

Black Forest:

A Model of “Post” Pandemic Praxis

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By combining nature and Black cultural raw materials, *Black Forest* presents the most relevant response to the growing need for social interventions that address environmental disparities in the United States. As a young boy from Trinidad and Tobago in New England, my parents taught my family to love trees and nature. They would take my siblings and me to trails, parks, ponds, and arboretums to ride bikes or rollerblade. We would sometimes pile into the family car and take autumn road trips to Maine through the orange and yellow deciduous trees. This dynamic portrait, these core memories, of a family who appreciates the outdoors and has a connection to it, trees, the land, and the environment, serves as a metaphor for why *Black Forest* presents a pathway towards endless possibilities of wholeness for all communities.

Being a Black Bostonian from Roxbury, Massachusetts, I felt a responsibility to raise my awareness of history and reclaim a rich legacy of Black spirituality in nature when Ekene Ijeoma, artist and former assistant professor of media arts and sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and founder in 2019 of the

MIT Media Lab’s Poetic Justice, told me about the Black Forest project. Black Forest is a public art project that collects names and stories of Black lives lost during COVID-19 in the U.S. and plants trees in Black neighborhoods for them.¹ Given the disproportionate number of Black lives either infected or lost due to COVID-19 and because of the history of environmental racism that afflicts Black neighborhoods (i.e., poor air quality, fewer trees and green spaces, higher temperatures, etc.),² tree planting has long been utilized as ecological resistance to counter harmful histories and uplift Black life.

Before I heard of this “Black Forest,” my millennial self only remembered a fourth-grade Social Studies textbook picture of the shade and darkness cast by tall trees in southwestern Germany’s mountainous region. Ijeoma’s vision of *Black Forest* activates our collective memory differently as a community-driven monument that includes an evolving, digitally networked story library.³ Such a vision models self-empowerment and praxis, bringing together racial equality and ecological justice.⁴ For



Figure 1. Photo by Anthony Eggert/Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma

Ijeoma, *Black Forest* remembers the histories of Black people impacted by ecological inequalities as tree-planting breathes new life into communities. As a multisite, participatory project that reflects art at the scale of injustice, *Black Forest* mirrors the environment Black communities need to thrive and flourish. A type of moralized geography, this environment not only breathes life into its community but also helps its community remember its organic connection to life.



Figure 2. Ekene Ijeoma, *Black Forest*: Melvindale, 2022. (Photo by Anthony Eggert. Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma.)

It was not until Ijeoma invited me to interpret *Black Forest* theologically that I began to realize how various manifestations of violence and systemic racism socialize Black communities out of healthy relationships with the environment. I felt challenged to think of “the environment” as more than nature; it also includes

social and political issues. Ijeoma imagined *Black Forest* after witnessing a tree that had been cut down and abandoned for days, “which reminded him of the murder of Michael Brown, a Black teenager who was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, MO, in 2014, his body left in the street for several hours.”⁵

“Stereotypes persist that African Americans are physically and spiritually detached from the environment.”⁶ Historically, Black people have indeed had multifaceted relationships with nature.⁷ However, it would be wrong to typecast Black people as anti-environmentalists or even as being apathetic to the environment. Historically, Black people have been systematically prevented from experiencing nature organically or even recreationally. Given that this trauma informs Black ecological experiences, people of the earth need healthy environmental spaces for our own thriving even outside of what the power structure allows. For the sake of Black liberation, *Black Forest* addresses the environmental displacements and ecological disruptions that afflict many Black communities and functions to reconnect humanity to the earth.

The history of Black people in America is rooted in relationships to the earth. According to environmental historian, Black feminist, and eco-theologian Dianne Glave in *Rooted in the Earth*, “African Americans actively sought healing, kinship, resources, and salvation in the land.”⁸ A sense of community has always defined Black Americans’ relationships with the environment. Living through the challenges of racism in the South, nature and the environment have been both a nightmare and a haven for Black people. Trees played a particular role. During the enslavement period, runaways experienced the trauma of being tracked and captured by whites in the woods. Yet, it was in the woods that Protestantism transformed the meaning of nature for Black people, and hush harbors grew into our Black churches of today. Black folk have always had a collective connection to nature that matters for a vision of a better world. *Black Forest* communicates hope for a future of collective connection between Black people, all people, and our natural world.

As a Black liberationist, I know that something beautiful happens when personal and spiritual growth transforms your environment to heal pain and trauma. We all live on one planet that is vulnerable to destructive behavior, especially on systemic levels, but God's loving power liberates the oppressed. Right relations – relationships with God, neighbor, self, and the earth – reflect respect and sanctity of nature, rejecting the belief that humankind can exploit the world for the indulgence of human greed. A Black ecological theology, or a Black ecologically conscious spirituality, includes a deepening recognition that there is an intersectional correlation between environmental systems and the health of human communities. *Black Forest* activates and organizes this consciousness, partnering with local organizations and volunteers to plant trees. People can even offer up their land for tree planting.⁹

We are what we remember. This is particularly true for Black communities. As a child growing up during hot summers in Roxbury – a historically Black town in Boston – I remember regular walks to the corner store. After turning the corner at the end of my one-way street, I would pass by a traffic light control box covered in tags and bumper stickers. Popsicle sticks, sticky honey bun wrappers, half-drunk juice barrels, and empty bags of Lay's potato chips and Doritos lay on the sidewalk to the store. My neighborhood was not litter-free nor overflowing with green spaces, but I had tremendous pride in it, and it felt like my neighborhood... like I belonged. Nonetheless, the only trees were saplings at the edge of the sidewalk by the corner amid the smog in the air, the blaring ambulance sirens, and the sounds of Black life hustling and bustling up and down.

