

# Black Feminist Ecological Thought: A Manifesto

10.01.2020

WORDS BY **DR. CHELSEA MIKAEL FRAZIER**

Despite having many aligned priorities, there's an alarming lack of diversity within ecocriticism. In her manifesto, Dr. Chelsea Mikael Frazier breaks down why this lack of representation has made it challenging for Black Feminist Thought and ecocriticism to find a collaborative rhythm—and how Black, African-descended women have cared about the natural environment and sustainability all along.

X

PHOTO COURTESY CHIP MOODY

In mainstream films, books, and political discourse exists the erroneous notion that Black women and their communities do not care about the natural environment, sustainability, or their own health loom large. To add insult to stereotype-informed injury, Black feminist voices have often been seemingly absent from mainstream environmentalism and the intellectual movement that sprang forth from it in the early 1990s. But Black Feminist Ecological Thought has been present and continues to evolve alongside an ecocriticism that often fails to recognize its existence and its intellectual and creative authority.

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature, art, and the environment. It is an intellectual movement that began to formally cohere in the early 1990s. Its aims included drawing attention to 1. everything being connected—especially nature and culture, 2. our definitions of humanity being rooted in our cultural norms and languages, and 3. a commitment to the health, well-being, and sustainability of our natural environments. From its inception, the movement announced itself as being universally relevant to and concerned about “all” people, but suffered from a very obvious lack of racial, ethnic, economic, and gender diversity.

access to leisure time, land ownership, and financial capital. Their ideas implicitly privileged white, Western values over all others and has been very slow to perceive the existence and/or necessity of alternative strands of ecological thought—such as Black Feminist Ecological Thought.

**Black feminism is an umbrella term  
that describes a range of social,  
political practices and theories that  
are historically rooted in and  
extrapolated from the experiences  
of Black women.**

X

**DR. CHELSEA MIKAEL FRAZIER**

As a Black feminist scholar, when I picked up the mantle of ecocriticism, I couldn't help but immediately notice this characteristic of the movement myself. Ecocriticism's alarming lack of diversity made it difficult for fields like Black Feminist Thought to find a collaborative rhythm, despite having many aligned priorities. Black feminism is an umbrella term that describes a range of social, political practices and theories that are historically rooted in and extrapolated from the experiences of Black women. Because of this, it is a field that has always been interested in breaking the structural imbalances that lead to an unfair distribution of material resources. Additionally, Black, African-descended women across the Diaspora are routinely the first to confront and lead the fight against some of the most intense harmful effects of environmental degradation.

Initially, as a Black Feminist scholar, bathed in the knowledge that 1. African-descended women across the African Diaspora routinely confront some of the more intense harmful effects of environmental degradation, 2. that there were several examples of Black women environmental

ideas, I was generally bothered by what I perceived to be an exclusion from ecocriticism.

But I was also emboldened in my writing and activism—or writing as activism—to draw attention to the ways that these two intellectual movements, Black Feminist Thought and Ecocriticism, could and should benefit each other. Especially because both movements claimed to be committed to demystifying the structural imbalances that lead to an unfair distribution of material resources. The origins and initial purpose of Black Feminist Ecological Thought then came as a result of recognizing the ways that our dismissive and stereotypical beliefs about Black, African-descended women were also limiting the transformative potential of our environmental movements across many fields. I realized that I would have to make clear what the movement was missing out on: the foundational knowledge that Black, African-descended women were not environmental justice leaders by coincidence and it wasn't just a result of their suffering at the hands of ecological violence. The consistency of the messages in Black women's art suggested something deeper: it suggested that Black women's ecological inclinations were rooted in a ecological world-sense completely alternative to what readily comes to mind when we think about the environment.

X

**The ecological harms of misogynoir  
and anti-Indigeneity affect Black  
women extremely intensely, and  
those effects also guarantee a  
despairing destruction for all  
directly responsible and/or  
indirectly complicit.**

**DR. CHELSEA MIKAEL FRAZIER**

American family in the 1690s. We meet Florens, a sixteen year old enslaved African girl laboring and living on a farm in rural New York, Jacob Vaark, the Dutch slave owner that purchases Florens and owns the farm where she works, his London-born, English wife Rebekka Vaark, and an enslaved Native American woman named Lina who also lives and works on the Vaark farm.

Throughout the novel, the farm itself—with its structures, people, flora, and fauna—also functions as a character, sometimes victim of the whims of its characters, other times the impartial container of the characters, but also the central environment that frames the happenings that shape their lives.

