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The cover image is courtesy of Michelle Garvey from her article in this issue.

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FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

SPIRITUALITY AND ECOLOGY: (RE)MEMBERING BLACK WOMEN'S LEGACIES

By Ebony Aya

Editor's note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.

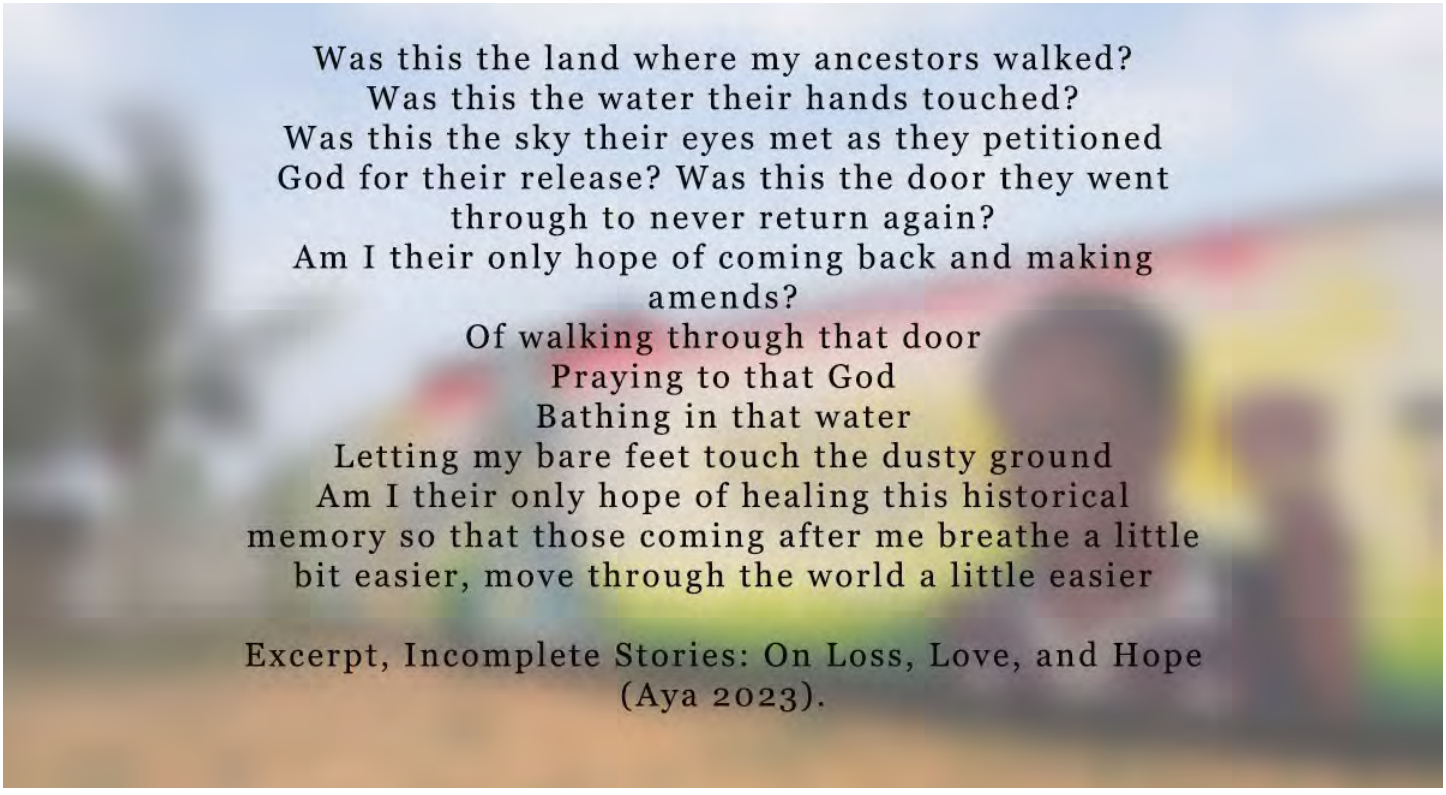
I feel the need to start this article by being clear that I have often struggled to relate to its subject. I don't have a green thumb, or at least one I have discovered yet. Keeping my indoor plants alive has been an ongoing struggle! And the outside plants? On the off chance that I do decide to plant, which I did try to do for several years, my yields are few and far between. I sometimes forget to water. Rather than doing the necessary research to understand what things can actually

