

Union Theological Seminary

BODY AND EARTH AUTONOMY:
HOW SPIRITUALITY & URBAN AGRICULTURE CAN HELP TRANSMUTE THE
EFFECTS OF DISPLACEMENT IN NYC

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Introduction

New York City prior to 1524 looked vastly different from the concrete jungle that most of us know today. Manhattan was once overflowing with deep green forests, red hills of strawberries, schools of dolphins, and birdlife so plentiful that it was hard to hear yourself talking.¹ The Lenape, the original keepers, and stewards of the five boroughs were experiencing a golden age from 1000-1524 C.E. This golden age was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of Europeans. In 1524, Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazzano sailed up the eastern coast of North America. And in 1613, the Dutch set up a trading post on the tip of lower Manhattan. By 1623, ninety percent of the Lenape population had died due to disease brought over from Europe. This, plus warfare, forced labor, starvation, and forced and coerced land acquisition, decimated and displaced the Native people of New York.² Shortly after, the Dutch brought African people to Manhattan as enslaved laborers in 1626. The slave trade resulted in the decimation and forced displacement of Africa's population. The Dutch New Amsterdam colony, from which the entire city would expand, was substantially built by African slave labor.³ Furthermore, the land itself would never be the same. An island once overflowing with wildlife would eventually become gray and flattened under the city's grid.

Thus, the history of displacement in New York City spans four centuries. In this paper, I will be discussing historical and contemporary displacement in colonial and present-day New York City. I argue that displacement has three significant effects. Displacement *dominates, commodifies, and profanes* urbanites and urban land. While people are the primary subject matter in the discussion of displacement, we often forget to consider the land as a subject as well. The

¹ Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007) 33-34.

² Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007).

³ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226317755.001.0001>.

literature on displacement and eco-justice tends to be two different bodies of work. However, I put the two disciplines in conversation with each other through an ecowomanist framework for this thesis. In *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, author Melanie L. Harris states that “ecowomanism signals the importance of developing an interdisciplinary approach and method to doing environmental justice work.”⁴ In this body of work, the interdisciplinary approaches I use include music, religion, sociology, and more. I will be spending substantial time on the spiritual cosmologies at the root of African and Indigenous identities while engaging in economic justice, environmental justice, critical race theory, and culture. This is to build an allyship between urbanites and urban land to highlight why urban agriculture is so important. The importance of urban agriculture is that it’s a social and spiritual tool of resistance that people of color use to affirm their place-based identity in a city that has historically displaced and disrupted their sense of belonging.

Chapter 1 gives a historical account of how the displacement, removal, and forced labor of Native and African people were crucial to the manifestation of New York City. It then examines how Black people are currently displaced through gentrification. Furthermore, I will give an account of my eco-memory, which has also been shaped by displacement. Eco-memories or an eco-autobiography are stories and memories that have shaped our understanding of home, belonging, and connection to the land.⁵ Melanie Harris explains that women of African descent must give accounts of their eco-memories so that environmental justice is not perceived as just a white people’s movement.”⁶

Chapter 2 discusses the three major effects of displacement on urbanites and urban land: *domination, commodification, and profanation*. Firstly, displacement dominates urbanities and

⁴ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 9.

⁵ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 4-7.

⁶ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 32.

urban land. The bodies of Black urbanites are historically ruled and subdued in NYC through enslavement, legislation, and law enforcement. Similarly, displacement dominates urban land by attempting to rule and subdue its body through the ceaseless building, reshaping, and development of land, to further modernization and urbanization.

Secondly, displacement commodifies urbanites and urban land. Colonial New York City expanded by way of the buying, selling, and displacement of African people through enslavement. Moreover, presently, Black urbanites are still being sold out by local politicians and policymakers who sign over and rezone their neighborhoods for new developments. Similarly, urban land is objectified, stripped of its agency, and sold to the highest bidder. Urban land is constantly for sale, with NYC having one of the hottest real estate markets in the world.

Thirdly, the phenomenon of displacement is legitimized through the city's rituals of profanation. Using Emile Durkheim's theory of religion, I argue that Black and poor people are rendered impure and profane. This is done in favor of maintaining white and affluent people as pure and sacred. The profane and sacred are kept apart through rituals of displacement such as redlining, housing segregation, over-policing, and gentrification. Similarly, urban land has also been profaned and rendered impure. New York City has historically been characterized as "unhealthy and dirty"⁷. Suburban and rural land has been rendered pure and sacred in its place. Cleaner, less densely populated areas have been places of refuge for people who can afford to flee the city. Especially in the face of epidemics or economic decline. Historically, however, those who are left behind have had to deal with the tragic effects of widespread disease, white flight, and institutional divestment.

⁷ Diana Budds, "Will Upzoning Neighborhoods Make Homes More Affordable?," Curbed, January 30, 2020, <https://archive.curbed.com/2020/1/30/21115351/upzoning-definition-affordable-housing-gentrification>.

Chapter 3 discusses African and Indigenous cosmology. I will discuss the concept of nativity and what belonging means for people of color. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the history of urban agriculture and how urban agriculture can be a tool for social and spiritual activism. Finally, chapter 4 discusses how urban gardening can help urbanites transmute the effects of domination, commodification, and profanation into *sovereignty*, *de-commodification*, and *sanctity* respectively. This transmutation completes the circle of healing and allows the sovereignty of Creation and God to reign supreme.

This work has been primarily inspired by my eco-memory and the women, femmes, and non-binary people I've had the honor of farming beside over the past 11 years. Over the years, I've watched (and participated) as they used spirituality as an agricultural tool to resist and heal the effects of racial-economic and environmental injustice in urban areas. Prominent thinkers and leaders that have influenced my work are Melanie L. Harris, Leah Penniman, B. Anderson, Evan Pritchard, and Karen M. Rose.

Methodology

I will be using the 7-step ecowomanist methodology as outlined in "*Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*" by Melanie L. Harris. This method is non-linear, interchangeable, and interdisciplinary. The first step of the ecowomanist methodology is the storytelling of my ecoautobiography. I will be discussing my spiritual relationship with the land and the displacement I experienced growing up in New York City. In the second step, I will engage in a critical reflection of my ecoautobiography. In the third step, I will analyze my ecoautobiography from a race-class-gender perspective. In the fourth step, I will specifically and critically examine African and African American history in New York State. In the fifth step, I will engage the voices of Black people on their experiences with the land and community

agriculture. I will be honing in on earth-honoring traditions and practices in step six. And finally, in step seven, I will introduce action steps on how individuals can combat and resist displacement by asserting themselves on the land.

Limitation

The most prominent obstacle I faced was completing this body of work during the Covid-19 pandemic. The constant change and unpredictability of the pandemic made connecting with farms and farmers incredibly difficult. Many community gardens have been inactive. And many community farmers, understandably so, were not available to meet. I also had to think about my health safety in conducting more ethnographic research. I had to consider whether a theoretical or empirical paper was best for this argument. Given the limits of the pandemic and the actual time limit to complete this particular work, I decided to write a more theoretical paper using my own lived experiences.

Eco-autobiography

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, author James Cone reflects on the common thread between the crucifixion of Christ and the lynching of Black people.⁸ Cone questions how white scholars and theologians had not observed or made the connection between the terrorism that killed Christ under Roman state violence and Black people under U.S. state violence. Cone criticizes white scholars who feigned concern for racial justice but could not see the Blackness in Christ. Cone specifically targets Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most prominent figures in social ethics and philosophy. Cone writes,

Niebuhr had “eyes to see” black suffering, but I believe he lacked the “heart to feel” it as his own. Although he wrote many essays about race, commenting on a variety of racial issues in America and in Africa and Asia, the problem of race was never one of his central theological or political concerns (Cone 2011, 41).

⁸ Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 2020.

Cone's critique of Niebuhr is indicative of the nice, white, liberal prototype. The one who doesn't mean any harm. The one who is conscious of racial injustice but does little work in undoing and dismantling it. The racial and class privilege of white liberals disallows them from being able to truly suffer with those who are the most vulnerable and degraded in their society.

Cone's *Cross and the Lynching Tree* is a love letter of heartbreak. Repeatedly, he asks the question of his white colleagues, fellow countrymen, and Christian neighbors, "How could you have not seen me? How could you have not seen me on the cross?" It is a question that Cone explores in disbelief, anger, defense, and love. And so, in the spirit of Cone's *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, I, too, explore my deepest heartbreak to communicate my deepest love.

I want to make it clear that I love my city more than anyone. Born in the heart of Central Brooklyn, my mother birthed me in a hospital room in Woodhull Hospital with only one nurse present. No doctor. My first memory is of me in my father's car driving to our new apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The one-bedroom apartment had more than enough room for a family of 7. The living room was so giant that we split it in half with a sheer curtain. My siblings and I makeshift second bedroom effortlessly fit a king, queen, and twin-sized bed inside of it. And yet, there was still enough room to dance, fight, cartwheel, and perform handstands.

I attended Public School 91, located one block behind my house. One evening, my youngest sister picked me up from after-school. I had just come off a rigorous afternoon of coloring. Taking my hand into hers, she led me north from Maple Street, towards Lefferts Ave, and made a left. Upon turning, I was struck by the most beautiful sunset I had ever seen in my young life. The wide avenue revealed God's magic in dramatic form. Though I had spent years learning how to identify colors, there were no words to describe the nuance of the spectrum before me. The sky was drenched in regal purples, hellish reds, and irregular oranges that I had

never seen in a 100-piece Crayola box or watercolor set. I decided right then and there, undoubtedly, that God did exist.

I spent my primary years chasing sunsets. The golden hour was my most coveted time of the day. I'd stop whatever I was doing at any moment to watch the sun's final rays wash over the streets, buildings, car windows, and my peach walls. On Friday nights, my family would observe the sabbath by entering into a period of darkness from sundown to sundown. A substantial quiet would take over my neighborhood as the Orthodox Jewish community entered into a period of observation as well.

Getting evicted from our home tore my 8-year-old self apart. Our Crown Heights apartment was the first and last time I would be in a stable home. I spent the rest of my years in Brooklyn in a perpetual state of displacement due to financial reasons. Even though my mother worked two or three jobs at a time, it was never enough. The increased cost of living, inflation, and non-living wages made stability impossible. By the time I graduated from high school, I had moved well over a dozen times.

