

Ecomemory for the Future: Religious Environmentalism and Black Environmental Liberation Theology (BELT)¹

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Black Environmental Liberation Theology (BELT) is viewed as an extension of black liberation theology, which after the 1960s served to carry on civil rights goals in the field of theology. Much criticized for the narrow focus it took by neglecting, for example, gender in the theological discourse or for the narrow understanding of the black self, black liberation theology has evolved to open to eco-theology and to employ a more multilayered view of African American culture. As Dianne Glave establishes, “Layers of eco-theology inform how African-Americans view and treat the Earth, natural goods (‘resources’), and people: eco-theology; Creation care from the Book of Genesis; dominion of the Earth and her goods—an African eco-theology paralleling Creation care; and an African-American eco-theology, one of whose strands is Black Environmental Liberation Theology (BELT)” (2017, 86). Glave’s definition of BELT reveals the historically close relation of African Americans to nature, which concomitantly indicates its embeddedness in African American cultural memory.

The present paper seeks to explore the main tenets of BELT in Glave’s works as it connects to black environmentalist memory precipitating black religious environmentalism and as it reveals the interconnection between black ecomemory and specific liberation ethics presenting a “model of Christian self-empowerment for environmental justice” (Glave 2006, 189).

Black Religious Environmentalism

As a strand of African-American eco-theology, BELT can be seen as a formalized expression of black religious environmentalism, but, more specifically, and beyond the attempt to be constituted as theology, it brings to the foreground the ethical and social engagement of African American religious environmentalism “for the

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purpose of mobilization for environmental activism,” which, as Elonda Clay claims, has too often been overlooked (2011, 161).

Indeed, religious environmentalism in general offers a spiritual agenda to establish “an ecologically grounded and harmoniously balanced spirituality” (King 2006, 81) and as a “countermovement [] in spirituality [it] describe[s] approaches that offer alternate solutions to existing social and religious power structures” (Bekker 2012, 76). Corné J. Bekker’s definition points to the duality invested in religious environmentalism: its spiritual orientation seeks to reveal deeper transcendental truths and, at the same time, to position itself as critique both through difference and distancing and through its constitution as social justice. As Roger S. Gottlieb also maintains, “one hallmark of religious environmentalism is a deep commitment to acknowledging the value of all life. [. . .] Another crucial aspect of religious environmentalism is the development of an environmental justice perspective” (2006, 125).

Black religious environmentalism inherently incorporates the social justice segment as “imposed inheritance.” As Clay reminds us,

environmental racism and the struggle for ecological justice are imposed inheritances. They are the result of centuries of patterned exploitation of land, natural resources, and human labor as well as the result of Christian complicity with slavery and racism, ecological imperialism, and government-sanctioned expropriation of lands inhabited by cultural and racial/ethnic “Others.” (2011, 162)

Robert D. Bullard and others have aptly demonstrated that the intersection of race, class, and the environment has determined the fate of African Americans since the first day black slaves arrived in the Americas. On the one hand, they have proved that there is “the fundamental connectedness of place and race in American culture” (Gerhardt 2002, 521)—as slavery meant being uprooted from a space and inserted into another with the result of “an alienation of a landless race from the land” (Stoll 2006, 160) and as African Americans were pushed to spaces that demarcated racial boundaries; on the other hand, it is evident that, despite alienation, an inherent attachment to the environment has been maintained through “transported landscapes” (Clay 2011, 155) and through an African cosmological understanding (Gundaker 1994, 195).

For the primary concern for racial and social issues, African Americans may seem to have been little concerned about ecological issues (Walker 2004, 249). The apparent distancing from mainstream environmentalism is due to the alienating effects of slavery and segregation, which made them feel that “This land

was not their land” (Stoll 2006, 160). Theodore Walker, Jr. also points to the fact that African Americans have found it difficult to identify with the goals of environmentalists for the “racial and racist aspects of modern white eco-logical/ animal rights thinking” (2004, 249). In general, however, as Shamara Shantu Riley discusses ecofeminism, it is for the lack of focus on “the historical links between classism, white supremacy, and environmental degradation” (2004, 373) that African Americans have distanced themselves from the environmentalist movement. As Karen Baker-Fletcher expresses painfully,