Ancestral Wall in Prampram, Ghana, July 7, 2019. Image courtesy of Ebony Aya.

grow in my environment, I have often just dived right in to see what works. I do recycle (hey, at least there's that), I don't litter, and I try to be mindful about my carbon footprint. But I have otherwise felt disconnected from the environment and land surrounding me.

I say all of this to explain why, when I was initially asked to give a talk for EnviroThursday,[1] I hesitated. I wondered what I could share from a place of authenticity and honesty given that my relationship with the environment, in my opinion, was less than perfect. I accepted because, even though I struggled with my own relationship with the environment, I come from a long line of people of African ascent[2] whose relationship with the environment was totally different than mine. I knew that if I looked hard enough, I could emerge through their stories. I wanted to (re)member their legacies, specifically those of Black women, from a place of spirituality and African ways of knowing—things that are not often associated with the environment in the United States.

As a person committed to the scholarship of Dr. Cynthia Dillard and her framework of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (EFE), which articulates "how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought," (2006, 3) (re)membering has been so critical to me because it has given me the ability to (re)claim the pieces of myself that had been trained away from knowledge of the natural world as a result of institutionalization within academia and the Church.[3] (Re)membering consists of a process—no, a praxis—of literally putting myself back together: re + member. In embracing the act of (re)membering, I turned to a practice routinely taken up by Black women of marshaling "the legacy of Black people in relation to our spirits, and those (re)memberings have required us to lean on the 'substance of things unseen'—on our spirituality" (Dillard 2022, 2). Spiritual life, which includes our spiritual consciousness, sacred practice, and creativity, is what bolsters "culturally relevant sustaining practices in educational spaces with Black students" (Dillard 2022, 3) and others from marginalized backgrounds.



Excerpt, Incomplete Stories: On Loss, Love, and Hope (Aya 2023).

With an understanding of the legacy I was building on with my utilization of EFE and (re) membering, I approached my process in three ways: (1) I started off with an initial inquiry in which I explored my own relationship to the environment through reflection and self-study; (2) I reflected on my travels to Ghana in 2019 and what people there taught me about (re) membering our connection to the environment as African ascendant peoples; and (3) I re-read texts by womanist[4] and Black feminist scholars that aided in the (re)membering process.

My Own Inquiry

As a result of EnviroThursdays, I started my own inquiry process, asking myself how I related to the environment. I did this through journaling over a period of months, realizing that in some ways I felt betrayed by the environment as a Black woman because of the ways that we as Black people have been forced to produce from it (slavery, sharecropping) and have subsequently been punished by it in ways that it did not seem other communities were (Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the earthquake in Haiti in 2009, to name just a few examples). My journal entry on January 19, 2023, went like this:

> How has the earth betrayed me as a Black woman? Or, how have the tools of white supremacy been used against both me and the earth to further the disconnection between the divine feminine and creation? First, I am thinking about the biblical story of Adam and Eve. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was placed in the middle of the garden of Eden, and, as the story goes, Eve allegedly ate from it because she was deceived by the serpent before she gave the fruit to her husband Adam. For that "sin," curses abound: she is ever at war with her husband, she is at war with the serpent as a representative of creation, and she is at war with her own seed because she will have labor pains as a result of the sin. This mother of all living, this mother of the earth, is immediately disconnected from the earth and herself. The story forces me to betray myself and makes it permissible when the earth is used as a weapon against me because in the betrayal I got what I deserved.
>
> *If you keep your legs closed and submit, so the line of thinking goes, you won't be betrayed as much. The trees won't lynch your children, the water won't swallow your husband, the hurricanes won't sweep away your whole family. Work the land for those who own you, but don't you dare work it for yourself and to feed those within the borders of your home, those within your communities.*
>
> But it's not for our perceived sin that we are betrayed. It is because of our essence that excuses have been invented, in order to control not only our bodies (the forced reproduction of our bodies and our labor), but to also control the earth. And perhaps this is the greatest tragedy: the separation of Black women from the earth. Because maybe if we could come back to the earth and find ourselves, we could find ourselves in each other once again. Maybe the healing lies in facing the first disruption in the story, the division between female and creation; everything else flows from this point.

