

# Is Eco-Anxiety Racial Anxiety?: Harnessing Eco-Anxiety for Practicing Racial and Climate Justice

Eunil David Cho

This essay aims to invite practical theologians to consider racial injustice seriously as they continue deepening practical theological scholarship on climate change and environmental crises. By looking at the specific issue of eco-anxiety, I examine how scholars and practitioners must consider how climate change and eco-anxiety are not uniformly experienced in the United States. While communities of color suffer eco-anxiety disproportionately more, their voices and experiences have been largely absent in the larger conversation. Subsequently, I look at Fannie Lou Hamer's practical theological work of ecological justice in order to suggest how practical theologians need to empower individuals and communities to harness their experience of eco-anxiety for practicing climate and racial justice.

## Introduction: The Intersection Between Climate Change and Racial Injustice

On August 3, 2019, a mass shooting occurred at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, United States, located near the Texas-Mexico border. In this senseless terrorist attack, a far-right White individual named Patrick Crusius killed twenty-three people and injured twenty-three others; most of them were Latinx Americans. According to the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), the shooting was an act of domestic terrorism and a hate crime. Shortly before the attack, the shooter, using hostile anti-immigrant languages that have been popularized on the political far-right, posted his manifesto online that he was trying to stop a "Hispanic invasion of Texas" (Brockell 2019). But there was also a distinctly environmental theme to his manifesto titled, "An Inconvenient Truth," presumably named after Al Gore's 2006 documentary film on climate change. The shooter wrote, "The decimation of the environment is creating a massive burden for future generations. Corporations are heading the destruction of our environment by shamelessly overharvesting resources...If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can be more sustainable" (Darby 2019).

The shooter's motivation can be identified as a lesser-known far-right ideology called *eco-fascism*. American journalist Luke Darby claims that eco-fascists believe that "the size of the human population is not only putting a strain on natural resources, but also that masses of displaced people will be a threat to state and cultural stability in a seemingly inevitable post-climate change world" (Darby 2019). That's why, for eco-fascists, allowing immigrants into the United States is catastrophic. The El Paso shooting eventually came to symbolize powerfully the deep connections between racial injustice and the climate change in the United States. Similarly, during the pandemic, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on African Americans, Latinx, Asian, and Native Americans reaffirmed how systemic racism and its resulting health disparities remain deeply embedded in the United States (Magesh et al. 2021). It is as present in matters of the environment as in other aspects of life: Both historical and present-day injustices have left people and communities of color exposed to far greater environmental health hazards—including water and air pollution, extreme weather, chemical exposures, and negative mental health effects of climate change—than White Americans (Centers for Dis-





ease Control and Prevention 2018). The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) declares, “Environmental and climate justice is a civil rights issue. We all depend on the physical environment and its bounty...But not all people are equally impacted. Race—even more than class—is the number one indicator for the placement of toxic facilities in this country hit by climate change” (NAACP 2021). This statement displays how environmental issues and systemic racism perpetually go hand in hand in America. This interconnection is called *environmental racism*, which is “a form of systemic racism where communities of color are disproportionately disadvantaged due to policies, practices or directives that burden these communities by forcing them to live in proximity to environmental hazards/toxins or in degraded environments” (Washer 2021).

However, while it has become all the more significant to see climate change as a racial justice issue in the United States, scholars and practitioners in various academic disciplines have not considered the impact of environmental racism in depth. If it’s the people and communities of color who suffer ecological challenges more disproportionately, why don’t we hear about the voices of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities around their experiences of eco-anxiety? Why are those people responding to the issue of eco-anxiety predominantly *White*? To address these questions, I first engage the work of environmental studies scholars Sarah Jaquette Ray and Sian Kou-Giesbrecht to explore why and how the voices of BIPOC communities have been overlooked in the scholarly and public conversation around eco-anxiety. Then I turn to argue how practical theologians can intentionally resist the trend by intentionally uplifting the voices of marginalized communities and examining their lived experience of climate anxiety and engagement of faith-based activism. By looking at the work of Karen Crozier, who examines Fannie Lou Hamer’s practical theological work on racial and environmental justice, I investigate the importance of considering how climate change always compounds existing structures of injustice and how people’s various ecological emotions including anxiety, grief, fear, and loss can be harnessed for climate justice in practical theological scholarship.

## Is Eco-Anxiety White Anxiety?

Based on American Psychology Association’s definition, climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety, is understood as “a chronic fear of environmental doom” (Dodds 2021, 1) and “the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse” (Pihkala 2020, 4). Psychologist Joseph Dodds argues that the past decade has seen the substantial rise of people’s experience of ecological loss, anxiety, and guilt, indicating climate change as one of the top threats to global health in the 21st century (Dodds, 2021). However, not every community experiences the same level of eco-anxiety. Because climate change disproportionately affects members of historically marginalized communities, communities of color are more concerned than Whites about climate change in America according to the national survey conducted by the Yale Project on Climate Change and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (Leiserowitz and Akerlof, 2010). Particularly, Hispanics/Latinx (69 %) and African Americans (57 %) are more likely to be “alarmed” or “concerned” about global warming than are Whites (49 %) (Leiserowitz and Akerlof, 2010). This explains why non-White communities are more likely to experience eco-anxiety and also display more willingness to engage in climate activism as a way to address various issues around climate change and support climate policies and actions (Ballew et al. 2020).