In 2015, I was officially exiled from the borough and unable to return due to gentrification and poverty. Gentrification is a process in which poor neighborhoods are changed by wealthier residents. Gentrification causes long-time residents' physical and cultural displacement as they cannot keep up with the cost of living and the very essence of their community begins to change. It is easy to believe gentrification happens through innovative entrepreneurship and the free market. But in actuality, it's proliferated by conscious decisions made by city planners and officials. My greatest heartbreak was being unable to live in the city I called home. The city where I found God in. All because I couldn't afford it. And much like Cone, I found myself asking the question repeatedly of city officials: "How could you not see

me? How could you not see how painful it is to be separated from my land?” Why were democrats who feigned concern for racial-economic justice selling us out to private developers?

I met Evan T. Pritchard, aka Chipmunk, the author of *Native New Yorkers*, in 2019 during my two-month stay at an interreligious farming community in Stony Point, New York. On a windy summer morning, Chipmunk led us through a set of prayers, salutations, and divination rituals. Thoughtfully, he explained that “before the Europeans arrived, we didn’t believe in owning the land because the land didn’t belong to anybody. Instead, in our traditions, we believe that *we belong to the land*”. Chipmunk's words made it clear that stripping people from their land is not just an injustice to the people but an injustice to the Land itself. Just as we mourn the places we’ve been displaced from, so does the Earth mourn those who have been ripped from her. The Earth knows us like a parent knows a child. And yet, we sell every piece of her to the highest bidder. The ugly truth is that I’m in love with a city that even sells the air.

In *All About Love*, bell hooks writes about what it means to live life through a love ethic. She writes, “were a love ethic informing all public policy in cities and towns, individuals would come together and map out programs that would affect the good of everyone.”⁹ But that’s not the case. Instead, public policies in New York are informed by the twin gods of money and power.

Chapter 1

The city of New York was founded on the violent displacement of Native and then African people from their homes. The current wave of gentrification in NYC is a historical symptom of centuries-long colonization and displacement.

⁹ bell hooks and hoopla digital, *All about Love: New Visions*, 2018, 99
https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/12704422?utm_source=MARC.

Indigenous New Yorkers & Displacement

Because this thesis is ultimately about the grief of displacement, I am choosing to begin the paper with the original Native New Yorkers, the Lenape people. The word Lenape means the “Real People.” The collective memory of Lenape presence and nativity in this city dates back to the Ice Age.¹⁰ The first settlers of NYC arrived during the Clovis Culture Period circa 10,000 BCE (Pritchard 2007, 369). They survived by using New York as hunting grounds for big game. There is evidence of mastodon, or mammut, hunting in Hyde Park, Hudson Valley, New York dating back to 9000 BCE and in New Jersey dating back to 10,730 BCE. Climate warming in NYC forced these settlers to leave circa 8000 BCE.

The first North American great river culture developed in what is now Allumette Island, Quebec, Canada, in 4000 BCE. They mined and traded copper as well as fur and corn. After the Allumette and Oka islands became overpopulated, proto-Mohican and Lenape peoples headed south to present-day Manhattan. The oldest discovered burial grounds in the Hudson Valley date to 3000 BCE.¹¹ The three sisters, also known as maize, beans, and squash, were developed in Central America in 7000 BCE and made their way to the New York/New Jersey area circa 1000 CE.¹² Unsurprisingly, 1000-1524 CE is also defined as the golden age of the Lenape people. During this time, the Lenape developed and mastered farming practices and saw an increase in their population and food production (Pritchard 2007, 373). The golden age reached its peak in 1524.

The year 1524 “marks the high point and downfall of the Lenape culture, as European-carried disease begins to destroy [Lenape] society” (Pritchard 2007, 373). In 1524,

¹⁰ Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007), 13.

¹¹ Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007), 373.

¹² Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007), 370.

Italian explorer and navigator Giovanni da Verrazzano explored the eastern coast of North America in service of the French. In 1598, The Dutch made their first visit to the Hudson River area. In 1609, Henry Hudson navigated the Hudson River. And in 1613, the Dutch finally established a trading post on the tip of Manhattan. Merely seven years later, in 1623, the smallpox disease, brought over by European colonial settlers, killed 90 percent of the native population in New England, which encompassed present-day Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont (Pritchard 2007, 376). According to some accounts, only two to three hundred Lenape were left in Manhattan by 1623. In, *Smallpox and the Native American*, Kristine Patterson MD states, “smallpox ultimately killed more Native Americans in the early centuries than any other disease or conflict. It was not unusual for half a tribe to be wiped out; on some occasions, the entire tribe was lost” (Pritchard 2007, 216).

Although the majority of the epidemics that affected the Native Americans were accidental, it seems that some were initiated by intentional infection of a group of Native Americans by European settlers. This most probably represents the first biological warfare used in the United States” (Patterson 2002, 222).

According to the settler-colonialism viewpoint, the massacre of the Indigenous population due to disease was understood as an act of Divine Providence.¹³ The population in 1524 could have been as high as 65,000 but gradually diminished to 6,500 by 1690. The number of Lenape villages in Manhattan dwindled from six to between 1664 to 1670.¹⁴

Colonial Dutchman Peter Minuit allegedly purchased the entire island of Manhattan in 1626 for \$24 worth of beads. However, no deed has ever been found from this exchange, even though the Dutch West India Company was known for its meticulous recordkeeping. New Amsterdam was founded and established on Canarsie land called Kapsee, located at the southern

¹³ Kristine B. Patterson and Thomas Runge, “Smallpox and the Native American,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 323, no. 4 (April 1, 2002): 216–22, <https://doi.org/10.1097/0000441-200204000-00009>.

¹⁴ Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007), 40.

tip of Manhattan. Eventually, the Dutch colony of New Netherland came to encompass all of what we know as New York City, including parts of Long Island.¹⁵ While this time and place would be the greatest oppression Lenape people would face in their history, European settlers were experiencing emancipation from oppression. Many of the Europeans who resided in the colony were finally able to exercise their religious freedom.

The early to mid-1600s were marked by forced and coerced land acquisition, fur wars amongst native tribes, and Native European wars. During this time, the Dutch set up forts, ports and renamed entire areas of Lenape territory. Drinking became a problem among the Lenape as settlers offered Lenape alcohol as payment for their lands. Indigenous people were massacred during the Kieft War, which spanned from 1640 to 1649 after treaties were not respected.¹⁶ The battles in this war were so horrific that the “former leader of the advisory council, David de Vries, wrote that the Native Americans were “massacred in a manner to move the heart of a stone.”¹⁷ But the Lenape had always fought back.

In 1664, The English captured New Amsterdam and renamed it ‘New York’. The English also changed the names of many other towns and rivers. This time between Lenape and Europeans was so violent that, in 1693, the Governor of New York, Ben Fletcher, put up a bounty “on the scalp of dead Indians” (Pritchard 2007, 377).

More wars and displacement mark the 1600s and 1700s for native people in the Northeast region. Lenape and other tribes were forced to move farther west and farther south than their places of birth and sought the blessing of other native tribes in order to move into their

¹⁵ History.com Editors, “New Amsterdam Becomes New York,” HISTORY, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/new-amsterdam-becomes-new-york>.

¹⁶ Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007), 376-77.

¹⁷ Richard Panchyk, “Kieft’s War,” in *The Encyclopedia of North American Colonial Conflicts to 1775: A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. Spencer C. Tucker, James Arnold, and Roberta Wiener, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 411–13, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2443800515/GVRL?sid=summon&xid=5b155710>.

territories. 1890-1910 was the lowest population of Natives in the history of North America.

“The descendants of New York City Lenape were removed by treaty at least twenty times and sent to Oklahoma, Ontario, and Wisconsin, where they were subjugated to poverty, disease, and death.”¹⁸ Pritchard writes,

Although the ancient Algonquin civilization gave birth to the Lenape in the cradle of Long Island, the infant soon outgrew its parent, fostering the great southern tier of Algonquin culture that covers much of the United States as far south as Cape Hatteras and as far west as Iowa. For the most part, these Lenape were the Indians the early settlers married and made families with. Let us, therefore, call the Lenape the “mother” of America and the Munsee of New York her “father” (Pritchard 2007, 7).

Finally, between 1900 to 2000, the predominant nation of Lenape to occupy New York City was the Munsee. Since the 16th century, New York City has become a place filled with migrants from all over the world. Today, Pritchard writes that “perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, New York is a city of immigrants; it is a city of displaced people in a displaced world” (Pritchard 2007, 17). And so, in this next section, and for the rest of this paper, I will focus on one prominent group of displaced people in New York City, those of African descent.

African New Yorkers & Displacement

African people already had established a presence in North America before the colonial contact period. According to Ivan Van Sertima, late professor of African Studies at Rutgers University, African people had been journeying to the Americas since 1200 BC.¹⁹ According to Luz Soliz, culture bearer and adjunct professor at Boricua College, Arawak and African people lived in present-day Saint Vincent & The Grenadines for generations before Columbus or slavery arrived in North America.²⁰

¹⁸ Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007), 9.

¹⁹ Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, Reprint edition (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003).

²⁰ Luz Soliz, a professor, lexicographer, and Garifuna culture bearer, transmits most of her knowledge through folk dance and oral history. Most of what I’ve learned from her has been in time spent in her dance

Jan Rodrigues, a sailor of African descent, was the first non-Native settler of Manhattan. In 1613, he was tossed and abandoned on the island after a dispute with his shipmates on a Dutch vessel. Rodrigues married into the Rockaway tribe and became fluent in Native American languages. He served as an interpreter and mediator between the Lenape and European explorers and traders.²¹ The first enslaved Africans arrived in New Amsterdam in 1626. The Dutch West India Company imported and owned the enslaved people, who came in a group of eleven. Enslaved Africans in New York built and maintained the young colony's infrastructure. They built roads and cleared land. They worked the farms that lined Manhattan and the Hudson Valley, planting crops and taking care of livestock. They worked both skilled and unskilled jobs. Africans substantially worked on the successful construction of Fort Amsterdam which became the heart of Manhattan.²² The year of Fort Amsterdam's construction is the foundation date on NYC's present-day seal.

The Dutch West India Company's importation and employment of most of the colony's slave labor enabled the settlement and survival of the Europeans at New Amsterdam as well as the limited economic success the colony experienced (Harris 2003, 14).

African people who were brought to Manhattan came from very diverse backgrounds. Many were transported to New York from the Caribbean. The British-owned, Royal African Company brought in people from Jamaica, Barbados, and Antigua. Dutch merchants sometimes brought in people from Curaçao. People “directly from Africa came from the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and the Congo” (Harris, 2003, 29). In addition to that, various other African tribes were represented in Manhattan.

company, the Wabafu Garifuna Dance Theatre. In a Garifuna dictionary she published, this history is *briefly* captured but not expanded on. Other sources typically repeat the misinformation of Europeans introducing Africans to the island.