Naming this specific journaling experience is critical because it reflects the larger self-study that I have been engaging in over a period of years focused on the ancient narrative of Eve.[5] Looking at Eve, I have tried to make sense of the ways Black women's bodies have been so

disregarded and abused in the American context. For me, Eve is a representation of that fragmentation that we as Black women experience because of the ways that we, like Eve, have been blamed for the oppression that we have endured. In this narrative, I see fragmentation take place not only within Eve herself but between Eve and the environment, as the disconnection she experiences in herself ultimately represents her disconnection with the environment. They are inseparable. On so many levels, I realized that I had internalized that same fragmentation.

Using Eve as a proxy of myself in studying the environment, I realized the root of my disconnection was that I was struggling to connect with my own self, which kept me from connecting to the environment and from engaging in other somatic practices that would help me connect with and stay within my body. I had to come back to a place where I could love and accept myself in the ways that Toni Morrison (1987, 88) spoke about in *Beloved:* "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard." I had to love myself and believe my truth, as well as the truth of other Black women like me who had lived with a sense of fragmentation and betrayal.

This led to a dialogue with my mother, who is now living with dementia, on February 7, 2023. I realized that her connection to the environment was one of the ways that she addressed the fragmentation in her own life. She stated,

> I started gardening in little pots when I was a teenager. Wherever I saw flowers, I would pick them out, put them in water, and then pots. Around my home, if I saw any type of flower, I would dig it out of the ground and put it in a bottle.
>
> That's when I started having interest in it. When I had my own home, I would always have a pot of flowers in my home during the winter months. When I started having homes, I would beautify them. I would buy magazines about how to start a garden and would do it. I used to love to do my gardening. I would sit out with the dog. I would enjoy myself, listen to music. It was a comfort for me. And it helped me relax. Sometimes I had really bad days and felt I had to struggle. When I got home, I wanted to completely relax. Growing flowers and everything like that [helped me to do so]. (Personal communication with Jacqueline Hatch)

As I look back over the life that I have had with my mother, I believe that it is gardening, and thus the environment, that allowed her to heal the brokenness within herself. It is only within the last 10 years, as her access to land decreased when she sold the home that my sister and I spent our teenage years in and moved into an apartment, that I have seen her mental and physical health deteriorate. Through the reflection, which inevitably prompted me to interview her, I am beginning to (re)member. I am beginning to (re) member her experience, yes, but mine as well. "You used to garden, too," my mom told me. As sharp as my memory is, this is a memory that isn't there. It was my mother, with her declining memory, who helped me (re)member parts of myself that I had long forgotten.

Ghana 2019: Year of Return

The more I engaged in my inquiry about my connection to the environment, the more I (re) membered the ways that I have been connected to it. One of those ways for me was going to Ghana in 2019 for the Year of Return[6] with a group of about 10 people. I am forever appreciative of the experience because it gave me the opportunity to (re)claim a piece of myself that enslavement, Jim Crow, and ongoing racial subjugation seduced me to forget (Dillard 2012).

