

Pedagogies of Black Feminist and Coalitional Ecological Praxis

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Abstract: This piece chronicles an emergent journey of learning, through initiating a Black feminist & coalitional ecological thought reading salon in a university, and through other place-based learning and teaching practices in *Syilx* Okanagan territory (known as Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada). Building upon and extending Black feminist orientations, reckoning with both eco-social joy and suffering/injustice in equal measure, these pedagogies address complexities of (de)colonization, racial hierarchies of knowledge, and coalition with non-humans in ways that go beyond surface level identity politics. The goals of this praxis are to ground in place-based accountabilities and to encounter the tensions and paradoxes of complicity with, and mobilization against destructive colonial extraction. Such pedagogies center commitments to approach with joy and gravitas, the very real socio-ecological negotiations necessary in this beautiful and troubling planetary conjuncture.

Keywords: Black feminist, coalitional politics, pedagogy, ecology, decolonizing.

What are the possibilities of learning and teaching unsettling approaches to land-based well-being outside of the confines of white environmentalism on diverse Indigenous lands of Turtle Island? How does one grapple with localized and regionalized socio-ecologies and reckon with the necessarily planetary scale of climate change and questions of justice? What does it mean to be an Afro-descended settler-of-colour (Jafri) in these spaces? I began my time as a new faculty member of environmental justice and cultural studies with these questions as an experimental mode of engagement within a North American University on the traditional and unceded lands of Indigenous *Syilx* Okanagan community. The *Syilx* People of the Okanagan

Nation are a trans-boundary set of Indigenous communities with land-based governance systems from time immemorial in the Pacific Northwest across Canada and the United States.

Thinking with the above questions and centering paradox as a wayfinding tool in moving through tensions and contradictions (Girvan et al.), I proceeded to move through the paradoxes in two ways: first, by stepping into this place as a “foreigner” learning about and from these *Syilx* lands; and second, by deconstructing the “white-out” (Cohen and Chambers, 38) of the place, guided by Black feminist (and coalitional) ecological thought. I initiated a reading salon in part to process these questions *in and with community*, an insight gleaned from a long lineage of Indigenous, Black, and women-of-colour feminist collectives (Bhandar et al; Combahee River Collective; García-Peña; Jackson; Smith; Tuck, Stepetin, Beaulne-Stuebing Billows).

This piece chronicles an emergent journey of learning, reading, thinking, and acting through the reading salon and through other place-based learning and teaching in *Syilx* Okanagan territory (colonially known as Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada) reckoning with both eco-social joy and suffering/injustice in equal measure. This balance emerges from engaging poetically, playfully and critically in the tradition of Alexis Pauline Gumbs “marine mammal apprenticeship” (10) among others, bringing complexities of (de)colonization and racial capitalism and coalition with non-human relations in ways that breach surface-level identity politics. Addressing social and ecological ills of contemporary life as well as finding remedies or pathways through these troubles, entails stitching together concerns that have often been strategically held apart to capitalize on elements and worlds divided for resource productivity.

Crucially, however, communities that have felt the impacts of, and long resisted these artificial and violent divides, offer wayfinding through the questions above. My own formation in lands with lively and highly visible more-than-human relations, stewarded by long-standing

Indigenous communities, as well as my location through Caribbean diaspora and learning from and with Black feminist and women-of-colour communities, orient my approaches to these questions. This piece is not meant to definitively answer the questions that lead above, but to keep them alive as provocations to guide movement in the times and places that I find myself, collectively with others. Because I am processing my own learning, the novelty of my arrival in this space and the ways my own locations and histories shape how I move through these questions, I am - uncharacteristically in recent years – writing this piece alone; however, like many in my communities, I am grounded, supported and inspired by many past, present and future relations, some of which I name in what follows.

Grounding in Indigenous Lands amidst National-State Exclusions and in a Colonizing University

Growing up in Lheidli T’enneh territory (in the outskirts of what is colonially known as Prince George, British Columbia, Canada) in ‘the bush’ meant that the sounds of coyotes - who sometimes peskily feasted upon our chickens and their eggs - lulled me to sleep. Bear, moose beaver, bats, mosquitoes, pine, spruce and willow trees – sometimes crusted in deep snow - were regular companions of daily life. Despite my formation in these lands, however, like in many “Canadian” regions, Lheidli T’enneh communities of people and their land-based governance systems were invisibilized through white settler myths and dominant presence. These lands raised me, but wider “settler-colonial socialization” (Nath and Allen, 201) raised me and other communities-of-colour to aspire to, indeed to *long for* “Canadian” belonging in ways that continue colonial extractive destruction of human and non-human life.