²¹ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 12-13, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226317755.001.0001>.

²² Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 14, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226317755.001.0001>.

Most identifiable in the historical record from their participation in the 1712 slave revolt are members of the Akan-Asante and Popo nations, but members of the Moko, Ibo, Yoruba, Adra, Jon, and Ibibio nations also arrived in Manhattan. Between the 1670s and 1690s, the Philipse and Van Horne clans, two of the New York colony's elite families, traded with pirates for slaves from Madagascar. Between 1715 and 1717, about four hundred additional slaves from East Africa also landed in New York, when the East India Company opened its East African slave trade to private traders (Harris 2003, 29).

There was also a preference in the Dutch colony for enslaved Africans who had some kind of European or Christian acculturation as opposed to people directly from Africa (Harris 2003, 20).

New York City was heavily dependent on slave labor for its agriculture and day-to-day survival during the colonial period under both Dutch and British governance. In the 1700s, British New York sought to increase the city's dependence on slave labor and slave trade to transform Manhattan into a principal slave port and have it become the economic center of North America. "In 1687, a healthy male slave was sold for sixteen pounds," and by "1760, healthy male slaves were sold for one hundred pounds."²³ This would equate to \$4,075 and \$23,530 today, respectively.²⁴ The slave population in New York helped secure a stable labor force and created a class system in the city.

Consequently, this gave way to a racial justification of the class system. The importation of enslaved people was so great that by the end of the 1700s, New York was one of the top three cities with the highest slave population, only outpaced by Charleston and New Orleans, making it the most significant urban slave population outside of the South (Harris 2003, 3). Leslie Harris, the author of *Slavery in Colonial New York*, writes,

One of the largest of these shipments came aboard the *Witte Paert* in 1655. When the ship docked in New Amsterdam, residents knew of its arrival because of the stench that arose from the holds, where slave traders had tightly packed three hundred African men and women and left them to travel across the Atlantic amid their own waste (Harris 2003, 15).

²³ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 27, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226317755.001.0001>.

²⁴ "Currency Converter, Pounds Sterling to Dollars, 1264 to Present (Java)," accessed May 13, 2022, <https://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm>.

In its totality, “it is estimated that close to 20 million people were forced to leave the African continent enslaved. By 1800, this had decimated the African population to half the size it would have been had slavery not occurred.”²⁵ According to Nathan Nunn, Professor of Economics at Harvard University, “Had the slave trades not occurred, Africa would not be the most underdeveloped region of the world, and it would have a similar level of development to Latin America or Asia.”²⁶ Slave trades created greater ethnic fractionalization, unstable political institutions, increased conflict, and negatively impacted social relations.²⁷ In the U.S., the slave trade negatively impacted African people’s health, family structures, child mortality rates, religious practices, socio-economic mobility, and intergenerational trauma. African American anthropologist Zora Neal Hurston wrote a book called, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo,”* which tells the story of Cudjo Kazoola Lewis, the last known slave ship survivor. In the book, Cudjo recalls the trauma of having his Benin village invaded, captured, marched down to the coast, and sold into slavery. After spending months onboard the ship with other abductees, getting separated from each other once they arrived in Alabama, it felt like death. Cudjo explained, “We seventy days cross de water from de Affica soil, and now dey part us from one ’nother. Derefore we cry. Our grief so heavy look lak we cain stand it.”²⁸

Slavery ended in New York City on July 4, 1827, making it one of the largest free black populations in the North (Harris 2003, 3). However, emancipation did not mean that African New Yorkers had equal opportunities for employment and upward mobility. “By the end of the

²⁵ “Infographic: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Uprooted Millions,” Statista Infographics, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/chart/19068/trans-atlantic-slave-trade-by-country-region/>.

²⁶ Nathan Nunn, “Understanding the Long-Run Effects of Africa’s Slave Trades,” *VoxEU.Org* (blog), February 27, 2017, <https://voxeu.org/article/understanding-long-run-effects-africa-s-slave-trades>.

²⁷ Nathan Nunn, “Understanding the Long-Run Effects of Africa’s Slave Trades,” *VoxEU.Org* (blog), February 27, 2017, <https://voxeu.org/article/understanding-long-run-effects-africa-s-slave-trades>.

²⁸ Becky Little, “One of the Last Slave Ship Survivors Describes His Ordeal in a 1930s Interview,” *HISTORY*, accessed April 3, 2022, <https://www.history.com/news/zora-neale-hurston-barracoon-slave-clotilda-survivor>.

period of emancipation in 1827, whites had legally, economically, and socially designated black people as a separate, dependent, and unequal group within the New York City community” (Harris 2003, 5). Therefore, African people were not able to thrive in the city. Instead, inescapable poverty and the competition with an influx of Irish immigrants for unskilled labor jobs made living in the city impossible. Moreover, kidnappings in New York were rampant due to The Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850. The act stated that “enslaved people had to be returned to their owners, even if they were in a free state. The now-famous novel *12 Years a Slave* offers a firsthand account of this exact period. The book was written by and about Solomon Northup. The book tells the story of how Northup was a free man living in Upstate New York when he was tricked, drugged, kidnapped, and sold into slavery in Louisiana. The social-political climate and slave kidnappings under the act forced the African population in NYC to move North, West, and overseas for prosperity, security, and safety. Harris writes,

After years of growth, New York's black population dropped precipitously between 1840 and the Civil War, from a high of over 16,000 in 1840 to about 12,500 in 1860. But it was also due to the increasing danger of kidnapping and southern enslavement that northern free blacks faced in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Blacks looked beyond the boundaries of New York City to the possibility of farming communities in upstate New York, the West, and Canada. Some also embraced emigration to Liberia and the West Indies, in cooperation with the white-led American Colonization Society that had been rejected by blacks earlier in the century (Harris 2003, 7-8).

African people also began to look uptown Manhattan for freedom and peace. At the time, the colony of New York still only encompassed lower Manhattan. Everything above lower Manhattan was still an undeveloped natural landscape. But, in 1825, plots of land began to go up for sale in uptown Manhattan. A Black man named Andrew Williams decided to buy three lots. More lots filled up Between 82nd and 89th Street off 8th Ave. This would be the start of Seneca Village, a neighborhood with a sizable working and middle-class African population. Over the next thirty years, the community grew to over 300 residents. The neighborhood also came to include European immigrants as well.

In those same three decades, however, the population of NYC quadrupled, and lower Manhattan could no longer hold all of the city's residents. The city's elites feared that the entire island would be developed and determined that the city deserved to have a grand park similar to those in Europe (e.g., The Champs Elysees & Kensington Garden). News outlets unleashed a smear campaign against the residents of Seneca Village. A New York Times article written in July 1856 described it as "N****r Village."²⁹ In 1857, their homes and property were seized and destroyed.³⁰ Along with the 350 residents of Seneca Village, a total of 1600 people were displaced uptown by the construction of Central Park. The destruction of Seneca Village is one of the first recorded events of gentrification that African people experienced in NYC. But it wouldn't be the last. Next, we will examine the latest wave of displacement in NYC, 145 years after the destruction of Seneca Village.

Black New Yorkers & Present-Day Displacement

Gentrification is a symptom of colonialism. The influx of wealthier residents changes the fabric of affected neighborhoods by improving housing conditions, attracting new businesses, and increasing rents and property values. The force of gentrification typically drives the physical and cultural displacement of long-time residents as they cannot keep up with the cost of living and goods in their own neighborhoods. And so can not fully benefit from the economic and social growth that renewed interest and investment in the neighborhood has brought.

Gentrification is largely an urban phenomenon. As immigrants and people of color make up a large portion of the city's poor population, gentrification has become a racial-economic issue.

According to the 2020 Census Bureau, in a population of over 8.8 million people, Black and

²⁹ Vox, *The Lost Neighborhood under New York's Central Park*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdsWYOZ8iqM>.

³⁰ Vox, *The Lost Neighborhood under New York's Central Park*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdsWYOZ8iqM>.

Latinx people make up over 52% of NYC’s population.³¹ According to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, one single adult with no kids needs to make an annual salary of \$47,709 before taxes and \$40,047 after taxes to make a living wage in NYC.³² However, since 2010, 50% of the job growth in the city has been in industries that pay under \$40,000 a year.³³ And despite the increase in housing costs, income for Black families has either declined or remained stagnant.³⁴

The most recent wave of displacement, or gentrification, began circa 2001 in NYC. Micheal Bloomberg worked as the mayor from 2002-to 2013. Like the white elites that came before him in the 1800s, he too had a dream to make NYC competitive with other world cities, such as London. Bloomberg chose Daniel Doctoroff, deputy mayor of economic development, to execute the mission. Doctoroff’s math was simple: “the more people that move to a city, the more they pay in taxes, and the more the government can reinvest that tax revenue in making the city appealing to the next person who might move there.”³⁵ Doctoroff implemented varying techniques to achieve this goal. One technique was to create 165,000 affordable housing units over ten years. However, from 2004-to 2011, two-thirds of the affordable housing built in NYC was utterly unaffordable. The federal government’s widely critiqued measurements of poverty and affordability are defined as a household paying more than 30% of its income on rent. However, the immense wealth dissimilarities in an expansively defined “area” of metropolitan NYC could include someone like myself, who made \$34,000 a year as a full-time administrative assistant, a homeowner in the “suburbs,” and Bloomberg, who was ranked as the 12th richest

³¹ “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: New York City, New York,” accessed March 21, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/kingscountynyork,NY,newyorkcitynewyork/PST045221>.

³² “Living Wage Calculator,” accessed April 9, 2022, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/pages/faqs>.

³³ “The State of Black New York” (New York Urban League), accessed April 9, 2022, https://www.nyul.org/files/ugd/ccf12e_06a44ca4995a40d7944b361219f9a6d8.pdf.

³⁴ “The State of Black New York” (New York Urban League), accessed April 9, 2022, https://www.nyul.org/files/ugd/ccf12e_06a44ca4995a40d7944b361219f9a6d8.pdf.

³⁵ Matthew L. Schuerman, *Newcomers: Gentrification and Its Discontents*, *Newcomers* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 243, <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226476438>.

person in the world in 2022 by Forbes.³⁶ In 2021, the area median income for New York City was 107,400 for a three-person household. At 30% of the area median income, a single person *has* to make equal to or less than \$25,080 a year to qualify for affordable housing and pay \$465 a month for a one-bedroom apartment.³⁷ And at 130% of the AMI, a single person making \$108,680 would pay \$1,926 for a one-bedroom apartment.

