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# BACK TO THE SOIL

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With the exception of landscaping, my experience with soil has been utilitarian, growing vegetables and herbs, watering and mowing lawns. While I have an appreciation and even wonder for the natural environment, a deep sacred connection is not ingrained within me. I am aware that my relationship with the Earth, the land, its soil, is deficient. I believe this deficiency in me is the result of African and indigenous peoples being prevented from weaving their ancestral beliefs and wisdom into this country's fabric.

The history of the United States has not only affected its people, but also its land which has suffered and been weaponized. For centuries, Black Americans have been driven away from nature's life-giving support through slavery, broken promises of 40 acres and a mule, the Homestead Act, and the US Department of Agriculture. The dispossession of land has become

“intergenerational pain.” (Penniman, 102-103, 113, 122) African Americans’ separation from the land also bring personal thoughts of Indigenous people’s separation from their land.

Although i was adopted, my parents were born in Dakota-Sioux Country. I know my grandparents were born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, certainly within the timeline of when the Lakota Sioux were being confined to a reservation. I have asked my parents if my family forbears had a “supermarket ideology” that prompted them to support the wiping out of Native people and stealing the land. (113) The answer was unfortunately, yes. The story of my family is bittersweet.

As a child I visited Mt. Rushmore on the land the Sioux were forced to leave. Many Indigenous people were displaced as the Homestead Act stole millions of acres and national parks such as Glacier and Yosemite. Those beautiful places were turned into recreational sites that only white people could enjoy. This displacement has injured the land. Indigenous people protect around 80% of the planet’s biodiversity (54, 62, 102) Without their stewardship the land suffers.

It is also understandable that African Americans have “a deep feeling of ugliness about the land” after what they suffered under slavery. But younger Black Americans are coming back to reclaim the land. For example, Black farmer, Chris Bolden-Newson explains, “The land was the scene of the crime. She was never the criminal. (31, 118, 144)

I realize our country has lost much without the sacred beliefs and care that Indigenous and African diasporic people provide.

Our land has suffered from over usage, pesticide use and mismanagement. We have stripped its minerals. From my perspective, our soil didn’t have a choice as “colonizers ravaged 50 percent of its carbon in their first generation of settling.” We would benefit from African ancestral techniques of mixed succession planting, mounding, deep mulching, plant-based toxin extraction, cover crops, and silage tarps.” (119, 155)

The land has spoken to us many times of our abuse, for example in the Dust Bowl era. In our modern world we damage ourselves as we damage the land to produce whole foods—corn, potatoes, and wheat—to use in processed foods. I believe if we adopted a philosophy of “what happens to earth happens to me”, then perhaps we would keep our food whole and not have kicked the issue of climate change down the road.

I reminisce on my childhood experience with soil, pushing a seed into a dirt-filled container, pouring water on it, then being amazed as a tiny green sprout shot up as I helped my mother in her little garden. I recall gaining a deeper connection with the soil based on miraculous experiences like that.

That connection waned as I grew older, lost in my adulthood in my suburban subdivision where the Homeowner's Association prohibited raised beds. I drove down the road with fossil fuels to purchase pesticide-sprayed perfect vegetables. I felt good about purchasing produce from the farmer's market in the summer. Wasn't I doing something wonderful for the environment? Obviously, the best choice was and is to have my own home garden.

Looking forward, when I am able to be freely connected to the soil again, I will strive for more than a utilitarian

interaction, even in urban life. Future thoughts are of working in a community garden for the benefit of others, utilizing African soil techniques and avoiding gmo seeds that are treated with pesticides or fungicides. Through my actions I hope to give credit to Black and Indigenous peoples.

In the interim, as I traverse my current ugly trials, I will find the bounty of soil in the concrete-fenced surroundings. I will look for every flower, every green shoot as the seasons change and the soil moves through its cycles. The soil has been a comfort and soother to me within this environment as I participated in a horticultural program which donates produce to Food Gatherers. By helping others, I was able to help myself.

When I am able to rebuild my life, I will shed former material possessions, move to a simple life and get back to the soil.





Artwork by Carol Poole

## **CONTACT AND SUBMISSIONS**