Thinking about Ghana, I (re)membered the text that I produced as a result of my travel and experiences. *Incomplete Stories: On Loss, Love, and Hope* (2023) details my experience in this country known for the slave trade. Visiting the slave dungeons as well as the Assin River, where our ancestors took their last baths prior to being sold, was of particular importance. In addition to these sites, however, reconnecting with the land that my people had been ripped away from was a critical healing moment for me. I (re)member standing on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, marveling at its sheer beauty while at the same time praying to our ancestors who had come from this place. These ancestors not only felt a connection to the land and the water but in many ways were inseparable from it. In the text I reflected,

> It is not only the water and the land that remember; our bodies remember too. Our bodies remember our beginnings, our history, our culture. Though we are disconnected from these beginnings and history because of our separation from the land and the language, we still carry the semblance of them in our bones. People such as the Gullah Geechee along the coasts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida are one visible example of this, as their practice of cultivating rice, and even some of their songs, can be directly traced to Sierra Leone and Senegal. It has taken researchers committed to articulating what we have retained from our ancient past, (re) membering, to make these connections and bring it into our consciousness (2023, 75).

In going to Ghana, I began to crave the unity and oneness that Ghanaians enjoyed with the environment, qualities we lost through the brutality of slavery, where our knowledge, resourcefulness, and ability to work the earth was used against us. We were forced to use the environment to work and produce at the ultimate level but no longer were able to access it from a space of spirituality and knowing. From the time that we were enslaved and forced to work stolen land across the Americas, we were seduced to forget our own creation narratives, which are grounded in our ancestral cultures, under the penalty of violence, and instead were forced to adopt Christian beliefs and practices. At the center of these beliefs is the creation story, which paints Eve as culpable for the multiple, intersecting oppressions that women experience. In centering her story, we were thus taught over the span of generations why we could no longer trust the environment as a source of renewal and spiritual practice.

In order to heal, I understood, we needed to connect back to this land from which our ancestors were taken: if not physically, then in our hearts and minds through ritual and ceremony. Standing on the shores of the Atlantic as the waves washed over my feet, singing songs to ancestors who may have stood in that very same space centuries before, I began to understand. Being in that space in 2019, during the Year of Return, was not only an act of (re)claiming[7] my humanity, my existence, and the existence of my people, it was an act of (re)membering that long before the intrusion of the slave trade, we were. We lived, we thrived, we existed on land where we were free to practice our spirituality and sacred rituals.

Coming home from that experience, I entered the church I was attending at the time. Called on to lead the congregation in worship, I (re)member going to a song by India.Aire (2009) that has since held so much meaning. I led the congregation in the following refrain:

> River rise, carry me back home.
> I cannot *(re)member* the way
> River rise, carry me back home
> I surrender today.[8]

The song that morning wasn't for the congregation; it was for me. I could not forget what I experienced during those brief days in Ghana. I made a commitment to forever (re)member the meaning of the moments on that land that held me and allowed me to bring myself back together. And in (re)membering, I felt displaced, uncomfortable. I could no longer be in environments where the sacredness of our history was not honored or places where, in order to exist, I had to take up narratives that did not belong to me. On coming back home, I began the excruciating process of sitting these down. Again, I was (re) membering. And it was all because I went back to the land from which my ancestors were ripped and walked back through the door of no return. In doing so, I let my people know I survived. And made it back home.

Sacred Texts

In the conservative Pentecostal Christian tradition that I practiced for nearly 30 years,[9] I learned to believe that the Bible was paramount. It was considered the word of God, incapable of error or wrongdoing, incapable of any fault. However, over the years, I began the process of backing away from that line of thinking and instead revering the Bible as one of many sacred texts useful for reflection. I did this because the more I studied biblical texts, the less I saw myself. I began the practice of writing stories into the text where I could correct this. This is what led to "Forgetting Sodom," the short story at the end of my book, *The Gospel According to a Black Woman* (2020), in which I rewrote the wretched story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is also what has undergirded my self-study on Eve over the years, going back and through her narrative and the narratives of other women like her in the Bible to better understand who they were. Wrestling with Eve like this also led me to revise and renarrate her text, a process that I took up in *Reconsidering Eve: Towards a Deepened Consciousness* (2024).