But, if you take a 26-story mixed-use residential development^{38 39} taking applications in Bronx Community Board 1, the median household income in that area is actually \$25,500 a year.⁴⁰ The term “affordable housing” is misleading when Bloomberg and succeeding administrations subsidized housing for people who make six-figure incomes and wouldn’t need subsidies to live in places like Bronx Community Board 1, which comprises Mott Haven, Melrose, and Port Morris. The city currently subsidizes households that make double the area median income under its affordable housing plan.

Mayor Bloomberg rezoned 40% of the city during his 12 years in office. Doctoroff’s vision of the 2012 Summer Olympics being hosted in NYC and an aquatic swimming center located in the Hudson River in the Greenpoint-Williamsburg area was ushered in by 2005 rezoning laws. The rezoning resulted in:

Some fifty industrial firms moved away or closed up shop. Between 2000 and 2010, the Latino population in South Williamsburg fell by 5,293, while the white population grew; more than 9,000 new apartments have been built or are planned, many in condominium towers along the

³⁶ Kerry A. Dolan and Chase PETERSON-WITHORN, “Forbes Billionaires 2022: The Richest People In The World,” *Forbes*, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>.

³⁷ “Area Median Income - HPD,” accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/hpd/services-and-information/area-median-income.page>.

³⁸ “425 Grand Concourse,” *Trinity Financial* (blog), accessed April 11, 2022, <http://www.trinityfinancial.com/portofolio/425-grand-concourse/>.

³⁹ “Housing Connect 425 Grand Concourse,” accessed April 11, 2022, <https://housingconnect.nyc.gov/PublicWeb/details/2684>.

⁴⁰ “Mott Haven/Melrose Neighborhood Profile,” accessed April 11, 2022, <https://furmancenter.org/neighborhoods/view/mott-haven-melrose>.

waterfront, yet only 16 percent are affordable. Between 2000 and 2014, rents in Greenpoint-Williamsburg rose by 57.7 percent, far faster than any other area in the city.⁴¹

As of April 2022, Bushwick Inlet Park, where Doctoroff proposed that the 2012 Olympics should take place, is still undergoing construction.⁴² And the cost of it turned out to be twenty times the original amount- \$400 million mainly due to the increase in property value because of the rezoning.

Moreover, the Bloomberg administration wanted to upzone industrial and poor neighborhoods close to public transportation. But he largely downzoned whiter, middle-class neighborhoods in the city even though many of those places were also a half a mile in proximity to public transportation. And even though Bloomberg designated more neighborhoods as historical districts than any other mayor, that distinction didn't include provisions against new developments in those areas. Mayor Bloomberg was unbothered about concerns regarding gentrification. The mayor was once quoted as saying, "If you're worried about gentrification, don't improve the schools and don't bring down crime."⁴³

The city didn't take any proactive measures against gentrification even when tenants' harassment claims doubled between 2011 and 2014.⁴⁴ Landlords employed different tactics to get their tenants to leave their buildings, especially tenants with rent-stabilized apartments. These tactics include attempting to buy renters out. And when renters did not accept cash buyouts, landlords could apply more extreme methods. This includes demolishing apartment buildings

⁴¹ Matthew L. Schuerman, *Newcomers: Gentrification and Its Discontents*, *Newcomers* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 247 <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226476438>.

⁴² "Bushwick Inlet Park (50 Kent Avenue) New Park Construction : NYC Parks," accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/planning-and-building/capital-project-tracker/project/8955>.

⁴³ Matthew L. Schuerman, *Newcomers: Gentrification and Its Discontents*, *Newcomers* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 246, <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226476438>.

⁴⁴ Matthew L. Schuerman, *Newcomers: Gentrification and Its Discontents*, *Newcomers* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 246, <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226476438>.

under the guise of “renovations” to render spaces unlivable. Neglecting repairs or not supplying apartments with heat or hot water in hopes that tenants will finally move out on their own.⁴⁵

Not only are residents forced to deal with the changes in their dwelling spaces, but the changes in public spaces as well. The influx of newer, whiter, affluent residents creates shifts in the culture and public spaces that they move into. Age-old mom-and-pop businesses shut down, replaced by hipper, more expensive restaurants and service businesses — even though those businesses may not be catering to the immediate needs of the community members already living there. The demolition and construction sites dot the area, and new relationships and conflicts form with new neighbors. And rehabilitated parks, fixed sidewalks, new bike lanes, and street lights finally find their way to neighborhoods that had long asked for renovated infrastructure. In *Making Working-Class Neighbourhoods Posh?*, Kristeen Paton uses sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s framework of capital to explain the cultural, social, and symbolic effects of gentrification. These effects include the breaking of uprooted social networks, the interruption and denigration of social practices and traditions, the loss of population and under-occupancy, and the “secondary psychological costs of displacement and marginalization.”⁴⁶

Paton found that working-class residents exhibit strong place-based attachments to their neighborhoods. While investment in neglected areas is a social good, working-class residents are pushed to support a process that creates increased economic and cultural inequalities. Next, we will examine three major effects of historical and modern displacement and how it negatively impacts the divinity and the relationship between the land, people, and Spirit.

⁴⁵ Matthew L. Schuerman, *Newcomers: Gentrification and Its Discontents*, *Newcomers* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226476438>.

⁴⁶ Yvette Taylor, ed., *Classed Intersections: Spaces, Selves, Knowledges* (London: Routledge, 2016), 142. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315572369>.

Chapter 2

Displacement has three effects on the people most negatively impacted by it.

Displacement serves to *dominate, profane, and commodify* the people it displaces. And while people are the primary subject matter in the discussion surrounding displacement, we often forget to consider the land as a subject in the dialogue as well. What happens to the people also happens to the land. The land is also being dominated, profaned, and commodified under gentrification. At times, it may appear that the three factors that I discuss are bleeding into each other. But that is because race, economics, and social stratification, are inextricably linked together.

Domination

In urban areas, Black people are treated as objects in need of domination. Black bodies are to be ruled and subdued. This dominance is established by way of violence. Tactics to implement the suppression of the movement of Black bodies include enslavement, murder, legislation, and law enforcement, just to name a few. These scare tactics serve to limit bodily autonomy and movement in space. It helps to tame and silence Black people into submission. And even erase them from city life altogether.

The domination of Black bodies in NYC has occurred since the 1600s. In *Slavery in Colonial New York*, author Leslie Harris states that several laws were passed in the colonial period to limit what Africans could do in public spaces. For example, in 1692, the city's Common Council passed bills that ordered enslaved people to be punished with twenty lashes if they made loud noises or played in the street on Sundays. It also forbade them from congregating in groups of four or more. In 1700, city officials tightened that law to only allow less than three African people to assemble. And it also nudged masters about controlling enslaved people on

Sundays.⁴⁷ Resistantly, enslaved Africans continued gathering in groups and rebelled against authority constantly. For example, during a confrontation in August 1696, the mayor of New York attempted to disperse a group of Africans and threatened to take them into custody. When the mayor threatened them, an enslaved man named Prince struck the mayor of New York in the face.⁴⁸

The control of Black bodies by authorities has persisted to present-day New York City. Loitering laws continued to be a criminal offense in modern NYC. Circumstances of loitering are still racialized and primarily enforced in lower-income communities of color. Growing up and going to school in NYC, authorities would constantly and randomly tell my friends and I to disassemble whenever we were gathered together. I remember cop cars pulling up in front of my high school and officers jumping out and demanding that my friends either disperse or be put in the back of their vehicles. Being young and Black during the stop and frisk era was terrifying. Just being Black in public was illegal. One day, as I sat in the park with my then-boyfriend, two officers stopped and questioned us. After frisking him and finding nothing, they still issued me a summons and hauled him off to jail.

Circumstances that warrant punishment under New York's loitering law include people getting together to play cards, shooting dice, break-dancing in the subway for tips, or standing near a school or college without a good reason to be there.⁴⁹ In my three years working in schools in the gentrified neighborhood of Park Slope, I never witnessed any white child being dispersed in front of or within any proximity to their school by law enforcement. Further, I

⁴⁷ Leslie M. Harris, "Slavery in Colonial New York," in *In the Shadow of Slavery* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 33 <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226317755.003.0002>.

⁴⁸ Leslie M. Harris, "Slavery in Colonial New York," in *In the Shadow of Slavery* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 37 <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226317755.003.0002>.

⁴⁹ "Loitering | New York Criminal Lawyers Tilem & Associates," accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.tilemlawfirm.com/loitering.html>.

barely observed law enforcement patrolling the wealthiest blocks of this affluent community, where Mayor DeBlasio lives and owns two residences.⁵⁰ Police officers seemed strangely absent from those train station stops as well. After leaving work, I watched white kids cheerily jump turnstiles, unaware that on my subway stop, there would've been a uniformed or plainclothes officer waiting to issue a warrant, slam them to a gate, or draw out a gun for their seemingly jovial offense.⁵¹

Moreover, similar to the 1692 laws that punished Africans for making loud noises, it's seemingly still a crime for Black people to make noises in the city. In a 2018 analysis of quality-of-life calls made to 311, studies found that 87% of them were noise complaints against neighbors, made in POC low-income neighborhoods with the highest surges in white residents.⁵² In *Gentrification As a Governmental Strategy*, author Justus Uitermark states that “gentrification is a means through which governmental organisations and their partners lure the middle classes into disadvantaged areas with the purpose of civilising and controlling these neighbourhoods.”⁵³ It is not just spaces that are gentrified. The people must be gentrified too. Black bodies are tyrannized and beaten into what the city elites demand they should be.

In the city, the land is treated as an object needing domination. The Land is not treated as a subject. It is stripped of its autonomy and silenced. The land is in a constant state of being ruled and subdued. This is executed under the guise of development and progress. Wild, fertile land is

⁵⁰ Tanay Warkerkar, “Mayor Bill de Blasio Could Be Your Landlord for \$1,825/Month,” Curbed NY, March 20, 2017, <https://ny.curbed.com/2017/3/20/14982418/bill-de-blasio-park-slop-apartment-for-rent>.

⁵¹ Lauren Floyd, “Video Captures Horror NY Subway Passengers Felt When Cops Ambushed Car in Search of Armed Black Man and Only Found a Compliant Unarmed Black Teen,” Atlanta Black Star, October 28, 2019, <https://atlantablackstar.com/2019/10/28/video-captures-horror-ny-subway-passengers-felt-when-cops-ambushed-car-in-search-of-armed-black-man-and-only-found-a-compliant-unarmed-black-man/>.