Having recently lived and raised family in ləkʷəŋən and WSÁNEĆ territories (colonially known as Victoria, BC, Canada), I have also learned from those who have care-taken the land in

that space (Bryce, 2010; 2020) to look beneath the veneer of a colonially-presenting “city of gardens” whose tourist-oriented inner harbour images require the invisibilization of clam gardens and camas cultivation long present in these socio-ecosystems (Songhees Nation).

In Syilx Okanagan unceded land, I had come invited by a post-secondary institution, but not explicitly *by* Syilx community. This institution originated in part through a memorandum of understanding with *Syilx* community (UBC, Okanagan Indigenous Engagement), and/but part of that agreement as elders and knowledge holders in the territory insist, is to be accountable to relations on *Syilx* land (Armstrong; Cohen and Chambers). This means among many things, resisting, where possible, the anywhere/everywhere universalizing knowledge logics of colonial universities. Although, as many Indigenous scholars have noted, it is impossible to fully decolonize a colonizing institution (Belcourt, Smith), small steps can be taken to dismantle settler-colonial structures and processes.

In related but non-equivalent logics, the e-race-sure of other non-white communities from the formation of a hegemonically white nation, shape the experiences of many of us who are othered through white-settler questioning of (non)belonging - “where are you *really* from?” – and from the ways that the nation-state narrates itself both internally and externally. The norms expressed in educational settings, cultural texts, and political leadership demonstrate this settler-colonial white-out. Such norms exert particular exclusionary practices in terms of reinforcing racist hierarchies of intelligence in universities where ‘rightful roles’ of servitude are often ascribed to folks who are not afforded the capacity to be ‘thinkers’ (Ibrahim).

These contexts shaped my hopeful but cautious entry into a new institution. I determined that before I was conscripted to all the “equity” committees at this institution, I would be (re)asserting myself – through initiating a reading salon – as a scholar of ecological thought and

action. This was not simply an act of self-preservation, but also a response to witnessing what happens when many of us spin our wheels in these institutions and then are spit out, depleted of energy to do the hard, necessary, community, joyful work that this planetary conjuncture requires of us (Ibrahim, et al.).

Black Feminist Ecological Thought

Black feminist ecological thought, a term coined by Chelsea Mikael Frazier, offers a particular entry point from which to engage with environmental and knowledge justice. Although Frazier has coined this term, she acknowledges, in the tradition of many Black (feminist) thinkers and activists, the long lineages of thought and community practice shaping its trajectory. “Black Feminist Ecological Thought (though emergent in name) has been present and continues to evolve alongside environmental thinking and action that often fails to recognize its existence and its intellectual and creative authority” (313). Frazier grounds the integral relationship between Black feminism and questions of environmental justice:

Black feminism is an umbrella term that describes a range of social and 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* (314, emphasis added).

Frazier, who comes from a literary background, is particularly intervening into the field of ecocriticism which involves the study of literature, art and the environment as mutually reinforcing aspects of world-making. Although this field has made inroads through eco-feminist challenges to white male foundations, the exclusionary foundations remain in many settings, limiting diversity of people, communities and thought.

Part of the reason why ecocriticism suffered from a lack of diversity is because of its tendency to primarily highlight texts produced by intellectuals that were white (and often male) who had access to leisure time, land ownership, and financial capital. And while ecofeminism advanced a compelling critique of masculinist themes and principles in environmental discourse, those critiques were often rooted in white, Western feminist intellectual traditions. As a result, both fields implicitly privileged white, Western values over all others and have been very slow to perceive the existence and/or necessity of alternative strands of ecological thought—such as Black Feminist Ecological Thought (Frazier, 314).

With Frazier, I am not dismissing exceptions to this dominance. Increasingly, the work of Indigenous, Black and people-of-colour thinkers, authors and activists is tempering “white environmentalism,” however, these lineages are often taken up by white environmental and social justice activists in ways that do not permit agency for how the stories are being told. As Carolyn Finney, author of *Black Faces, White Spaces* insists, “[w]hoever has representational authority can determine how our stories get told and how we think about ourselves in relation to others” (6). This representational authority over communities and how they relate to ecologies often warps knowledges held in these communities.