There are very deep historical reasons for such suspicion and mistrust; however, when we are reluctant to listen and are silent on these issues, we reinforce our own oppression. We reinforce the assumption that we are dispensable, nothing, because it appears that we do not care. When we are silent, only we know that we do care, that we are tired of losing family members to cancer. We silently care, but the dance of dispensability continues. (2004, 388)

Black religious environmentalism suggests, however, that environmentalism is deep-seated in African American culture for two reasons. With a (religious) worldview—including the traditional African moral obligation “to contribute to the well-being of future life” (Walker 2004, 251)—and an understanding and knowledge of the environment transported from Africa, alienation could be turned into habitation, which induced an ethical view of the environment expressed through African American religiosity. In discussing the relevance of the black church in the environmental justice movement, Mark Stoll also points toward the defining interrelation of religion, an ethically defined self-respect, and the environment: “[African American] communal sense of social ethics and morality have given them a way of conceptualizing, identifying, and attacking toxic threats to their communities” (2006, 163).

The “communal-cooperative activity” (Arp and Boeckelman 1997, 258) characterizing African American religiosity and, formally, the black church proves “that religion is a factor in explaining Black environmental activism” (Arp and Boeckelman 1997, 263). The religiosity-induced environmental thinking has triggered an activism embedded primarily in the black church. So while it is true that, more directly, the African American environmental justice movement has its roots in civil rights activism (Melosi 2006, 123), just as in the case of the civil rights movement itself, it is the black church and religiosity that have served as the background for black environmentalism. As Stoll also contends, “By nurturing both civic culture and an oppositional mentality, black mainstream churches

empowered believers by encouraging their self-worth and promoted and facilitated political and economic activism within the system” (2006, 155).

BELT both represents and taps into black religious environmentalism by connecting to and continuing a centuries-old legacy. It enhances black morality as social morality (see Stoll 2006, 158) by making environmental issues a civil rights issue. For this reason, following Bekker’s afore-mentioned definition, which places religious environmentalism outside the mainstream environmental discourses, BELT as “subaltern environmentalism” (Clay 2011, 163) is not primarily ecocentric, but anthropocentric (Melosi 2006, 123).

Black Environmental Liberation Theology (BELT)

Glave first termed BELT in a 2004 article in *Griot* entitled “Black Environmental Liberation Theology: The Historical and Theological Roots of Environmental Justice Activism by the African American Church.” Later versions form chapters (“Environmental Justice: Free to Breathe” in *Rooted in the Earth* [2010a] and “Black Environmental Liberation Theology” [2006] further anthologized in Hopkins and Thomas [2010] maintain the main foci of the original paper but the encompassing volumes reveal her ecowomanist philosophy more profoundly and the 21st century understanding of the environmental context. The chapters on environmental racism present a brief history of the African American environmentalist movement from the 20th century, occasionally building on identical passages, thus centering the same thought throughout: the African American activist mind precipitates or, rather, surfaces by the end of the 20th century as the Black Environmental Liberation Theology (BELT). BELT is identified as an offshoot of black liberation theology and as such it seeks to be established in relation to it by following a dual strategy. On the one hand, Glave argues for an African American environmental justice tradition, tracing it back to the early 20th century when protests had an indirect environmentalist underpinning. Early civil rights activism may not have had specific environmental issues on its agenda but the struggle against racism involved issues of housing, work conditions, or unequal protection. On the other, however, embedding BELT in black liberation theology and connecting it to a spirituality reverberating with ecological ancestors reveal a memory of environmentalism in the African American community that connects to black religious environmentalism pointing back to the times prior to the civil rights activism in the 20th century.