⁵² “New Neighbors and the Over-Policing of Communities of Color,” accessed April 9, 2022, https://www.cssny.org/news/entry/new-neighbors?gclid=CjwKCAjw3cSSBhBGEiwAVII0ZzAIs7I0QE5TpwDn7ffWXHBI2QtybZpNlE9I3Z8CtUh3RcUrTzq3hoCHNoQAvD_BwE.

⁵³ Justus Uitermark, Jan Duyvendak, and Reinout Kleinhans, “Gentrification As a Governmental Strategy: Social Control and Social Cohesion in Hooglyet, Rotterdam,” *Environment and Planning A* 39 (January 1, 2007): 125–41, <https://doi.org/10.1068/a39142>.

beaten down, flattened, and burdened under the weight of concrete, steel, and glass from outside the city. Instead of working with the land, colonists and their present-day descendants worked against it. When the Lenape were still the primary stewards of New York City, they built their architecture with the land, not against it. The Lenape were the original masters of natural building or what is called, *organic architecture*, today. Organic architecture is a type of design in which buildings are inspired by, built around, and blend in with their natural surroundings. After centuries of unnatural and unsustainable structures, woke white architects are now turning to indigenous ways of building. Even though indigenous “huts” and “shacks” were once a sign of indigenous people’s perceived poverty, underdevelopment, and uncivilization. In fact, the Lenape were so committed to leaving a zero footprint that many structures were temporary. For example, Lenape used bark in their grave pits instead of using boxes or stone because those materials took too long to decompose.⁵⁴ In *Native New Yorkers*, Evan Pritchard writes,

The Algonquin had strict rules concerning the use of the land. The bottom line, later adopted by the the Boy Scouts, was [...] “Leave the land as you found it,” “Leave no traces.” This means that every hole in the ground should be filled up after you’re done, that everything should return to the earth.... Algonquin sweat lodges were torn down after four days of ritual, the stones returned to the earth. And the pits and holes filled up and covered with carefully preserved clumps of grass so that only the most trained eye could tell someone had been there. The Lenape built no monuments, libraries, or museums so that the earth would not be marred by blocks of stone.⁵⁵

European expansion is premised on the domination of land. It finds its origins in Christian theology.⁵⁶ The biblical creation story finds Adam and Eve disobeying God's limitations and restrictions on the land.⁵⁷ Since the beginning, the children of Adam and Eve have not been able to realize the discipline of restraint. Even with the whole world at their feet, they still wanted *more*.⁵⁸ This insatiable desire to have everything and exhibit free reign over

⁵⁴ Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007), 37.

⁵⁵ Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007), 37.

⁵⁶ Gn. 1:28 MSG

⁵⁷ Gn. 2:16-17 MSG

⁵⁸ Gn. 3:6 MSG

everything has descended their people into ecological chaos.⁵⁹ The children of Adam and Eve have struggled to be in balance with the Earth ever since. God's orders: Take some, but leave the rest. Everything is not to be ruled, subdued, and consumed. But their insatiable consumption led Adam and Eve to be expelled from the garden and forced to live from the sweat of their brow. Since then, the mission of Adam and Eve's descendants has been to dominate the land for survival. However, the children of the first set of humans cannot discern how anger, jealousy, greed, and violence perpetrated in the name of domination and survival affect the land itself. The first time the word "sin" appears in the Bible is to describe Cain's murderous anger.⁶⁰ Cain murders his brother Abel because he is jealous and not satisfied with the attention that God gave him. Cain wanted *more*.⁶¹ When Abel's blood spills onto the ground, the Earth is damned as she receives his blood.⁶² We pause here to question, How many times have the crimes of expansion and domination spilled innocent blood on the Earth? How many times has the Earth received us over and over again? The Earth knows us by our sweat. By our blood. By our name.

Once, during Ramadan, my housemates and I visited a synagogue. When we moved to make our way back home, my friend Elizeh paused to make her Maghrib prayer. I prayed alongside her. After we were finished praying, Elizeh explained to me that in Islam, there is a belief that when you die, the Earth mourns because she will miss you pressing your forehead against her. And the Earth will cry in all the places that you kneeled and pressed your forehead. She laughed and followed it with, "so it is good to pray in as many places as possible." Despite the intimacy that the Earth has with us, we sell her off again and again.

⁵⁹ Gn. 3:17-19 MSG

⁶⁰ Gn. 4:6-7 MSG

⁶¹ Gn. 4:3-5 MSG

⁶² Gn. 4:10-12 MSG

Commodification

The privatization and commodification of land is unethical. Public space must be as free as the air. But in a city that's for sale, the people, the land, and the air itself has a price tag. NYC has sold hundreds of millions of dollars in air rights. Air rights are the right to build or develop in the airspace above a property. And anyone who is a property owner *owns* the air above their property up to the heavens, even though zoning laws may not permit you to build that high. Manhattan's Midtown East neighborhood is known for its several skyscrapers and dense population. During the Bloomberg administration, the area was upzoned to allow *even taller* buildings to be built to rival newer buildings in places like Hong Kong and Shanghai.⁶³ In 2018, JPMorgan Chase bought half of the air rights belonging to Grand Central Station for \$240 million.⁶⁴

Putting a dollar amount on air is a spiritual crisis. People do not own the land, the water, or the air. Mistakenly, Euro-Christianity has taken the Genesis charge to mean that humans have been given ownership of the Earth. But that's not the case. The Genesis charge is an order to serve and preserve the land. Genesis 2:15 MSG states, "God took the Man and set him down in the Garden of Eden to *work* the ground and *keep* it in order." The original Hebrew words for "work" and "keep" have slightly different connotations than our English language definitions. To "work" the land means to *serve* the land. And to "keep" the land means to *serve, preserve, or guard* the land. Therefore we do not own it. We are responsible for it. We are its servants and guardians. As the translation of Genesis 1:26 in the MSG bible reads:

God spoke:

⁶³ Charles V. Bagli, "With \$240 Million Deal, Floodgates Open for Air Rights in Midtown East," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2018, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/02/nyregion/jp-morgan-chase-midtown-east-air-rights.html>.

⁶⁴ Charles V. Bagli, "With \$240 Million Deal, Floodgates Open for Air Rights in Midtown East," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2018, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/02/nyregion/jp-morgan-chase-midtown-east-air-rights.html>.

“Let us make human beings in our image, make them
 reflecting our nature
 So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
 the birds in the air, the cattle,
 And, yes, Earth itself,
 and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.”

Still, developers, city government, and investors contend with what the air in NYC is worth. But how does one put a price tag on the breath of God? The same city that puts a price tag on air doesn't care if its most vulnerable populations have free, equal, clean access to it. It is a city that would rather people of color not breathe in the air at all. It's the same city that Eric Garner gasped for air in Staten Island, desperately pleading for NYPD officers to release him from a chokehold.⁶⁵ Garner's last words were, “I can't breathe.” This is also the same city that purposely sets up driving routes, toxic waste dumps, and other environmental hazards in poor communities of color. The city-run Pennsylvania Avenue and Fountain Avenue Landfills in Starrett City were the dumping ground for legal and illegal toxic waste for three decades. News articles report that after living in the housing development for a few years, residents of Starrett City began to report a variety of respiratory problems.⁶⁶ Lauryn Hill's lyrics in *Black Rage* describe the betrayal that people of color experience from the city as their governments are guilty of polluting their resources.

Black rage is founded: who fed us self hatred
 Lies and abuse, while we waited and waited
Spiritual treason, this grid and its cages
Black rage is founded on these kind of things
 Black rage is founded on draining and draining
 Threatening your freedom to stop your complaining
Poisoning your water while they say it's raining
*Then call you mad for complaining, complaining*⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 76-77.

⁶⁶ Nathan Kensinger, “In Brooklyn, a Toxic Dump Is Transformed into NYC's Newest Waterfront Park,” Curbed NY, July 11, 2019, <https://ny.curbed.com/2019/7/11/20689777/brooklyn-shirley-chisholm-state-park-photo-essay>.

⁶⁷ “Lauryn Hill – Black Rage,” Genius, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://genius.com/Lauryn-hill-black-rage-annotated>.

Profit is the incentive to sell the land and sell out the people. Land that people are attached to is sold away. The people who are displaced are forced to individually figure out how to grieve places they've lost and find new places to call home. The documentary, *My Brooklyn*⁶⁸, documents the transformation of Albee Square and Fulton Mall, an eight-block pedestrian strip located in Downtown Brooklyn, into an upscale neighborhood with luxury residential and commercial towers and retail chains. It was also a cultural and communal site for Brooklynites of Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean descent. A place of shared memories and a collective past. In, *Albee Square: When the Mall's No Longer Home*, Allison Dean writes,

To strangers unfamiliar with Downtown Brooklyn's history, the Albee Square Mall at the intersection of Fulton Street and DeKalb Avenue appears unimpressive. But to locals, the mall is a landmark. People remember how early hip-hop artists like Biz Markie hung out there in the 1980s. Biz Markie even had a song about the Albee Square Mall in which he proclaimed, "So when I come in the Mall, and then I start to roam, you wouldn't think it's a store, you would think it's my home."⁶⁹

The city owned the land that Albee Square Mall sat on, and the lease for the building was owned by Thor Equities, a private development company. Since the mall was located on city property, a public hearing was required before Thor Equities could move on with the sale of the building. The public hearing was ill promoted and rescheduled three times, hindering Brooklyn's constituents from mobilizing a greater effort against the sale. Still, community members did attend the hearing and voiced their opposition to the city's plan to sell the land. And advocacy groups like FUREE (Families United for Racial and Economic Equality) worked to halt the sale and push for more equitable planning that included public input and compensation for the small businesses of color displaced by the new development. But the city didn't need the community's input. The developers and the city already had a vision to "transform Downtown Brooklyn from

⁶⁸ Allison Lirish Dean and Kelly Anderson, *My Brooklyn: Demystifying Gentrification* (New Day Films, 2012), <https://columbia.kanopy.com/video/my-brooklyn>.