X

In the narrative, Toni Morrison juxtaposes the demise of the character Florens—a young enslaved Black girl—with the impending dysfunction of her environments, i.e. the farm. In doing this, we can read Morrison's *A Mercy* as a parable that makes clear the ways that misogynoir and anti-Indigeneity are more than simply a breach in morality on a societal level. More urgently, the novel dramatizes the notion that the convergences of misogynoir and anti-Indigeneity are widespread social, economic, and ecological liabilities.

This interpretation is the kind made possible by Black Feminist Ecological Thought. Black Feminist Ecological Thought emphasizes the importance of recognizing this kind of novel as being both Ecological Art and Black Feminist Art simultaneously. Black Feminist Ecological Thought also illuminates the reasons why it is important for us to interweave both perspectives in order to discern the transformative potential of the text. In this case, the transformative potential being: the ecological harms of misogynoir and anti-Indigeneity affect Black women extremely intensely, *and* those effects also guarantee a despairing destruction for all directly responsible and/or indirectly complicit.

For another example of Black Feminist Ecological Thought at work, we can turn to MacArthur Genius grant-winning artist Latoya Ruby Frazier's 2016 photo project, "[Flint is Family.](#)" Popular images of Black mother-led families that permeate the pop cultural landscape often paint those families and the Black mothers that lead them as dysfunctional. By contrast, Latoya Ruby Frazier presents poet, entrepreneur Shea Cobb, a single mother, and her family as a functional, whole, organized, and complete unit. Additionally, Frazier's images—with a touch of hopeful melancholia—highlight the motivation behind Shea Cobb's ecological ethics: a tender focus on protecting her young daughter from the Flint water crisis's poisonous effects. Frazier's images invite viewers to reflect on the fact that the stress the Cobb family is experiencing is located in state-sanctioned ecological violence, rather than that all-too-common grammar of American life: a "shameful" Black mother.

Black Feminist Ecological Thought  
also reminds us that Black women  
are not, and have never been, passive  
victims of environmental  
degradation—nor are they and have  
never been the blame for a supposed  
breakdown of “the Black family.”

X

DR. CHELSEA MIKAEL FRAZIER

Black Feminist Ecological Thought keeps our appetites hungry for images, words, and stories like Latoya Ruby Frazier’s that meditate on the relationship between environmental harm and the everyday stresses of Black mothering. Black Feminist Ecological Thought also reminds us that Black women are not, and have never been, passive victims of environmental degradation—nor are they and have never been the blame for a supposed breakdown of “the Black family.” Instead, in “Flint is Family” we have a representation of *a* Black family, not *the* Black family, led and composed mostly of Black women and girls conceptualized as whole, functional, and complete yet straining intensely against the great chasm of environmental injustice that is the Flint water crisis.

Black Feminist Ecological Thought is neither static nor universally relevant to all things and all times. Black Feminist Ecological Thought is also not the result of “adding” Black feminist principles to ecocriticism, rather transforming both movements. As an interpretive and creative world-sense, it is committed to understanding the intersections of gender, race, and class and bringing those commitments into a larger discussion of ecocritical approaches to literature, art, and culture.

elements of culture including our legislation, our economic sensibilities, or engagement with material resources like water, flora, fauna, and land. It is about perceiving what new ideas and worlds are made possible when the commitments of these two movements are enmeshed with one another.

Practitioners must be careful however, not to limit Black Feminist Ecological Thought to the reactionary work of uncovering and unpacking ecocriticism's (and mainstream environmentalism's) lack of diversity and/or inattention to the ecological perspectives of Black women. Black Feminist Ecological Thought is not a reactionary response to the Eurocentric failings of mainstream ecocriticism. Black Feminist Ecological Thought illuminates and documents the ways that 1. Black women thinkers have always developed their own alternative understandings of the interconnectedness of all things and 2. these ecological understandings have centered the health, well-being, and sustainability of Black, African-descended women across the Diaspora since time immemorial.

X

Black Feminist Ecological Thought asks all of us to keep our eyes peeled for the very subtle ways that environmental harm and discourses around environmental harm tend to blame, neglect, or obscure Black women's complex relationships to themselves, their families, and their environments. But Black Feminist ecological Thought has always been whispering to us—urging us to understand the interconnected points of our unwell society as a first step toward restoring our environments. The aim of Black Feminist Ecological Thought is to open more portals for us to thoughtfully confront all the melancholy and promise of ecological healing, or as Zora Hurston Neale might say, to confront all the “dawn and doom” in the branches.