It would be false to tie African American environmentalism—and actually BELT—to a specific date. As she points out in other chapters, what is understood in the late 20th century as ethical farming was a characteristic trait of African

agricultural practices (Glave 2003, 401), many of which were remembered and put into use in America by African slaves and their descendants. As Kimberley Ruffin argues, ecological ancestors are the ones “who experience [] positive readings of human biodiversity; whose physical, botanical, and hunting skills provide invaluable support; and who seek [] out commonality with nonhuman nature and other marginalized peoples” (2010, 85). It must be noted, though, that for liberation theologians the social and cultural context is emphasized in interpreting any phenomenon, and in that way not problematizing the ethics in detail based on the context of the day may occasionally sound like reading present-day ideas into different times and geographies—a retroactive strategy to “serve the constructive function of positive group identity and create meaning and reality based on a connection to place” (2010, 114-5) in the present.

Thinkers such as Robert D. Bullard maintain that there is “a clear link between civil rights and environmental justice” (1994, 5), thereby claiming that civil rights activism has inherently entailed environmental justice issues. In this way, African American struggle for civil rights was closely tied to environmental justice thinking from the very beginning. The connection proves obvious: as Bullard and Beverly Wright maintain, “all communities are not created equal, and thus some get more than their fair share of the benefits or residential amenities while others receive more than their fair share of the costs or disamenities. Race, class, geography, and political power mitigate the distribution of benefits and costs” (2009, 3). What connects civil rights issues with environmental struggles in the first place is that minorities and disadvantaged groups are often “shunted into the places that are more geographically vulnerable” (2009, 11). In all this, the environment as place and its memory are interwoven with social, political, and racial discourses.

From the point of view of Glave’s religious engagement with environmental justice, African American activism was significantly embedded in religious discourses up to the Civil Rights movement and has remained so in many aspects. As for the environmental justice movement, Glave specifically identifies Martin Luther King, Jr.’s role in the strike of the sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968 as the pivotal point of African American environmental activism (2004, 64)—also to validate the launch of BELT. Exposure to waste and contamination turned sanitation workers into an endangered group, who suffered from infections and various diseases beyond the fact that “an unhealthy work environment as a subtext” (Glave 2010a, 131) also indicated the limited work opportunities for African Americans.

Glave establishes more direct roots of BELT with the National Black Church Environmental and Economic Justice Summit in 1993, which sought “to combat unequal protection and to work toward environmental justice” (Bullard 1994b, xviii). There were several protests regarding environmental issues in the 1980s (see

Bullard 1994a, 5-6) which led to the all-important First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, serving as the background for the 1993 summit. The summit of 1991 was born out of the need for “a multi-racial movement” (Chavis qtd. in Grossman 1994, 273) initially with the intention to continue the radical, insurgent nature of grassroots organizations (Huss, Stretesky, and Lynch 2012, 796). It adopted the “Principles of Environmental Justice.” As the preamble vows:

WE THE PEOPLE OF COLOR, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence on the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to insure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these principles. (“Principles of Environmental Justice” 1991)

The 1993 summit intended to integrate environmental justice based on the “Principles” into its action and devise an action plan accordingly: “We, African-American Church leaders, historically committed to justice issues, affirm the unitary nature of life and commit ourselves to the ministry of converging justice and environmental issues that are critical matters of life and death for our Church and for our community” (qtd. in Pinn 2002, 86-87). The action plan follows closely from the “Principles” and foresees initiatives, participation, challenge, networking, education, and local help to be implemented by black churches.

The expanded 15-point agenda of BELT as an initiative is heavily indebted to the “Principles” of the 1991 summit and the striving of the 1993 summit. Glave situates the action plan in a multicultural and multiethnic environment, in which work with other people including whites is possible—a tenet James H. Cone is skeptical about. Thus, she advocates intra-and intercommunal networking and coalition formation based on an autonomous African American self meaning that appropriation of tools, activism, and strategies should be realized based on situational needs and in support of the African American self. Traditional and innovative, at the same time, BELT is meant to maintain its grassroots and holistic character.

By emphasizing theology and history, Glave establishes a link to a tradition of African American activism and connects to black liberation theology. On the one hand, Glave intends to anchor BELT *vis-à-vis* theology in that she theologically justifies it through the “language of theology” (Glave 2006, 190), i.e., black environmental thought is based on Biblical passages that support an environmentalist and anti-racist language. Passages that foster equality, equity, and the uplift of the oppressed serve to establish a theological and ideological background that can help target issues harming the environment and foreground the connection of race and environmental issues in one discourse. The application of a distinct language “along with the theological and historical framework of BELT” (2006, 197) strengthens a distinctive approach and particularizes the community.