⁶⁹ Allison Lirish Dean, "Albee Square: When the Mall's No Longer Home," *Gotham Gazette*, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://www.gothamgazette.com/development/3612-albee-square-when-the-malls-no-longer-home>.

a “marginal commercial environment” into a 24/7 hub of upscale housing and consumption.”⁷⁰

Therefore, Thor Equities sold the remainder of Albee Square’s 70-year lease to the new developers. And one year and \$120 million later, Albee Square Mall was demolished. In, *My Brooklyn*, a life-long frequenter of Fulton Mall and Brooklynite, Rahsun Houston, admits that he no longer patronizes the area. Houston explains, “To tell you the truth, I don’t frequent Downtown like I used to because there is nothing for me to come down here to frequent about.”⁷¹

My friends and I miss when Fulton Mall was a place where you could run into family and friends that you hadn’t seen in ages. A place where one could find fashion, food, music, literature, religious supplies, and more catered to Black people for Black people by Black entrepreneurs. These days, it’s commonplace to find European tourists taking group tours down those same streets. Albee Square now boasts the newly built City Point. This mixed-use complex houses stores such as Trader Joe’s, a classic sign of gentrified Brooklyn, and Lululemon, an expensive yoga-apparel company. The 66-story residential tower is the home to multi-million dollar luxury condos with 25- year tax abatements included. Studios to three-bedroom dwellings start from \$925,000 to over \$3,500,000. And residents save up to \$30,000 every year on carrying costs with tax breaks that the city has provided them.⁷²

But admittedly, perhaps not *everything* is about money. Far from the “marginal commercial environment” that the city claimed that it was, Fulton Mall was *already NYC’s third most profitable shopping district*.⁷³ Attracting over 100,000 people per day, Fulton Mall was only outpaced by Herald Square and Madison 5th Ave. It was a place that Black people poured money

⁷⁰ Allison Lirish Dean, “Albee Square: When the Mall’s No Longer Home,” Gotham Gazette, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://www.gothamgazette.com/development/3612-albee-square-when-the-malls-no-longer-home>.

⁷¹ Allison Lirish Dean and Kelly Anderson, *My Brooklyn: Demystifying Gentrification* (New Day Films, 2012), <https://columbia.kanopy.com/video/my-brooklyn>.

⁷² “Downtown Brooklyn Studios to 3-Bedroom Apartments for Sale | Availability,” accessed April 25, 2022, <https://brooklynpointnyc.com/availability>.

⁷³ Allison Lirish Dean and Kelly Anderson, *My Brooklyn: Demystifying Gentrification* (New Day Films, 2012), <https://columbia.kanopy.com/video/my-brooklyn>.

into and revitalized when the city redlined and divested from the surrounding area. The Afro-New York community stayed when white flight, banks, and investors left the area for dead. Thus, the re-development of Fulton Mall serves to prove that not even money can save Black people from the beast that is dedicated to making their spaces and work irreverent.

Profaneness

French sociologist, Emile Durkheim's theory of religion states that religion is a system of unified beliefs and practices that recognize the sacred.⁷⁴ Beliefs are the ideas, myths, and meanings concerning the sacred. Practices are rites or rituals that demonstrate how an individual interacts with the sacred. In other words, beliefs are what we think and rituals are what we do. Sacred objects are considered special, set apart, and deserving of reverence. Durkheim states that the sacred is not essentially special or supernatural. It's more so that special meaning is attached to it by a social group. The opposite of the sacred is the profane. Profane objects are ordinary and have no special meaning attributed to them. The profane is everything set apart from the sacred and the supernatural.⁷⁵ It is part of mundane and secular life. While the sacred can freely engage and with the profane, the opposite is not allowed. For the profane is believed to contaminate the sacred.⁷⁶

Applying Durkheim's framework to the city and displacement, I argue that the city elites and government operate as a system that perpetuates beliefs and practices that keep white affluent people, places, and things sacred. At the same time, rendering Black and poor people, places, and things profane. The city government engages in rituals that keep the two from mixing. Processes such as redlining, housing segregation, over-policing, and gentrification are

⁷⁴ Emile Durkheim and Joseph Ward Swain, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 2019, 44 <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5889090>.

⁷⁵ Emile Durkheim and Joseph Ward Swain, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 2019, 34 <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5889090>.

⁷⁶ Emile Durkheim and Joseph Ward Swain, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 2019, 322 <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5889090>.

rituals that keep the profane and the sacred in their rightful places. For example, in 2014, Mayor Bill de Blasio signed off on a luxury building that had a separate entrance for low-income residents.⁷⁷ This entrance, which has come to be known as “poor doors” was rendered legal by providing separate addresses for low-income residents under Bloomberg’s zoning laws. The high-income residents of 15 Hudson Yards were kept sacred by separating them from the profane. They were kept from having to go through the same street door, use the same amenities, and or live on the same floors with low-income residents.⁷⁸ But just as Durkheim points out, there isn’t anything essentially special about the sacred. There is nothing special about wealthy people, whiteness, luxury buildings, or affluent areas and things. There's no reason why poor people can't have these things, interact with these things, or deserve this quality of life. But at every turn, the city is committed to showing low-income people that they are not only *undeserving* of these things. But they are also *not of* these things.

The urban land itself has been considered profane. During the epidemics of the 1800s, microbes dictated how the city developed.⁷⁹ It was the main reason for the expansion uptown, the removal of Seneca Village, and the construction of Central Park. The city was overcrowded, and disease spread far and quickly. An uneven amount of resources was spent studying how disease spread in poor and immigrant populations and understudied in well-off areas. Thus, microbes were associated with poor people. And microbes came to be associated with the city itself. In 1916, social reformers portrayed NYC as “unhealthy and dirty.”⁸⁰ The city claimed that it was

⁷⁷ Janet Babin, “New York Skyscraper’s Separate ‘Poor Door’ Called A Disgrace,” *NPR*, July 30, 2014, sec. Economy, <https://www.npr.org/2014/07/30/336322608/new-york-skyscrapers-separate-poor-door-sparks-outrage>.

⁷⁸ View Author Archive et al., “Manhattan Developer Bypassed ‘Poor Doors’ with Separate Address: Suit,” *New York Post* (blog), July 22, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/07/22/nyc-developer-bypassed-poor-doors-with-separate-address-suit/>.

⁷⁹ Diana Budds, “How Microbes ‘Designed’ New York,” *Curbed NY*, October 2, 2018, <https://ny.curbed.com/2018/10/2/17925378/nyc-museum-exhibit-germs-public-housing>.

⁸⁰ Diana Budds, “Will Upzoning Neighborhoods Make Homes More Affordable?,” *Curbed*, January 30, 2020, <https://archive.curbed.com/2020/1/30/21115351/upzoning-definition-affordable-housing-gentrification>.

harder to keep urban areas clean than to keep a strictly residential area clean. This belief resulted in migrations north of the city to sacred land. The land north of the city was sacred because it was separate from urbanization, uncleanness, and epidemics.

The belief in a profane city and the ritual of leaving it for more spacious, suburban, or rural land continues today. In 2020, NYC experienced a 336,000 population decline. The coronavirus pandemic caused residents to flee to nearby counties and states. A report from Cornell University stated that “the census estimates confirm what many upstate residents [already] knew: More of their neighbors are former Big Apple residents.”⁸¹

However, there is nothing intrinsically special about suburban or rural land. According to the book of Genesis, God did not sanctify some parts of land and not bless the rest. In contrast, he deems that all land is “good”:

God spoke: “Separate!
Water-beneath-Heaven, gather into one place;
Land, appear!”
And there it was.
God named the land Earth.
He named the pooled water Ocean.
God saw that it was good.”⁸²

Epidemics, pollution, toxic waste, and other social forces can eventually take over any area, suburban or otherwise, and render it unsafe, unclean, and profane. As evidenced, for example, when covid-19 slowly but surely hit smaller cities and towns Upstate and across the country.

One error in Emile Durkheim’s theory of religion is that he claims that *all* religions use the sacred and profane dichotomy. This may be the case for European monotheistic religions. But in Indigenous and African religions, this isn’t so. In the next chapter, we will explore African and

⁸¹ “Pandemic Prompted Exodus from New York City, Gains Upstate,” Cornell Chronicle, accessed April 26, 2022, <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2022/03/pandemic-prompted-exodus-new-york-city-gains-upstate>.

⁸² Gn. 9-10 MSG

Indigenous spiritual worldviews in order to assess methods that can help heal the trauma that the people and the land have endured due to the effects of displacement.

Chapter 3

African & Indigenous Cosmology

In *Ecowomanism*, Melanie L. Harris discusses the history of shared common cosmologies between Indigenous and African people in the U.S. Harris reflects on bell hooks' writings on the topic.

From the moment of their first meeting, Native American and African people shared with one another a respect for the life-giving forces of nature, of the earth. ... Similar to the recognition of interconnectedness in the earth community that was an intricate part of African American life and the awareness of the healing power of the earth to reconnect one to a sense of belonging, Native American peoples also recognized the power of earth to help one recognize the innate beauty and goodness of the self and all beings.⁸³

In, *The Christian Imagination*, author Willie James Jennings explains that the mind of European expansion is deeply detached from participation with the Earth. Therefore it can not understand or value identities that are formed by places. Jennings quotes Calvin Luther Martin, a historian of North American Indigenous tribes, who asked,

What if it seemed strange, odd, and even impossible for you to conceive of your identity apart from a specific order of space— specific land, specific animals, trees, mountains, waters, and arrangements of days and nights?⁸⁴

The formation of identity with space is not only an Indigenous concept, but an African concept as well. In Ifá, an African Traditional Religion, it is believed that our birthplaces hold significant meaning to our destinies. Our birthplaces are not accidents or coincidences. It is believed that we are made up of all the *stuff* of our birthplaces. And so who we are, what we are made up of, and the intention behind the choice of our birthplaces make up our identity and provide direction for us in life.

⁸³ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 29-30.

⁸⁴ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), 40.

Leah Penniman, author of *Farming While Black*, states that “In African cosmology, we believe that there is no separation between the sacred and every day.”⁸⁵ Native American and African cultures both instruct that divinity is found throughout creation. The land, air, animals, sky, and so forth all have a spirit. Even “things” deemed “non-living” in a Western ideology have life. Rocks are subjects. Sticks are subjects. The light is a subject. They speak, offer guidance, and are to be consulted. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, author Robin Kimmerer notes that the English language gives us permission to strip living and “nonliving” beings of their subjectivity by reducing and objectifying them as “it” or wrongly gendering them. Kimmerer writes,

Learning the grammar of animacy could well be a restraint on our mindless exploitation of land. But there is more to it. I have heard our elders give advice like “You should go among the standing people” or “Go spend time with those Beaver people.” They remind us of the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides. Imagine walking through a richly inhabited world of Birch people, Bear people, Rock people, beings we think of and therefore speak of as persons worthy of our respect, or inclusion in a peopled world.⁸⁶

Last summer, I visited Soul Fire Farm, located in Grafton, New York as a participant in their intensive farming program. During that time, one of the co-owners, Leah Penniman, an Odoumase-Krobo Vodou Queen Mother of mixed Haitian-American descent, explained to us that they orchestrated divination techniques to ask the land permission to build infrastructure on it. Thus, with the consent of the *lwas*, or deities of the land, they could transform an overgrown swamp into a replenished pond.