I also agree with Frazier’s critique of the *slowness* and often still-marginal recognition of these strands that have existed in literature and the arts. For example, much North American and global Anglophone ecocriticism engages with Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam Trilogy of near-future post-apocalyptic novels - *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). It has taken far longer for Octavia Butler’s near future post-apocalyptic

Parable series – *Parable of the Sower* (1993), and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) to reach a (still unequal) level of recognition within ecocriticism. When one reads Butler’s plots that engage with themes of climate change, corporate control and societal break-down and the emergence of pockets of communities creating new rules and protocols for community governance amidst these material-social conditions, it is difficult to believe that Butler’s work in no way inspired the stories that would become Atwood’s MaddAddam series. Perhaps one telling feature of Atwood’s work that ‘frees’ it from this lineage, is that Atwood’s stories are premised upon taken-for-granted white societies and thus, comfortably ignore questions of race and colonialism that are foundational to the settings of her stories. Octavia Butler’s themes engage in the complexities of gender and power and class, as do Atwood’s, but they also weave in the complexities of racial power. In a similar history of canonical literary erasure, it has taken time for Nobel award-winning Toni Morrison whom Frazier engages with to be recognized for her *eco*-socially sophisticated thought and grounded imaginaries (Frazier).

Putting “Black” and “ecological” together thus marks an intervention into conventional white settler environmentalist visions of “the pastoral as diversion, a construction of a culture that dreams, through landscape and animal life, of a certain luxury or innocence (Dungy, xxi). Where interventions have been made to mark the presence of Black communities in political-ecological landscapes, the objective has often necessarily been to mark the urgency for remedies to environmental racism that puts certain under-valued communities in direct sacrifice zones absorbing the most hazardous environmental harms (Bullard; Waldron).

Amplifying Coalitional Impulses and Community Knowledges

My own intervention in initiating the reading salon has been to explicitly add the word “coalitional” to Black Feminist *and Coalitional* Ecological Thought. This word is not meant to

mark an easy equivalence across struggles of anti/decolonial movements and communities, but rather to signal a priority of working to negotiate differences in building relationalities where they have been proscribed by existing binary and insufficient organizing logics: Black/white; settler/Indigenous; human/non-human; citizen/alien, etc. Notably coalition-building itself has long been implicitly nurtured within Black Feminist collectives. The Combahee River Collective statement emerges as a strong statement of intersectionality (before it is named as such and further developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw) by insisting on recognizing that “major systems of oppression are interlocking” (1). The Combahee River Collective knows the facts of these interlocking systems precisely because it acknowledges the messiness and challenging work that preceded their collective statement. However, two operating logics nudge me to more-explicitly name coalition in my own movement through Black Feminist *and coalitional* ecological thought/praxis. The first is that racial formations and organizing logics shift over time so the meanings and communities taken-for-granted in words that flag racial communities are not fixed or static. Black organizing was often conceived in the past as an umbrella under which multiplicities of non-white racialized communities would find shelter and grounding; however, the communities indexed by the colours “black” (and “brown,” etc) have shifted over time such that these words have taken to specify particular and exclusive communities (Brown, Gilroy, Hall). Paradoxically, in some ways and at times, these specificities are important to name, and in other ways and times, insisting upon specificities interrupts the potential for coalitional work. Some of the logics of border-guarding discrete identity (politics) are actually encouraged by white supremacist and nation-state systems because when ‘oppression Olympics’ take hold, these hegemonic systems remain intact. Moving through these shifts, I want to flag the irresolvable

tensions and paradoxes here and to name coalition as the messy aspirational process of working through these.

The second, and relatedly paradoxical reason for explicitly adding coalitional into the mix is to flag an erasure, and the inevitability of *future* erasures, that can exist within community organizing when certain gaps occur in certain communities and their knowledges. I take the explicit naming of messiness in the Combahee River Statement and the humility of its authors (Black Women Radicals) as an invitation to think critically about how the original Combahee River Collective statement unintentionally re-produced the invisibilization of Indigenous communities at the site of the Combahee River itself. The Combahee River Collective is explicitly named after the source of its inspiration: the site of an important military operation in 1863 where Harriet Tubman led a group of African American union soldiers to free 700 enslaved people in the Combahee Ferry Raid (Jones). However, Combahee is also the name of a pre-existing Indigenous community, a subset of the Cusabo Muskogee linguistic group whose land is what is currently the southern part of South Carolina. “The first people of coastal South Carolina were reduced from prosperity to obscurity between 1562 and 1751 as European encroachment shattered the framework of their traditional existence.” (Charleston County Public Library). Nowhere in the Combahee River Collective statement, nor in the subsequent reflections by the authors on the statement (Jones), is there mention of the overlapping, but distinct histories of the dispossession of people from land, and land from people that would bring Black community into coalitional commitments with Indigenous histories and presencing at the Combahee River. Reading only the Black histories connected to this site and name enacts an on-going violence that began with settler removal of these communities from their land.