On the other hand, she also seeks to position BELT in close relation to black liberation theology. The black theology evolving after the Civil Rights movement is seen as an extension of the movement into the realm of theology but also as an attempt to overcome the crisis caused by the decapitation of the movement through King’s violent death. Cone’s early works establish a formal systematic black theology, which centers on the black interpretation of the Bible as it follows from the socio-political context in America. As a theology of the poor and oppressed, it intends to offer a theological way to reclaim the biblical message to cater to the needs of African Americans and to fight oppression through theological means. Cone addresses the environmental injustice in a late essay “Whose Earth Is It Anyway?” (2000), connecting race and environmental issues and in that opening black theology toward the environmental justice movement. Glave, acknowledging the connection to Conesian thought embeds BELT in the tradition of liberation theology; however, quite refreshingly, she avoids the trap Cone falls into by insisting on ontological blackness and in that “oppression is required for the self-disclosure of the oppressed” (Anderson 1995, 87) and practically refusing collaboration with whites. While Glave adopts Cone’s liberation ethics and methodology in the main by vowing to fight environmental racism from a standpoint reminiscent of Cone’s resistance, she does not limit her activism to intra-group networking only but foresees collaboration across ethnic and racial boundaries. As she establishes, “African Americans in the church are called to operate and serve in a multicultural world that includes whites. In addition, African Americans are not isolated and are part of a community that includes whites—some of whom are racist—that wield great economic, social, and political power” (2006, 197). She envisions a coalition with mainstream organizations to “co-opt organizational, strategic planning, and management tools” (2006, 197) and to push them to “develop a more holistic and equitable understanding of environmentalism pertinent to the African American community” (2006, 198).

Criticism of mainstream, white environmentalists comes to the foreground when addressing the specific issues of African American environmental action. She repeats the skepticism of the 1993 summit (2006, 196); namely, that mainstream environmentalists' concern revolves around global issues and ignores particular African American problems. This thought is reiterated in her agenda when she insists on "focus[ing] narrowly on critical environmental problems" (2006, 197).

Negligence of black environmental challenges by mainstream environmentalists and environmental racism lead her to place primary focus on the African American community, where she advocates "selfless Christian service for environmental justice in the African American community" (2006, 198). While she supports "mixing traditional and modern activism" (2006, 198), her approach reiterates traditional community building through the religio-cultural awareness-raising characteristic of the Black Church. Further than that, focusing on the community enables acting out locally "legacy of resistance, combining grassroots activism, spirituality, and organization" (Glave 2010a, 138).

Rooted in the Earth: BELT, Ethics, and Ecomemory

Besides BELT signaling an attempt to formalize a theological discourse and to launch an agenda within the African American community to struggle for environmental justice, it reveals strikingly the effort to redefine the struggle for civil rights in a field that has been close to African Americans. Glave's tactics to embed her environmental theology in a history of resistance and a memory of deep-seated environmentalism while relating it to black theology to validate it ethically represent, on the one hand, the formidability of the developing vista, but, importantly, on the other, a memory of the environment as a site of oppression and resistance. What connects the two tenets is the African American agency that is maintained by the theologian through specific liberation ethics that resists environmental racism and liberates African Americans from ecological injustices. Glave's stand echoes Katie Cannon's:

Liberation ethics is debunking, unmasking, and disentangling the ideologies, theologies, and systems of value operative in a particular society [. . .] [b]y analyzing the established power relationships that determine cultural, political, and economic presuppositions and by evaluating the legitimating myths that sanction the enforcement of such values [. . .] [i]n order that we may become responsible decision-makers who envision structural and systemic alternatives that embrace the well-being of us all. (1995, 138)

For Glave, the critique of environmental engagement is not simply that of unjust practices but that of the whole system in which the injustice appears. As Enrique Dussel also contends, “Liberation ethics arises as a theory preceded by and demanded by a praxis opposed to the system as a totality” (1988, 237). Glave’s ethics representing and promoting agency seeks to unmask systematic environmental injustice that poses a threat “deliberately or passively” (Glave 2006, 190), whereby she identifies BELT as a part of the liberating framework imminent in African American culture and connected to the African American environmental heritage. Based on her introduction to BELT, her liberation ethics is grounded in African American resistance traditions, black theological ethics, and more recently, the ethics of the environmental summits of 1991 and 1993.