Although New York is a place of displaced people, we all have the opportunity and duty to realign ourselves with ethics that promote the relationship between us and the earth. And in doing so, we place ourselves in good company of the long line of the original keepers of this land. The story of Skywoman is a creation story shared by many Indigenous people in the U.S. In

⁸⁵ Leah Penniman and Karen Washington, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm’s Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*, 2018, 53.

⁸⁶ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, 2013, 58.

Braiding Sweetgrass, Robin Kimmerer identifies Skywoman as an immigrant who co-created the world with the help of other animals and the seeds that she arrived with from the Skyworld.

Kimmerer writes,

It is good to remember that the original woman was herself an immigrant. She fell a long way from her home in the Skyworld leaving behind all who knew her and held her dear. She could never go back.⁸⁷

...It is good to recall that, when Skywoman arrived here, she did not come alone. She was pregnant. Knowing her grandchildren would inherit the world she left behind, she did not work for flourishing in her time only. It was through her actions of reciprocity, the give and take with the land, that the original immigrant became indigenous. For all of us, to become indigenous to a place means living as if your children's future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it... Can a nation of immigrants once again follow her example to become native, to make a home?⁸⁸

How do displaced people governed by an African cosmology become reoriented in their place-based identity? How can the effects of displacement (domination, commodification, profanity) be resisted and healed? I propose that one answer to this question is urban agriculture. Farming and gardening have always held the power to develop and restore the connection between people and the land. Without this connection, people create a lack of respect for the non-human world and human life. People become increasingly disoriented, and it becomes challenging to live life through a love ethic.

The literature on gentrification and eco-justice are two different bodies of work. These disciplines often do not intersect. But because we are discussing Black urbanites' separation from the land, we bring in urban environmentalism to discuss how they heal and address the systems that impact their environment. The word environment thus expands further than what we may typically perceive as "nature" to include the spaces where we live, work, play, and

⁸⁷ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, 2013, 8.

⁸⁸ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, 2013, 9.

commute. It addresses the policies, private groups, and agencies that inform and shape the urban environment.

What is urban agriculture?

Urban agriculture generally refers to the cultivation, processing and distribution of agricultural products in urban and suburban settings, including things like vertical production, warehouse farms, community gardens, rooftop farms, hydroponic, aeroponic, and aquaponic facilities, and other innovations. Urban farmers and gardeners work among diverse populations to expand access to nutritious foods, foster community engagement, provide jobs, educate communities about farming, and expand green spaces.⁸⁹

Urban agriculture deepens one's nativity to the land. Urban agriculture has the potential to transmute the effects of domination, commodification, and profanity into sovereignty, de-commodification, and sanctification. In the next chapter, we will examine the history of community gardens in NYC and how they have been a tool to reclaim urban spaces and address, heal, and resist the effects of displacement.

Chapter 4

History of Urban Agriculture & Green Spaces

The history of community gardens began in NYC in the 1970s. The 1970s in NYC was a time of incredible hardship. The city was going through a massive fiscal crisis and economic decline. Failed attempts at urban renewal strategies and redlining created mass white flight into the suburbs.⁹⁰ This created massive divestment from the city. Abandoned buildings, burnt buildings, and vacant lots peppered the boroughs.⁹¹ At least 11,000 properties went into foreclosure.⁹² And when the property reverted back to the city's ownership, it remained undeveloped. The vacant lots degraded into garbage-filled parcels.

⁸⁹ "Urban Agriculture | Alternative Farming Systems Information Center | NAL | USDA," accessed May 8, 2022, <https://www.nal.usda.gov/legacy/afsic/urban-agriculture>.

⁹⁰ "Rooted in Community, New York City's Gardens Still Thrive," Trust for Public Land, accessed May 9, 2022, <https://www.tpl.org/blog/rooted-community-new-york-citys-gardens-still-thrive>.

⁹¹ Vox, *How Radical Gardeners Took Back New York City*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2CaF12xxw>.

⁹² "Rooted in Community, New York City's Gardens Still Thrive," Trust for Public Land, accessed May 9, 2022, <https://www.tpl.org/blog/rooted-community-new-york-citys-gardens-still-thrive>.

The Bronx River Alliance states that in the 60s and 70s urban renewal was code for “negro removal.”⁹³ The city tore down what it deemed was “slums” in Manhattan to make way for middle-income housing. This resulted in over 100,000 demolished homes and countless Black and Puerto Rican residents being displaced into the South Bronx. Seeing the divestment and economic decline, landlords paid arsonists to set their buildings ablaze. They collected multi-million dollar insurance checks and government subsidies to move elsewhere. Landlords were unaccountable for their crimes as they did not have to fix the buildings that burnt down. In total, 80% of the housing in the South Bronx was lost to fires and 250,000 people were displaced. The insurance payout during this time equates to about \$50 million today.⁹⁴

It is out of this grim moment in history that the present wave of urban agriculture in NYC was birthed. All across the boroughs, community residents took their own initiative to rebuild and restore their neighborhoods. For example, In 1962, Luis Torres began clearing out a vacant lot across the street from where he lived in the Lower East Side. This would be the birth of El Jardín de Paraíso.⁹⁵ In 1966, Hattie Carthan took on the task of planting and caring for street trees. She then formed a youth group, the Tree Corp, which planted over 1500 trees in Bed-Stuy in less than a decade.⁹⁶ In the 1970s, Liz Christy enlisted a group of friends to throw seed bombs into abandoned lots and place flower pots in the windows of abandoned buildings. In 1973, they took over a vacant lot on Bowery and Houston Street, and spent a year cleaning it up, and planting and fencing the lot. They called themselves the Green Guerillas. Guerilla gardening has come to

⁹³ “How the Bronx Burned,” Bronx River Alliance, September 14, 2020, <https://bronxriver.org/post/greenway/how-the-bronx-burned/>.

⁹⁴ “How the Bronx Burned,” Bronx River Alliance, September 14, 2020, <https://bronxriver.org/post/greenway/how-the-bronx-burned/>.

⁹⁵ “Re-Discovering Community Gardens and Puerto Rican Roots in New York | Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños,” accessed May 9, 2022, <https://centroptr-archive.hunter.cuny.edu/centrovoices/barrios/re-discovering-community-gardens-and-puerto-rican-roots-new-york>.

⁹⁶ “Our History,” Green Guerillas, accessed May 9, 2022, <https://www.greenguerillas.org/history>.

⁹⁷ Vox, *How Radical Gardeners Took Back New York City*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2CaF12xxw>.

be known as the act of gardening on land that one does not have the legal access or right to cultivate food, plants, or flowers on. This includes abandoned lots, private property, or neglected “public” spaces. Quotations on “public” because what is considered public space is highly contested. The city attempted to seize the property back from the Green Guerillas but backed off after the Guerillas put pressure on the city via news media. In April 1974, the City Office of Housing Preservation and Development presented them with a \$1 dollar lease per month in order to make the arrangement legal. Thus, making that plot of land the first recognized community garden in NYC. Afterwards, community gardeners all over the city began to follow suit and obtained \$1 leases for their initiatives. By 1985, there were over a thousand community gardens in the city.⁹⁸

In 1988, Karen Washington founded the Garden of Happiness on a vacant lot across the street from her home in the Bronx. Enticed by what the community gardeners had accomplished, Mayor Giuliani put up 126 gardens to be auctioned off in 1999 for development.⁹⁹ Washington refused to go down like that. Washington enlisted the support of the NY Botanical Garden, Green Thumb, and Green Guerillas to get her garden protected under the Parks Department. After Washington accomplished this, another 294 gardens were able to follow suit.¹⁰⁰ Today, there are more than 600 community gardens in NYC, totaling more than 100 acres of public, open green space.¹⁰¹ Urban gardening served as a means of *authentic* urban renewal. Residents all over the city bounced back to reclaim and renew their homes and neighborhoods.

⁹⁸ Vox, *How Radical Gardeners Took Back New York City*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_g2CaF12xxw.

⁹⁹ DAVID LEFER, “GARDENS FLAP GROWING GIULIANI TO AUCTION 126 PLOTS,” *New York Daily News (NY)*, February 21, 1999, Access World News – Historical and Current.

¹⁰⁰ Leah Penniman and Karen Washington, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm’s Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*, 2018, 213.

¹⁰¹ “GrowNYC Green Space,” GrowNYC, January 10, 2015, <https://www.grownyc.org/greenspace>.

Gardens as Social & Spiritual Activism

Melanie L. Harris explains that ecowomanism is the “critical reflection, contemplation, and praxis-oriented study of environmental justice from the perspectives of women of color and particularly women of African descent.”¹⁰² Melanie Harris explains that bell hooks “pointed out that the realities of loss, grief, and displacement” can have a harmful impact on the “psychological well-being and mental health of African American people” and that it’s important for scholars to bring awareness to the healing modalities that “were and are being practiced daily to protect the psyches of black peoples.”¹⁰³ These healing modalities, also known as self-care, engage the earth.

While not directly named a contemplative practice of healing, historically gardening in black life is known as a healing practice that can reduce stress, embolden agency, and build community. Other models of community gardens can be found across the country, from faith communities in Chicago to rooftops in New York. When we consider how the practice of gardening, planting, and reconnecting to the earth can have positive neurological and psychological impacts, then we, as scholars and activists, are moved to open up the discourse to an ecowomanist reality of honoring the connection with the earth as healing.¹⁰⁴

Research has indicated that a positive association between gardening and eco-spirituality exists.¹⁰⁵ Ecospirituality is “earth-honoring faith practices led by women of African descent that provide models of contemplative practices of planetary and self-care.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, urban agriculture also becomes a tool of spiritual activism. Spiritual activism is a “social or ecological transformational activity rooted in a spiritual belief system or set of spiritual practices... Spiritual activism is putting spirituality to work for positive social and ecological change.”¹⁰⁷ For example, during my time farming in urban, suburban, and rural places in NYS, I witnessed BIPOC women use spiritual practices in their work to hold space and heal the trauma of

¹⁰² Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 141.

¹⁰³ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 108.

¹⁰⁴ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 108.

¹⁰⁵ Mark L. Harvey, Kailyn Bowman, and Amanda Karr, “The Gardening Spirit: Evidence That Frequency of Gardening Precisely Predicts Ecospirituality,” *Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture* 31, no. 1 (January 2021): 1–9.