Although once again, this attention to *victims* of colonization and environmental racism is important work, it is equally crucial to affirm presence and ecological thought and practice as rightfully integral to Indigenous land-based communities and governance practices in Turtle Island and beyond. Paradoxically, however, it is also important to not reproduce the “ecological Indigenous person” trope (Gilio-Whitaker) nor to burden Indigenous communities with everywhere and anywhere remediating the impacts of colonial extractivist systems. Nor is it fair to expect all Indigenous communities to forgo socio-economic wellness by adhering to outsider white environmentalist missions to interrupt even selective and sustainable resource development. Although this lesson was learned in British Columbia’s “war of the woods” (Baker), these tensions continue to play out in many sites where many white settler environmental groups expect First Nations communities to continuously outright reject resource development projects, without being able to provide solutions for the histories of colonialism that have stripped communities of their land and access to sustainable harvesting practices.

Beyond specifically Indigenous land-based reclamations of ecological knowledge, it is also crucial to recognize that Black communities and communities-of-colour may also hold (non-equivalent) sophisticated knowledges about socio-ecological communities and knowledge practices that nurture healthy living systems. Although forced migration has disrupted Indigenous forms of knowledge across the globe, this is not to say that non-white migrant communities cannot also contribute to, and nurture healthy ecosystems. Understanding Black communities as active agents with embodied land-based knowledges in North America and throughout the globe, is a powerful move of reclamation (Finney). Maroon communities – once reductively narrated by outsiders as ‘runaway slave’ communities living in the woods in the Caribbean and Latin America – have long been asserting their agency as forest protectors, and

sustainable agriculturalists (United Maroon Indigenous People, 4). Another node of knowledge comes from trickster stories which govern larger-than-human relations. For example, Anansi-the-spider stories carried from Indigenous Akan African communities forced into transatlantic passages, have shifted and adapted in new socio-ecologies in Jamaica. Despite these shifts, trickster stories still have the capacity to orient approaches to climate change and a host of other ecological matters, provided these stories are recognized as sophisticated governance stories and not dismissed as simply children's stories, nor rendered parochial (Girvan "Trickster Carbon"). It is only through the "stubborn whiteness of environmentalism" (Purifoy), that certain communities are utterly e-race-d from having environmental consciousness, commitments and practices.

As we know from the savvy video documenting of Christian Cooper, who dared to bird-watch in New York's Central Park while being Black, the white entitled (dog-lover's) gaze upon, and perceived threat from the presence of a bird watcher who is Black, arises not only from a racist trope equating Black men with violence, but also from a conviction that that same man is not entitled access to public parks, nor capable of nurturing relations with non-human community. In her move to call 9-1-1 and target an 'African American man,' Amy Cooper both: 1) violently criminalizes an innocent person; and 2) disrupts an active human-non-human relationship at a time when such connections are highly needed, especially in urban settings where most human populations live. Fortunately, Christian Cooper has transformed this experience into a leading role in a National Geographic streaming series about birds. Paradoxically, however, even the title of the National Geographic's new show – "*Extraordinary Birder*" – manifests a violent exceptionality of a Black man *as birder*.

Other African Americans like Will Allen, have worked tirelessly as community-based farmer-organizers to combat urban food apartheid and provide social programming and youth mentorship (Allen). His origins in intergenerational sharecropping, originally in South Carolina prior to his parents' movement North, orient him toward the powerful possibilities of growing organic food in cities as an alternative to both agrochemical conglomerates and to structured barriers faced by Black youth. Indeed, one could argue that certain Black communities have had to develop and hold sophisticated socio-ecological knowledges in what Saidiya Hartman calls the “afterlife of slavery” (6).

The Call and Response – Reading Salon Invitation

In continuing and collectivizing my own learning through initiating a reading salon, I was inspired by the tradition of salons as gathering places for literary and cultural exchange, especially those making room for marginalized communities and knowledge. The famous “Dark Tower Salon” during the Harlem Renaissance was a space where Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and W.E.B. Dubois among other now iconic figures, gathered during the 1920's (Harlem World). The sponsor of the Dark Tower reading salon was A'Lelia Walker, notably the daughter of the famous Madame CJ Walker who made her fortune creating a literal salon and hair products for Black women (the good, the bad, and the ugly of Black women's hair experiences is a whole other story!)