The fictional vignettes in Glave’s later work, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (2010), exemplify how the liberation ethics in BELT precipitates in her memory work. Intended “to give the historical perspective of the book some ‘flesh’” (Glave 2010b), they provide a mnemonic account of the multilayeredness of the African American experience of nature as they unfold her BELT ethics by offering a context for her thinking in which she embraces her ecowomanist ideals. In the vignettes, she sets up a genealogy of African American ancestry through the way the ancestors of an African American family relate to the land. Their ancestor Minkah “once free in Africa, ‘seasoned’ in Jamaica, and [then] enslaved in Alabama” (2010a, 43) represents both the link to an African heritage and, through his journey to the Americas, the traumatic memory of the Transatlantic slave trade. As the name means “justice,” it suggests the embodiment of untarnished and obliging liberation struggle as well as authentic African heritage—that in the intersection of spiritual and environmental embeddedness. In the shadows of the forest (57), the prophet-figure Minkah, Joseph in the new world, dreams of being a priest in Africa, and “in the forest’s gloom,” he resists oppression by running away and by “beckon[ing] his people to the arbor to worship” (59). The vignettes contain relevant topics blended into African American cultural memory from the Middle Passage to the, for Glave, hope-filled, triumphalist Obama era. Minkah’s ideals precipitate thus in later generations through toil on the land, racial oppression, cultivation of “sacred wooded sanctuary” (73), and gardens. Importantly, one female descendant is narrated to become conscious of her re-connection to her cultural identity through the connection to the land and its ethical imperative during her studies at a black college: “She remembers her ancestor Yooku, an African priest who gathered herbs from the land, and her grandparents Albert and Marie, who worked the fields in Louisiana. It seems to Anabel that her family’s connection with the land has come full circle as she learns about ways to teach about nature” (105). Beyond

the reference to Anabel's studies at school, learning to teach offers interference with broader understandings of the African American approach to nature, i.e., through identity and memory, as Minkah's prophetic heritage to teach and lead gains full reincarnation in Michelle Obama "[taking] up the mantle" (114). The liberation ethics Glave professes connects spirituality and liberation in/through the environment. A later vignette further establishes that Glave connecting civil rights to the pollution of a petrochemical company (127) shows that in her ethics, liberating the environment is in fact liberating the African American self.

In Tim Gorrings's assessment, liberation ethics has three pillars: praxis, social analysis, and "appeal to scripture" (2001, 131). Glave's introduction to BELT advocates the application of biblical language and appeals to biblical passages that justify "serving the poor and the dispossessed [in] a biblical model for alleviating the condition of oppressed African Americans" (Glave 2004, 62), as well as sets ideals of church leaders (including the Nation of Islam convert, later Sunni Muslim Malcolm X in the 2004 version of her text), whose personality and lifework express the prophetic tradition. Much in Cannon's footsteps, her 15-point agenda for action seeks to set a praxis of debunking through grassroots activism, and her list of events illuminating the recent history of African American environmental protest mirrors her social analysis of "environmental racism by Euro-Americans [with] biblical, historical, and contemporary origins" (2004, 63).

Through the memory traces of the vignettes, Glave implements her BELT in praxis as she builds on the womanist methodology of recollecting in Toni Morrison's (1995) and Alice Walker's (1983) footsteps. In doing so, she insists on an Africanist religiosity as well as ecospirituality, which, at the same time are presented in a fragmented way as they are sutured into the text at the beginning of each chapter. Giving flesh to the text, therefore, also indicates the nature of ecowomanist memory work: the recollection of memory traces refers back to the fragmentation of memory itself while analysis beckons memory as it can sustain memory and provide a cohesive framework for the memory narrative.