As I did this, I also religiously took up the work of Black feminist and womanist scholars, thinkers, lyricists, and theologians whom I felt were passing on divine knowledge that I, as a Black woman, could see myself in. I was naturally drawn to folks like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks, Black women whom many people know and love.[10] But I was also greatly inspired by Renita Weems, a womanist theologian who in many ways helped me begin to see the patterns of abuse and misogyny that are so present in the biblical text. It was her work in *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (1995) and *I Asked for Intimacy: Stories of Blessings, Betrayals, and Birthings* (1993) which has helped me to contextualize Eve in a different light. Because of her work, I saw that these metaphors of violence and ostracization were actually representative of the cultures doing the writing and had nothing to do with the way that the divine creator thought about us as people in general and Black women in particular. So, when I took up the task of turning to sacred texts for understanding my relationship to the environment, I naturally went to the Black women whom I already knew were writing about these things.

One of those women was Melanie Harris. I specifically engaged with her work on Ecowomanism, which highlights the "necessity for race-class-gender intersectional analysis when examining the logic of domination, and unjust public policies that result in environmental health disparities that historically disadvantage communities of color" (Harris 2016, 5). This piece was important for me because, in speaking about the environment, Harris not only centers the ways that Black women know but also suggests that earth justice has always been a part of who we are. Based on the knowledge that we have long embodied a commitment to the earth, Harris argues that Ecowomanism helps us to resituate that commitment, interrogating the "structural evils that African American women have historically faced," evils that have arguably separated us from the environment (Harris 2016, 6). She likewise grounds our commitment to the earth and environment in a deep-seated spiritual consciousness, stating that among Black women, there is a "deep value of the earth as sacred," and that our bodies are connected to the earth and thus to that sacredness (Harris 2016, 6).

I appreciate Harris' work because she helps us as Black women to (re)member that connection to the environment is part and parcel of who we are. It is not out of reach but, rather, deep within us. Fleda Mask Jackson's (2001, 48) essay "In the Morning, When I Rise: My Hands in Spiritual Soil" in many ways builds on Harris' work, helping us to collectively (re)member how our ancestors engaged with the environment:

> I come from generations of gardeners, spanning over a millennium. My foremothers and forefathers tilled and planted freely in Africa for sustenance of the body and soul. In ancient Egypt, my ancestors developed the first formal gardens, organizing plants and flowers along the Nile as they worshipped the sun. Even in the misery and pain of bondage, I'm certain that, for some, a glimpse of blooming trees and shrubs provided a brief moment of hope for the future. For those fortunate slaves who were permitted a patch of earth where they grew vegetables to supplement a meager diet, the harvest of their own bounty must have provided some sense of autonomy. And for all who attempted and succeeded in escaping, they recognized the plants, flowers, and trees as beacons lighting their paths to freedom.

Jackson (re)minds us of the ways that our African ancestors, who founded civilizations and created temples of thought, knew not only how to exist within the natural environment but how to be in harmony with it. Lakeesha Harris (2017), in her essay "Healing through (Re)membering and (Re) claiming Ancestral Knowledge about Black Witch Magic," goes one step further and shows us that not only did our ancestors know how to live in harmony with the environment, they also drew their sense of spirituality and ways of navigating the world from it. Harris reflects on the experience of her mother, who concocted potions consisting of herbs, berries, and rum to heal a variety of sicknesses based on what she saw her own mother do. Harris also details the experience of her Aunt Joyce, someone she regarded as a root worker and agriculturalist who through the use of Black witch magic was able to keep her sanity intact in the midst of an abusive situation. These examples highlight how our ancestors hid spiritual practices that may have been forbidden and integrated them within dominant frameworks, including Christianity. This enabled them to hold onto a degree of this ancestral wisdom and practice even as they professed a non-threatening faith practice in the eyes of dominant culture.