It was not until I lived in Denver, Colorado, that my formative childhood experiences in a northeastern Atlantic city began to affect me in ways I did not originally understand. Until Denver, I had memories mostly of life in dense cities characterized by population diversity and urban concrete landscapes. Living in Denver *felt* different, primarily because of Colorado's plush greenness, many

trees, and beautifully spread-out natural scenery. I enjoyed and adjusted to Denver's outdoorsy culture: hiking, running, whitewater rafting, attending park festivals, and more. Still, and not necessarily because I was away from my immediate family and hometown, I had difficulty locating a sense of belonging to the space. I knew I belonged, but the environment did not remind me of Roxbury or other places I had lived, like the Bronx or Harlem.



Figure 3. Ekene Ijeoma, *Black Forest: Melvindale*, 2022. (Photo by Anthony Eggert. Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma.)

Leaving Denver, I returned to Boston right before lockdown. Pandemic times taught us much about our relationship with the environment. During lockdown, introvert or not, we all began to miss being outside without COVID-19 restrictions. We grew to appreciate nature more after we could not be in it. On the other hand,



Figure 4. Photo by Anthony Eggert. Courtesy of Ekene Ijeoma.

nature experienced a bit of respite for a short period without the physical presence of humankind. Pandemic restrictions positively impacted air, water, and noise pollution due to decreased vehicle traffic and factory closures. Nature recovered as we gained a new appreciation for nature and human connection.

So much of capitalism alienates us from nature. After the lockdown, society returned to the same capitalist practices and ideals that contributed to Black experiences of environmental racism and ecological inequality. COVID-19 poignantly reminded us of the pre-existing fact that we cannot fight for the planet *and* have a society of inequality. We still need responsive, not reactionary, sustainable prescriptions for ecological justice that entail longevity for an ongoing struggle. Joining a long tradition of organized resistance, the emergence of *Black Forest* signifies new capacities for restoration, Black community-building, and human connection through a more collaborative relationship with nature.¹⁰

As trees provide shade, reducing temperatures and refreshing the air in Black and urban areas that usually suffer from hazardous heat and bad air quality, *Black Forest* centers Black communities with redlining histories, often in areas with fewer trees and polluted land. As Ijeoma points out, “With COVID-19, we saw respiratory illnesses. At the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, we heard George Floyd say, ‘I can’t breathe.’ We need trees in the communities that experience unfortunate loss.”¹¹ *Black Forest* prophetically calls for a critical assessment of how we got to the present moment and follows up with a roadmap to community and a plan of action, or praxis – fostering a *collective ecological consciousness* that does not segregate injustices but integrates them with the fight for life in all its forms.

As *Black Forest* grows, the community broadens the image of environmentalism and ecological justice for Black consciousness and liberation. It positions Black communities in the driver’s seat of their ecological destinies to some extent. It feels empowering

to know that art and activism like this exist. For some, like me, it may be the first time they are challenged to think critically about their personal relationship to the environment. For everyone, it is a call, or at least an opportunity, to join a better future in our shared natural world. Much like cookouts, family reunions, and “all-Black spaces” at the park, *Black Forest* will hopefully see that we become caretakers and stewards of our environment and one another. A living memorial, more than three hundred mid- to large-size trees have been planted in California, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Rhode Island, and Washington. *Black Forest* is at hand.

Notes & Bibliography

¹ MIT Media Lab’s Poetic Justice will see forty thousand trees planted on public and private land primarily in urban centers across the United States.

² Black communities have long suffered in the U.S. because of the government and corporations dumping toxins and garbage into marginalized neighborhoods, indicating how race and poverty defined the treatment and status of Black people in U.S. history.

³ *Black Forest* offers crowd-sourced sonic and video collages and continuously budding histories as users contribute their stories. Poetic Justice records stories from all fifty states. Trees will include a tag or sticker with QR codes that link to the archive.

⁴ Black models of self-empowerment for environmental justice can be traced back to the 1960s with notable movements like Martin Luther King, Jr.’s civil rights advocacy for sanitation workers. Specifically, Neighborhood Tree Corps, founded by Hattie Carthan, a legendary activist remembered as “Bed-Stuy’s Tree Lady,” inspired Poetic Justice.

Under Carthan’s leadership, Neighborhood Tree Corps planted over one thousand five hundred trees throughout Brooklyn in the 1960s. Poetic Justice also looked to Africa and groups like the Green Belt Movement, founded by Wangari Maathai, which planted over fifty million trees in Kenya since the late 1970s.

⁵ Annabel Keenan, “Tree-planting project memorializing Black lives lost brings 40,000 trees to urban centers across the US,” *The Art Newspaper*, July 30, 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/07/30/black-forest-living-memorial-tree-planting-covid-19-black-communities-monument>.

⁶ Dianne D Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago Review Press, 2010), 3.

⁷ During the enslavement period, Black folk worked the land; in the years after enslavement, Black people relocated from Southern rural fields and gardens to urbanized Northern cities.

⁸ Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 8.

⁹ Keenan, “Tree-planting project.”

¹⁰ Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, 138. “African Americans have continued their legacy of resistance, combining grassroots activism, spirituality, and organization to craft a ‘spearhead for reform’ that African Americans who continue to be embattled by environmental racism can carry into the future.”

¹¹ Keenan, “Tree-planting project.”

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