As a religious thinker, she embeds her environmental thinking in black liberation theology but, more broadly, in an African American environmental tradition, which she employs poignantly to address burning issues in the African American community—a move not untypical of religious activism. As Bekker insists,

Religious leaders lead by *reaffirming* the central truths of existing traditions, they aim to *radicalize* these truths from within the community through a process of exemplary behavior, they *ritualize* the truths into codes of laws and sacred rituals, and they open new ways for followers to respond to the original call to lead in systems of *responsiveness*. (2012, 78)

Just as her BELT program embalms and incites a programmatic behavior, which, besides serving an ecological cause, also revitalizes the African American community, her ethics of the community in *Rooted in the Earth* evokes a “liberative dimension of poverty” (Gorringe 2001, 135) that ascribes a “messianic role” to the poor (131), thereby attaching unique authenticity to them based on “justice, grassroots activism, spirituality, and organization” (Glave 2006, 199). Initiating BELT as a “spearhead for reform” (199), she appears to attempt the same in her book, i.e., to redeem the “fragmenting and transforming” black church tradition (Stoll 2006, 163), and that of the community by clearly working toward the same goal: in her analyses as well as in the vignettes, she reaffirms black religious environmentalism, conscientizes it through the recollection of memories, and ritualizes it through the rebirth of the tradition in the White House garden. Endowing the Obamas with a spearhead role in environmentalism, Glave ritualizes their activity by replenishing the cultural activity of gardening in the heart of America:

The good work continues. In 2009 the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, took up the mantle of those dedicated teachers and cultivated a vegetable garden on the grounds of the White House. She used the garden to feed her own family but also invited schoolchildren to the garden to learn about sustainability. [. . .] From the first shovel of soil to the first harvest of ripe vegetables by a group of Washington, D.C. fifth graders, the White House garden project has served as an educational tool for children of different ethnicities, including African Americans, who pick the vegetables from the vine and cook the produce themselves. (2010a, 114-40)

Schoolchildren represent the future of the nation and the whole nation at that; however, the inclusive maneuver indicates the intention to counteract environmental injustice by symbolically addressing and including the poor and disadvantaged groups as well, which based on BELT means people of color in the first place. In this way, Michelle Obama’s activity is ritual, signifying prophetic, but also priestly and kingly functions in Minkah’s footsteps.

What makes BELT an example of genuine African American memory work is the way Glave entices responsiveness through her book. She establishes the relation between the environment and African Americans by employing and verifying situation ethics (Gorringe 2001, 132), which “aims at a contextual appropriateness—not the ‘good’ or the ‘right’ but the *fitting*” (Fletcher 1966, 27-28). One might argue that it is a permissive use of ethics as Joseph F. Fletcher’s “principled relativism” (31) may give way to a non-dogmatic, utilitarian or pragmatic

understanding of the situation, as it “calls upon us to keep law in a subservient place, so that only love and reason really count when the chips are down” (31). Glave, even when emphasizing African American appropriation of the environment, looks to understand the situational realization of God’s revelation—an approach that follows from her integration into African American traditions. The move is well demonstrated by Glave’s description of the appropriation of Christianity to enable African Americans

to embrace a God of contradictions—a God that whites cast as the oppressor and that, at the same time, granted a spiritual or metaphorical, and literal freedom to blacks. a nuanced black God with whom they had an intimate relationship, a God who was with them in their struggle against racism and segregation. Some African Americans throughout history have seen themselves in God’s own image and have perceived God as someone they could turn to in the struggle against oppression. (Glave 2010a, 50-51)

Her situation ethics links to Cone’s conceptualization of Tillich’s and Barth’s notion of the context, which she builds on God’s liberating work of the poor and the oppressed. In a likewise fashion, reinterpreting Christianity involved “an environmental-spiritual fusion” (2010a, 56) that Glave continues to emphasize in the vignettes and her own experience as when she remembers after a snowstorm: “I experienced God in the theophany the storm presented: for me, it was the appearance of God through Nature” (2017, 88).