¹⁰⁶ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017

¹⁰⁷ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 79-80.

environmental injustice in the community. Whether it had to do with food, healthcare, public safety, gentrification, or other social issues. I constantly went to BIPOC-led farms and was engaged in spiritual rituals such as altar work, praying, setting intentions, giving offerings to the land, calling on ancestors, or given opportunities to engage in spiritual baths. From my perspective, spirituality as a tool appeared to have the same respect and importance as physical agricultural tools that were integral to everyday work. And both the spiritual and agricultural work was sacred. There was no separation or dichotomy between the two. Thus, we now move into how urban agriculture serves as a social and spiritual tool to bring sovereignty, de-commodification, and sanctification to urbanites and urban land.

Sovereignty

Black people have to establish some sense of sovereignty to combat the domination they've experienced for 396 years in this city. When I started urban gardening in 2011, I was able to understand the interconnectedness of all oppressions for the first time. I found that land, food, and environmental justice addressed the illusions of separation. Being with the land helped me to experience the oneness in creation and God's sovereignty in our lives. This is especially important for me as a Black woman. In an interview with *The Root*, Tanya Fields, founder of the Black Joy Farm where I've intensively farmed said, "I think it's really important for Black people to embrace growing food in an urban setting. We are a group of folks who have not had a ton of sovereignty over our bodies and communities."¹⁰⁸ Community gardens are places where bodies that are used to being dominated can finally find reprieve. Tanya Fields said,

We ask people to just come here and sit. There is no requirement that you have to come here and give us sweat equity. There is no requirement that you have to come here and work. You can come here for respite. This is a place of magic.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ *Welcome to the Homegrown Food Revolution in the Bronx. Facebook Watch*, 2018.
<https://fb.watch/cX2FI0cykm/>.

¹⁰⁹ Rob Greenfield, *The Black Feminist Project: Where Radical Joy and Resistance Meet*, 2021,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOaHNFEZJUM>.

Yes, what gardens can provide — Food, tranquility, communal space, and spiritual edification— is magic. And ultimately, love. Urban gardeners pour love into a loveless city. It is a city that uses the people and land for all it's got without reciprocity. Love is the ultimate counter weapon to domination. In *All About Love*, bell hooks states, “domination can not exist in any social situation where a love ethic prevails” (Hooks 2001, 98). Community gardens teach valuable lessons on food sovereignty and food security. In *Rooted In Community*, author Chloe Linder writes,

The success of community gardens in low-income neighborhoods has been demonstrated numerous times. Newark, New Jersey is a good example. In 1991, a study found that the 405 community gardens in Newark had significant socioeconomic benefits such as saving residents 33.5% of their income and improving access to fresh food and vegetables by 44.4% (Patel, 1991).¹¹⁰

Community gardeners also educate Black New Yorkers on how to grow food and tend to plants, and harvest water. Thereby giving them the tools they need to exercise food sovereignty. Community gardens are also examples of people exercising land sovereignty. Land sovereignty is the “right of working peoples to have effective access to, use of, and control over land and the benefits of its use and occupation, where land is understood as resource, territory, and landscape.”¹¹¹ This is important for the freedom of Black people. The act of taking over land was and still is a radical act. And to do it for the purpose of creating community space and land and food sovereignty is also revolutionary. In the *Message to the Grassroots*, Malcolm X passionately exclaims, “Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.”¹¹² Land sovereignty becomes increasingly

¹¹⁰ Chloe Lindner, ““Rooted in Community”: The Importance of Community Gardens,” *Liberated Arts: A Journal for Undergraduate Research* 8 (May 6, 2021), <https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/lajur/article/view/13648>.

¹¹¹ “A ‘Land Sovereignty’ Alternative?,” Transnational Institute, July 6, 2012, <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/a-land-sovereignty-alternative-0>.

¹¹² “(1963) Malcolm X, ‘Message to the Grassroots’ •,” August 16, 2010, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-malcolm-x-message-grassroots/>.

important for New Yorkers because they live in a city where no one owns anything and everything is for sale.

Moreover, the land itself is also released from domination and silencing. She reassumes her subjectivity and agency. Community gardeners listen to the voice of the land by asking her what she wants. What plants are native to her? What is in the soil and the water? What can they do to better her? What songs can they sing to her? Community gardeners pay homage to the spirits and original keepers of the land by naming them and by maintaining the integrity of their own stewardship.¹¹³

De-commodification

In *Native New Yorkers*, Evan Pritchard quotes a famous Cree saying that says,

Only after the last tree has been cut down, only after the last river has been poisoned, only after the last fish has been caught, only then will you find that money cannot be eaten.¹¹⁴

In the trappings of the European expansion worldview, the connection to land is fostered through the use of control and private property.¹¹⁵ Whereas in a Native or African worldview, connection to the land is fostered through freedom. Community gardens promote the de-commodification of land. “The opposite of commodification is de-commodification. Decommodification imposes limits on the commodity character of goods and services traded on markets.”¹¹⁶ While places of shared memory are being taken away via the real estate market, the urban agriculture movement has been providing new spaces for shared collective memory.

¹¹³ Leah Penniman and Karen Washington, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*, 2018, 54-70.

¹¹⁴ Evan T Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2007), 37.

¹¹⁵ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹¹⁶ Christoph Hermann, “Alternatives to Commodification,” in *The Critique of Commodification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197576755.003.0007>.

Community gardening combats land commodification by taking over private or city-owned land and turning them over to the public for green space. Urban farmers are invested in the work of keeping the land public and safe from development by having them protected under the parks departments¹¹⁷, inducted into community land trusts¹¹⁸, designated as critical environmental areas¹¹⁹, and resisting auctions.

Instead of putting a price tag on the land and harming the environment and the people as city elites do, community gardeners do the work of bettering the environment and health of the people. Urban greening efforts have significant benefits for urban neighborhoods, especially poor neighborhoods of color. More green spaces help cool cities' temperatures, intercept stormwater, aid with waste management, provide resources to grow local food, and help physical activity and the mental health of residents.¹²⁰

Sacredness

In African Traditional Religions, there is no separation between the sacred and the profane in African Traditional Religions. All things are considered sacred. All of our physical actions have spiritual ramifications and vice versa. Theologian and ecowomanist Mercy Oduyoye describe this:

We believe that there is a spiritual angle to everything that exists... The material world, as we call it, is spiritual. And if you are not in tune with the material world then the likelihood is that you are not in tune with yourself and you are not in tune with your creator.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Leah Penniman and Karen Washington, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*, 2018, 213.

¹¹⁸ Leah Penniman and Karen Washington, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*, 2018, 13-14.

¹¹⁹ "NYC Community Gardeners Might Have New Protection in the Fight Against Development," Civil Eats, February 7, 2022, <https://civileats.com/2022/02/07/nyc-community-gardeners-might-have-new-protection-in-the-fight-against-development/>.

¹²⁰ Christoph Rupprecht and Jason Byrne, "Informal Urban Green Space as Anti-Gentrification Strategy?," 2017, 209–26.

¹²¹ Melanie L Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*, 2017, 103.

Community gardens challenge the aspect of profanity by affirming that urban areas, too, are places of serenity and sanctity. And both urban areas and urbanites are worthy of respect and care. Just as the pioneers of community gardening were forced to stay during the economic decline of the 70s, so did gardeners remain in the city during the most recent wave of “microbes” taking over New York. Community gardeners stayed and fed their communities throughout the pandemic despite being told by GreenThumb to close their gates. Karen Washington’s decision to keep growing food was simple. Karen said, “You’re telling us to shut down? Hell no. We got in those gardens. How do you tell a community that is hurting—that is starving—to shut down community gardens?”¹²² Washington and other community gardens formed a coalition called the Bronx Community Farm Hubs (BCFH). In 2020 the BCFH distributed 43,000 pounds of food with 5,000 of those pounds coming from Bronx gardens. And in 2021 they distributed more than 162,100 pounds of food with 15,000 of those pounds coming from the gardens.¹²³

Instead of fleeing to safe, sacred, suburban areas as so many people did, community gardeners understood the spiritual assignment of interconnectedness and stayed. They continued to put their hands to the earth and grow food. They made sure that they and their community practiced good safety measures, were fed, and cared for, and had human-earth connection.

Conclusion

This paper is not meant to perpetuate a myth of primitivism versus modernity vis a vis urban agriculture. The goal of this paper is to highlight the unbounded kinship and geographic specificity that still shapes African identity and the subsequent grief that accompanies the denial

¹²² “NYC Community Gardeners Might Have New Protection in the Fight Against Development,” Civil Eats, February 7, 2022, <https://civileats.com/2022/02/07/nyc-community-gardeners-might-have-new-protection-in-the-fight-against-development/>.

¹²³ “NYC Community Gardeners Might Have New Protection in the Fight Against Development,” Civil Eats, February 7, 2022, <https://civileats.com/2022/02/07/nyc-community-gardeners-might-have-new-protection-in-the-fight-against-development/>.

of native or place-based identity. The city is the cloth and urban agriculture is the embroidery that impresses the relational identity between the people and the land. Urban agriculture allows the people and land to be caregivers to each other as they heal through the damage that colonization and displacement have inflicted on them historically and presently. This analysis cannot be done without highlighting African and Indigenous cultures' history, spirituality, and cosmology. Taking these into account, we can understand community gardening as both social and spiritual activism. Ecowomanism provides us with the framework to achieve this while bringing my lived experiences into the body of work.

I would be remiss if I did not discuss the other side of urban agriculture and gentrification. The greening of neighborhoods primes it for increased gentrification. This is called *environmental gentrification* or *green gentrification*. Environmental gentrification is the process by which the development of greenspace drives up the property values of an area because the location then becomes more attractive to investors and potential residents.¹²⁴ Anything that is put in the city can be sold. And the real estate market does an excellent job of co-opting and using urban agriculture as a selling point for potential buyers and renters. Therefore, tactics such as taking land out of the market and into land trusts, maintaining homeownership, and informal greenspaces¹²⁵ become critical in this battle. Emphasis on *informal* greenspaces. We disrupt the system by taking land back on our terms. Strong, rooted communities are the enemy and death of the real estate market. None of this is easy. It's hard work but it's good work. And it's blessed work. As the powerful lyrics of *We're Blessed* by Fred Hammond professes, "We're blessed in the city. We're blessed in the fields. We're blessed when

¹²⁴ Christoph Rupperecht and Jason Byrne, "Informal Urban Green Space as Anti-Gentrification Strategy?," 2017, 209–26.

¹²⁵ Christoph Rupperecht and Jason Byrne, "Informal Urban Green Space as Anti-Gentrification Strategy?," 2017, 209–26.

we come and when we go. We cast down every stronghold. Sickness and poverty must cease. For the devil is defeated. We are blessed.”

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