This reading salon I offered was specific to my field – the cultural politics of environment and climate change. The salon started with my own admission to being a learner, since it is only since completing my doctoral degree, that I have been able to begin to remedy the large gaps in my own education. I never had a Black—let alone Black feminist, ecologically-oriented—teacher, reading or scholar in any formal studies, up to and including my doctoral coursework in

cultural, social and political thought. This meant that I started the salon with humility, especially interested in finding other Black feminists with expertise and interest in questions of ecology in this institution. Although I did look for and couldn't find Black feminist ecological thinkers in the on-line faculty information, I didn't want to take for granted this absence. My invitation went as follows:

As a newcomer to this university, I'm offering this reading salon because:

- 1) I'm excited and curious to see who is doing or interested in Black Feminist (& Coalitional) Ecological Thought in its diverse and sometimes paradoxical configurations.*
- 2) Putting Black (Feminist) + Thought together is regrettably still a novelty in many Canadian institutions due to legacies of scientific racism and sexism and their presumed hierarchies of knowledge.*
- 3) Putting Black + Ecological together is also regrettably novel to many in hegemonic Anglo-American scholarly and activist circles due to white settler environmentalism.*
- 4) I'm adding 'coalitional' to the name of this salon even though Black Feminist collectives have largely been coalitional. I want to explicitly address in future sessions certain gaps in, for example, understandings of the presence of Indigenous communities on Turtle Island.*

Perhaps unsurprisingly given my location in a university in a place that has been marked by what Syilx Okanagan Indigenous communities name a “white-out” (Cohen and Chambers, 38), no Black feminist ecological faculty were present in this institution to respond to my initial invitation; however, we did gather interested faculty, staff with histories in multiple communities and regions –including Nigeria, Mauritius, the Philippines, the Caribbean, and various diasporic “Canadian” – born communities with roots in the Caribbean, Britain, and wider European

regions. Though I do not speak to experiences of participants in this piece because they have their own voices and experiences, I want to recognize the presence of scholars and activists – emerging or established – who are in their own rights, making valuable contributions to fields and conversations as diverse as: the ethics of African immigrant arrival into settler-colonial Canada (Adebayo); archipelagic Indian Ocean and transnational literary studies (Obeegadoo); migrant eco-criticism (Chua); Black and Indigenous artistic and material reclamations (Kosteniuk); the fostering of radically rebellious research ecologies (Rodriguez); Korean diasporic orientations to Indigenous land ethics (Lee); eco-feminism (Neimanis); multi-species justice (Castricano); political ecology of industrial meat production (Frisque) and literary narratives of living and dying in the wake of slavery (Grinnell). In the tradition of call-and-response, the reading salon would not have been possible if these people had not genuinely responded with interest to animate the space.

My goal, as flagged by the explicit presence of the word ‘coalitional’ in the name of the salon, was to center the work of Black feminists, but to expansively extend to coalitional engagements. I led intentionally with specifically Black feminist authored ecological works in the first few sessions because of their marginalized status. Establishing these foundational texts to build upon as we grew our conversations was key. As some of our conversations in subsequent sessions demonstrated, it is too easy to slip into conventional Euro-Western literary and thought canons in ways that undermine long-standing subjugated knowledges by considering them “derivative” of Euro-Western canons. The more we read, normalize and legitimize the knowledges in these communities, the less we have to defer/refer to canonical Euro-Western knowledges.

Praxis: Grounding in Syilx Land Relating, Nurturing Community and Reading

In addition to reading together, some of us are also engaged in practices of mutual support and nourishment in the sometimes-inhospitable environments of the university. In the tradition of the Dark Tower reading salon and other Black feminist organizing around kitchen tables (Jackson; Smith), I bring food and drink to our sessions. Knowing paradoxically that such gestures with food can reproduce mammy/Aunt Jemima tropes (Girvan “Riffing with Aunt Jemima”, Wallace-Sanders), I nonetheless offer food in these spaces to reproduce a ‘kitchen table’ feel; promote an atmosphere of mutual care/nourishment; and to connect the abstraction of eco-social matters with grounded Black and coalitional food ecologies. To facilitate a sharing of this labour and the joy of contributing, we end the year of salons with a potluck at my place, where everyone is encouraged to bring something inspired by Black feminist and coalitional ecological thought.

In all sessions I prepare sorrel, a drink I first tasted in Jamaica when meeting my paternal grandmother for the first time. Sorrel is made of dried hibiscus flowers steeped in boiling water with ginger (and sometimes other spices, citrus fruits, depending upon region), and then sweetened with cane sugar, or honey or agave and chilled to make a cold tea.