Situation ethics is oppositional, nevertheless. In *Rooted in the Earth*, she exploits the memory of African ethical farming in contrast to white use of the land: “Much of this knowledge began in Africa, where some Africans practiced environmentally friendly conservation that was synonymous with subsistence farming. Such practices were continued in America by the enslaved and ultimately exploited by slaveholders” (2010a, 82). In Glave’s thinking, ethical farming is overshadowed by white conceptualizations of nature and, under the pressure of the white world, in which African Americans were “forced to comply with the government’s demand to do the unthinkable” (2010a, 55)—the reason why they could not maintain the “ethical struggle over stewardship of God-given natural resources” (2010a, 55).

Glave’s retrospective interpretation of African American environmental ethics suffers, nevertheless, from inconsistency through her narration of slaves’ dealing with farm animals as a means of resistance: “Livestock and working animals were abused, another way to rebel against slaveholders. African Americans did not care about rationing the animals’ feed, letting livestock run wild, and ignoring the work animals’ safety. And why shouldn’t they when Africans Americans were

treated like chattel?” (2010a, 64). The easy dismissal of “the brutal and careless treatment” of livestock (Genovese 1989, 110) that Eugene D. Genovese describes as common (1989, 110) debunks any homogeneous environmental ideal of the African American community, even if the abuse of livestock was motivated by resistance or hunger (1989, 111). Glave’s rhetorical question answers itself based on her arguments in other parts of the book: the lack of solidarity for chattel counteracts the spiritual bonding with the environment she insists on and reveals the multilayered connection of African Americans to the environment. She also reflects on it in a later writing of hers when she acknowledges that “Africans and African-Americans are not exempt from responsibility for exploiting the natural goods (resources) of the planet” (Glave 2017, 86).

This, however, does not lessen the power of her argument. BELT does establish/verify a tradition of rootedness in earth and community, for which she establishes and promotes a model of maintenance forcefully. Beyond expressing her commitment to both the community and the environment, Glave’s final admonition and exhortation identify the book as a memory work:

This book began in Africa with the enslaved crossing the Atlantic into the Americas. It continued in time from enslavement to freedom to the African diaspora and ends with children in the garden of the nation’s first African American president and First Lady. We can reclaim our environmental heritage, but no one needs to step into a void. Locally, nationally, and internationally, blacks can follow the inspirational examples of our forefathers and -mothers’ unique relationship with the land, the civil rights generation’s strategies for change, and contemporaries such as the Obamas’ sense of environmental stewardship. We have templates for environmental change and reengagement. We can—no, we must—answer the call. (2010a, 141)

On a positive note, she warns, exhorts, but also reminds of and thus builds on African American memory closely connected to an environmental spirituality. Starting her narrative with Minkah and then twisting it into an ecowomanist narrative by recognizing Michelle Obama as the one fulfilling Minkah’s dream of leading, nurturing, and remembering, Glave brings the African American cultural memory around to effect closure in a triumphalist way. For the “Christian integrative relational womanist” (Baker-Fletcher 2006: 71) theologian, the gardening activity represents the long tradition of ecological activity leading way beyond an activity of sustenance and ecological sustainability to cultivating memory by integrating coming generations in it and thus passing it on to them.

Conclusion

Glave's black environmental liberation theology offers a model for ecological agenda based mainly on civil rights activism and black liberation theology. Beyond, however, the practical framework for ecological action that she offers, BELT can be seen as the precipitation of her memory work that revitalizes black religious environmentalism both as grassroots activism and environmental spirituality. Her BELT is thus as much embedded in the ecological turn in the civil rights movement as in the spiritual tradition of ecological ancestors. Her major work *Rooted in the Earth* undergirds BELT as ecomemory: giving "flesh" to her book through the deployment of the vignettes as fragments of one cohesive mnemonic narrative as the beginning of each chapter represents ecowomanist memory work of recollecting as well as shows the application of ecomemory in facilitating ecological activism through analysis and writing. As much blending into tradition is essential in her BELT agenda, so it is relevant in her ecomemory detectable in her book. The African American tradition of liberation ethics interweaves resistance traditions and black religious ethics brought together in an environmental(ist) framework. It is through this framework that she manages to reconstruct ecomemory to both replenish her community and instigate ecological action.

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