Reflecting on these texts brought me back to my own mother and how she instinctively knew how to heal herself through gardening. It is only now that I can understand that what she did was a healing practice that allowed her to stay sane for so long. It is only now that I understand that her ability to be present was so deeply tied to being able to be in the soil in the warmth of the

sun. And it is only now that I understand that, in order for me to be well, I must do the same. In doing the same, I (re)claim my own magic and (re)member myself in the space of internalizing texts that assisted in fragmenting my being. I no longer have to be cut off from my being, and I no longer have to be cut off from the earth; I, like other Black women, can begin the process of (re) membering myself whole, and no longer defining myself through the misappropriation of Eve's personhood (Dillard 2022).

Concluding Thoughts

It was by engaging these three components—my self-study, my travel to Ghana, and my reading of key texts—that I realized that my disconnection with the environment was also a reflection of how much I had been fragmented from my own self. When this dawned on me in my course of study, I almost felt like weeping. I understood in greater measure the totality of what happened to me and my people, but I also felt like a great weight had been lifted. It was only in the process of (re)membering that this could have happened. I thank my mother. I thank my ancestors. I thank the land for helping me to get there by participating with me in the journey back to myself, back to (re)membering that my people have always had this connection to the earth. I will hold on to this and use this knowledge of self to continue to strengthen my own relationship to the earth going forward.

I am forever and eternally grateful.

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Footnotes

[1] EnviroThursdays is an initiative at Macalester College sponsored by the Environmental Studies department. It provides an opportunity for the campus community, particularly students, to hear from an array of speakers—including community members outside of Macalester—and learn from their individual approaches to understanding the environment. This article is an adaptation of that talk.

[2] Ascent is used here intentionally as opposed to descent, as in ascending from our ancestors (rising up), instead of descending. I have been inspired by the work of Cynthia Dillard (2006, 2016) and Derise Tolliver Atta (2018) who both use this term when speaking of people of African heritage.

[3] I am naming the Church here as an institution comprised of different denominations and locales.

[4] Womanism is a term coined by Alice Walker in her 1983 text, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. For Walker, womanism was a more accurate, expansive term to explain the experiences and perspectives of Black women and other women of color than feminism. "Womanism is to feminist, as purple is to lavender" (xii).

[5] The concept of Eve stems from the Judeo-Christian narrative found in the book of Genesis. What I didn't realize until the last few years is that I have spent the greater part of the last fifteen years reflecting on Eve and the ways that the narrative blamed her for the wrongdoing in the world. In 2022, I started to compile all of the writing that I had done about Eve and turned it into a text called *Reconsidering Eve: Towards a Deepened Consciousness*, which was released in 2024.

[6] The 2019 Year of Return marked the 400th anniversary of the enslavement of people of African heritage in the United States by the British. Although Europe had been disinvesting from the continent before 1619, with the first slaves coming to parts of the Caribbean in the early 16th century to work on Spanish plantations, 1619 is a date that tracks Britain's involvement in the slave trade. In 2019, there was a great effort from people like Ghana's president Nana Akufo-Addo for people of African heritage in the United States to return home.

[7] The act of (re)claiming is lifted up in Dillard's text *The Spirit of Our Work*, which is focused on (re)claiming our own spirits and (re)membering the humanity and cultural traditions of Black women and people as a precursor to carrying out the deeper cultural and spiritual work of teaching that these frameworks require," (2022, p. 140).

[8] India.Arie. "River Rise" Recorded 2009. Track 8 on *Testimony: Vol 2, Love and Politics*, Soulbird, album. Parentheses added for emphasis.

[9] I attended an Assembly of God church from the ages of 9 to 30 and was a licensed minister within the denomination from the ages of 28 to 38, though in my thirties I ardently rejected a lot of what I found to be racist and sexist propaganda in the denomination.

[10] Walker, Morrison, hooks, and so many other Black feminist and womanist writers were instrumental in helping me see myself accurately, in helping me to (re)member my spiritual and sacred self. The texts that have been the most meaningful for my development include and are not limited to: Walker's *In Search of My Mothers' Gardens* (1983) and *Temple of My Familiar* (1989); Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970); hooks' *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self Recovery* (1994), *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), and *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001).

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