Fig. 1 Sorrel. Photo by the author

Sorrel, as it is called in Jamaica, is also known throughout much of Latin America as *agua de Jamaica*. It is also known as *bissap* in Senegal, as *sobolo* in Ghana, and as *zobo* in Nigeria

(Martinez np). The making of sorrel from hibiscus flowers grown and harvested in the Caribbean is more than simply a culinary treat. The West African origins of hibiscus flower and drink mean that sorrel manifests a powerful socio-ecology of survival and joy among people who were enslaved and who smuggled plant life and ecological practices with them on boats into lands where they found themselves making life out of the ruins of trauma (Martinez).

I also bring dried plantain chips to our group. Plantains connect multiple socio-ecologies of Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and other archipelagic regions through the (often forced) flows of movements of people and their non-human relations. Plantains are thought to have originated in Southeast Asia and moved the circuits of the Indian Ocean in the 5th-15th century (Kehinde Ngo) and then well beyond during the colonially named “Columbian exchange,” which actually entails a much more expansive larger-than-human network of ambivalent flows beyond the name of a colonizer (a whole other story!)

Crucially, in bringing thought and practice together, through *praxis*, some of us are also individually and collectively learning how to dismantle our complicity with colonial relations in Syilx territory. This is a long-term practice that requires a lot of homework, un-learning, learning and acting in different ways than those we’ve inherited from settler-colonial structures and processes. Some of us in this group are taking *nsyilxcen* language classes, bringing important Syilx understandings of this place into our learning and teaching (Cohen and Chambers), and developing practices for connecting to the larger-than-human relations in this space.

The Texts

One of the goals of our reading salon is to initiate conversations across numerous texts and practices to resist monolithic perspectives on Black Feminist & Coalitional Ecological Thought.

I briefly name texts that we have read together thus far, recognizing that this salon is in-progress, and many texts, films and practices are yet-to-come.

I began very intentionally with the book *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* – by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, for several reasons. First and foremost, Gumbs addresses an inclusive planetary readership through what she names the “context of undrowning” which ties together lives of those who did not survive violent transatlantic voyages, those who did survive those passages, but also a coalitional community:

Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism. We are still undrowning. *And by we, I don't only mean people like myself whose ancestors specifically survived the middle passage, because the scale of our breathing is planetary at the very least.* (Gumbs, 2 –emphasis added)

This expansive understanding of Black feminism as a broad set of commitments goes beyond discrete skin-level identity categories to address the complexity of the planetary conjuncture. “We” all have skin in the game of planetary health and systems of ecological degradation and violent socio-cultural oppression are co-implicated, and mutually-reinforcing. Because we are all located (though in highly differentiated ways) in these planetary eco-social systems, we are all invited to intervene (again in highly differentiated ways, with differing levels of responsibility). The subtitle of Gumbs’ book “Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals” does specify two particular communities that she is bringing together; however, these are two communities whose perspectives and knowledges have been largely absent from ecological thinking and acting, so we are appropriately invited to linger with these knowledges as an ethical cross-species set of experimental and experiential understandings to create worlds *otherwise*. There are nuances and

paradoxes around how certain readers may feel about the ‘you’ evoked in this book; some sections – like chapter 11 “respect your hair” – clearly hail readers who understand the important reclamation of Black hair, historically and continuously rendered “unprofessional,” un/touchable, curious (a whole other story!). The book permits important conversations on how to hold the tensions different readers may feel about such in-group conversations.

The second reason to begin with Gumbs arises from her centering joy and trauma in equal measure - there is playfulness in her poetics and also within what she learns from her marine mammal guides. She names violences that have been experienced in oceans by both people and marine mammals, but she also orients toward an indefatigable sense of joy arising from within shared struggles:

... “Spinner” is the name given to a variety of dolphins all over the world who spin around themselves around three to seven times in one leap and then land in the water again...if you could fly, windmill around yourself rotating like a planet on a planet in a sea pulled by a moon, wouldn’t you? (Gumbs, 69).

The book features reverence for, and inspiration from the collective love and play of Black feminists and marine mammals.

The third important orientation in Gumbs is to move herself and readers away from scientific objective observation of animals as foreign *others* through species divides, and to move toward humility, empathy and coalition:

My hope, my grand poetic intervention here is to move from identification, also known as that process through which we say what is what, like which dolphin is that over there and what are its properties, to *identification*, that

process through which we expand our empathy and the boundaries of who we are become more fluid, because we identify with the experience of someone different, maybe someone of a whole different so-called species (Gumbs, 9).

Gumbs insists on being vulnerable in this process to the “messiness of my emotions, but also to the possibility of just projecting onto a whole set of beings who can’t verbally protest my projections” (9). Understanding and trying to mitigate against human projections upon each other and other species, tempers colonial anthropocentric forms of knowledge.

