylor, “Combahee Collective,” 15.
11. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg NY: Crossing Press, 1984).
12. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life : Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. (London: Verso, 2015): 1–2.

13. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned : Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Chico CA: AK Press, 2020): 118.
14. Gumbs, *Undrowned*, 119.

WORKS CITED

- Clifton, Lucille. *Good Woman : Poems and a Memoir, 1969–1980*. Brockport NY: BOA Editions, 1987.
- Dunning, Stefanie K. “Black to Nature : Pastoral Return and African” *American Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *Undrowned : Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. Chico CA: AK Press, 2020.
- hooks, bell. *Sisters of the Yam : Black Women and Self-Recovery*. Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2005.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper Collins, 2000.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider : Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg NY: Crossing Press, 1984.
- Moore, Jason W. *Capitalism in the Web of Life : Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. London: Verso, 2015.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Salleh, Ariel. *Ecofeminism as Politics : Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern*. London : Zed Books, 2017.
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahatta. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. La Vergne: Haymarket Books, 2017.
- Walker, Alice. *Living by the Word : Selected Writings, 1973–1987*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.
- Ward, Jesmyn. *Salvage the Bones*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2011.