Lastly, beginning our conversations with Gumbs afforded a nuanced entry amidst and against institutionalized knowledge. Gumbs holds a PhD, but as an independent scholar, she has chosen to exit the university. This locates her work in interesting ways. She identifies as a "Queer Black Troublemaker and Black Feminist Love Evangelist and an aspirational cousin to all sentient beings" (Gumbs, About). Gumbs urges the reader to disorient from the head/cognition, and drop into our hearts and bodies, and bodies of water as conveyors of cross-species experiential knowledges. The end of the book contains a set of invitations to practices that facilitate just such a move beyond the head to the heart and body.

After we read *Undrowned*, as an expansive and highly developed manifestation of Black Feminist ecological thought and practice, it seemed fitting to turn to Chelsea Mikael Frazier’s, “Black Feminist Ecological Thought: A Manifesto.” As I have already situated her as the coiner of the term above, embedded and intervening specifically within the field of ecocriticism and literatures, I will not linger more on this text.

In order to move away from contributors specifically from African American contexts, we next read Olubunmi Ashaolu’s “Motherism, African Women and Ecological Advocacy in

Aminata Sow Fall's *L'Ex-père de la nation* and *Douceurs du bercail*." Olubunmi Ashaolu is a Nigerian scholar of literature (ecocriticism), who focuses on how dominant literary imaginaries of the Global North create and reinforce geo-political realities within/across and outside of the continent of Africa. She reclaims – through Senegalese novelist Animata Sow Fall – particular knowledges and orientations from within specifically Francophone West Africa. These regional orientations resonate throughout the continent as each region retains beauty and Indigenous forms of knowledge and communities despite colonial occupation and extraction by numerous imperial powers. Ashaolu flags the ecological relevance of themes of "African Motherism," – first theorized by Catherine Achelonu – in the works of Animata Sow Fall. This theory and article shed an important and critical light on the ways that "Africa" and its varying ecologies (and ruralities) are depicted in literatures from 'the outside', through a hegemonic white colonial gaze that mobilizes well-worn and hazardous (literary and other) tropes to depict the whole continent of Africa. Like many feminisms, there is contestation within the terms of African Motherism – the essentializing aspect of the biological mother and a gender binary in this theory invites critical responses; however, the reclaiming of Indigenous knowledges and retrieval of possibilities of the politics of essentializing land-based relations recalls themes in Anishinaabe-Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts' powerful elaborations of "Indigenous Place-thought".

Next, we read Camille Dungy's *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, as suggested by an accomplished poet in our own group (Chua). In addition to Dungy's important editorial introduction (cited in previous sections of this article), the collection affirms some already-beloved Black poets – like Lucille Clifton and Audre Lorde – as 'eco-poets,' among many other titles and accolades. We were newly introduced to George Moses

Horton (1798-1884) a brilliant self-emancipated poet, that existed in so many ways, before his time. His biographical notes suggest he actually sold love poems to white University of North Carolina students!

This collection also serendipitously led us to the next suggested read by salon participant, Savannah Kosteniuk. The book *Being Property Once Myself* by Joshua Bennett (2020) riffs off of the first line of a Lucille Clifton poem, which was also in Dungy's book *Black Nature*:

being property once myself
i have a feeling for it,
that's why i can talk
about environment.... (Clifton 2)

Bennett extends the notion of being property as a kind of coalitional pull across the species divide, where the realities of Black people's historical status as non-human animals and objects of ownership, is radically re-imagined, subverting the entire exclusionary social order of "Mankind" and its violences to humans and non-humans alike. The chapter we read, Horse, is inspired by Frederick Douglass' urging for "recently emancipated black farmers...to consider animals their co-laborers, friends, partners in the field, to resist the whims of a social order predicated on their confinement." (Bennett, 3). These themes returned us again to grappling with the paradoxes of human-animal proximities, comparisons, equivalencies, and empathies, especially as these pertain to histories of the dehumanization of marginalized people.

In our sixth session we read poetry from 3 members of the group (Chua, Adebayo, and Girvan). Two of the poets took up the themes of the recent 2023 wildfires that took hold in communities situated on Syilx land. From Chua's migrant eco-critical perch witnessing the smoke and ash and connecting the ash of Mt. Pinatubo from her childhood experiences in her

home country, she animates and blurs transnational flows of natural/human (Global North)-caused disaster and re-birth. Adebayo's poetry takes his experience of evacuation from wildfire as a point of departure for grappling with diasporic displacement/departure from home as a result of both civil and climate wars. He connects these forced displacements with the violence of colonization and the imposition of nation-state borders on pre-existing eco-sociologies.

In the next session, we return to grappling with the promises and risks of drawing proximities between animals, plants and people with salon member, Nikhita Obeegadoo's attention to Indian Ocean archipelagic flows and the retrieval of eco-social agency from within more-than-human communities plagued by enslavement and indenturement. Through analysis of eels as marine creatures in literatures of the Indian Ocean, she retrieves a method of slippery storytelling to redraw narratives *otherwise*. Drawing the coalitional impulse through water into conversation, in this session we also feature the *Syilx* Water Declaration (ONA), a long-standing form of set of protocols for governing the gift of and responsibility to water as a living relation in the lands we are gathered on. As we learn more about *Syilx* protocols and land-based governance systems, we sink into accountabilities here, even as we recognize the global traffics and (de)colonial legacies that connect us in complex entanglements of marginalization and complicity.

Conclusion – Learning from Red-winged Black Birds: Resonances, not Equivalencies

Our pedagogies here entail moving back and forth from texts and theory we are reading, to the practices of being in these lands. As I close this piece, but not the life-long and intergenerational learning that this local and planetary conjuncture requires, I wish to center the voices and

resonances (and dissonances) that shape a pond ecology in Syilx land where I have been walking on a near daily basis since arriving.



Fig. 2 Photo by the author

These birds bring me back to my childhood in Red Rock/Lhedli T’enneh territory, some 500 kilometres away (still in the same colonially designated province). There is comfort in the way these birds call and respond to each other – like the call-and-responses in Black (and other cultural) musical traditions. Like Alexis Pauline Gumbs, I am seeking apprenticeship with these birds and other relations here through cross-species identification, knowing that I also risk projecting my own desires and orientations upon them. In noting the resonances with the birds, the cattail pond and pine forests where I grew up, I also note that these socio-ecologies share resonances with each other but are not equivalent. Neither the beautiful *s?atq^włp* (Ponderosa pine) here (Figure 3) nor the *smúk^{wa}ʔxn* (Arrowleaf balsamroot) are present where I grew up. In my walk toward the pond in April and May, the stunning beauty of this coalition stops me in my tracks and requires me to learn how to be in relation with them. I ask my *nsyilxcən* teacher, Jasmine Peone of Wildrose Native Traditions, how to say their names, and she generously helps me navigate the awkward foreignness of the English tongue and its incapacity to breathe life into

Syilx lands (Hemens). Non-equivalent dissonances plague colonial attempts to capture land and language.



Fig. 3 Photo by the author

But other resonances exist here. The lodgepole pine – extending to Syilx lands here – form a distinctive wall of green alongside the roads where I grew up in Leidli T’enneh lands. These are also the species that have been most ravaged by pine bark beetles in recent years (Figure 4).



Fig. 4 Photo credit Pine beetle infested forest (<https://flic.kr/p/e8SuXx>) by Simon Fraser University (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/sfupamr/>) under CC BY (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)

Both pine species rely on natural wildfires to continue to propagate. While one must resist the narrative that recent wildfires are simply a natural course of events and not the result of human-caused climate change, it is also important to listen to these trees and local knowledges to affirm the necessity of wildfires here (Kilawna). I look to these trees and the red-winged blackbirds in my on-going apprenticeship of learning to live in these places of recently-intense wildfires. Returning to the resonant sounds of coyotes of my childhood formation, I learn from Cohen and Chambers that in *Syilx* land, *Senklip* (coyote) among other larger-than-human kin, plays a very important role in the creation and governance of these lands (43). When I meet *Senklip* close-up on a walk by the pond, we spend a few seconds locked in a gaze. It will take more learning for me to know about my role in this encounter and how to act to honour *Senklip* in this hill where housing and resource developments continue to encroach on existing *Syilx* socio-ecologies. I am implicated in these histories. These more-than-human teachers and the caretakers of land and languages (Armstrong, Cohen and Chambers) continue to guide me in learning with *Syilx* knowledge in place and also connecting across space and time. Within *Syilx* reclamations of knowledge, there are also resonant gestures of coalition across communities impacted by colonization and racialized extraction: “Within *Syilx* territory, there is much to learn from each other. This learning is very much connected to larger provincial, national, and international relationships. Everybody is a learner and everybody is a teacher.” (Cohen and Chambers, 43). Affirming existing land-based knowledges and reclaiming community connections to ecologies, even in the afterlife of forced displacement and subjugation, are some of the ongoing resonant gestures of pedagogies of Black Feminist and coalitional ecological praxis.

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