However, while eco-anxiety has received growing attention in public discussions and research, the lived experiences of BIPOC communities regarding eco-anxiety have been largely absent. One of the compelling reasons is that White scholars and activists have made up the majority of voices in the conversation. In her thought-provoking article published in *Scientific American*, Ray asserts that eco-anxiety is “an overwhelmingly White phenomenon” (Ray 2021). Based on years of her research and activism, Ray observes that those who have been studying and actively responding to the issue of climate anxiety are predominantly White. To be more specific, these climate anxiety circles are even whiter than the larger environmental circles. Why is the conversation and interest in climate anxiety so White? What happened to the voices of communities of color? In her critical analysis, Ray writes, “The white response to climate change is literally suffocating to people of color. Climate anxiety can operate like white fragility, sucking up all the oxy-

gen in the room and devoting resources toward appeasing the dominant group” (Ray 2021). Ray implies that eco-anxiety can be “a form of white fragility or even racial anxiety” and asks, “is climate anxiety just code for white people wishing to hold onto their way of life or get ‘back to normal,’ to the comforts of their privilege?” (Ray 2021). As a result, in the field of ecological and environmental studies and practices, Ray argues, the perspectives of racial and ethnic minority groups have been alarmingly underrepresented. Furthermore, this significant absence of communities of color and other marginalized populations’ voices could potentially reinforce the dangerous assumption that these non-White communities are “uninterested” in the issues around climate change (Kou-Giesbrecht 2020, 1). A similar pattern, of course, can be found in theological and religious studies as well.

## The Development of Practical Theological Reflection on Eco-Anxiety

Compared to other theological disciplines, practical theology has offered little to the conversations on climate and environmental crises. Only since the global pandemic have practical theologians begun to consider climate change as an emerging priority and produced some noteworthy articles and books (McCarroll 2020; Ayres 2021; Marlow 2022; McCarroll and Kim-Cragg 2022). But within the subfield of pastoral theology, scholars and practitioners have been grappling with the environmental crisis for a somewhat longer time, particularly focusing on how to provide care for individuals struggling with eco-anxiety, “a variety of difficult emotions and mental states significantly related to environmental problems” (Pihkala 2022, 1). The initial conversation began with Howard Clinebell’s book, *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth* (1996). In this pioneering work, Clinebell urges caregivers to reconsider humanity’s deep connection to nature by contending, “our relationship with the earth, mother-father of all living things, is an often-ignored but foundational factor influencing our overall wellness and the wholeness of our identity” (Clinebell 1996, 27). Although pastoral theologians did not initially respond to Clinebell’s invitation with enthusiasm, nearly twenty-five years later they have finally begun to reflect on the psychological and theological impacts of environmental crises on people’s lives, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly

spread across the globe. On the issue of eco-anxiety, a number of pastoral theologians have examined its numerous implications for pastoral care, such as the various forms of eco-anxiety (Pihkala 2020; Clayton 2020), the existential dimensions of eco-anxiety (Budziszewska and Jonssoon 2021), the role of responsibility and guilt in relation to eco-anxiety (Jenson 2019; Fredericks 2021), the political dimensions of eco-anxiety and ecological issues, and eco-anxiety’s wider connection with ecological theology and practical theology (LaMothe 2021; McCarroll 2020; Swain 2020). These pastoral theological reflections on eco-anxiety are timely and insightful, yet there is yet to be a substantial conversation in the field on the issue of eco-anxiety and racial justice.

Most recently, in his careful theoretical overview of pastoral theology and eco-anxiety, Panu Pihkala articulates the importance of justice in the conversation on eco-anxiety because “the most vulnerable populations are also the most susceptible to various kinds of climate-related harm” (Pihkala 2022, 7). Pihkala points out that although the movement of climate justice has been growing since the 2000s, theologians and religious scholars have not carefully considered how “there are strong inequalities related to political power, race, and gender, which also affect climate politics and emotions” (Pihkala 2022, 8). For instance, research shows that women tend to experience more climate-related emotions—such as despair, guilt, hopelessness, and mourning—than men (Hickman et al. 2021). Likewise, for indigenous communities in North America, climate anxiety is not a new phenomenon. It is simply a continuation of the oppression, suffering, and colonialism wrought on them for centuries by White settlers (Whyte 2017). Pihkala challenges practical theologians to address how climate change continually exacerbates structures of injustice, disproportionately affecting historically marginalized communities by intensifying their struggles with ecological emotions and existential threats over much longer and deeper periods. Specifically in the context of the United States, Ray makes a similar claim, arguing that the popular message of “climate change is the greatest threat of our time” often overlooks “people who have been experiencing existential threats for much longer. Slavery, colonialism, ongoing police brutality—we can’t neglect history to save the future” (Ray 2021). Thus, as practical theologians continue to grapple with climate change and its impact on both humans and the earth, we must ask, “How



can we critically examine our history so that we can better imagine our future?” In other words, if practical theology remains a theological discipline that privileges and engages lived human experience and practices, how can we continue this timely task in the era of eco-anxiety with an unwavering commitment to justice, liberation, and healing?

## Uplifting the Stories of Communities of Color in the Era of Eco-Anxiety

Asian American environmental scientist Sian Kou-Giesbrecht points out how racial minority groups in the United States have been historically “depicted as disinterested in environmental issues” (Kou-Giesbrecht 2020, 2). This erroneous depiction has allowed racial diversity to be a low priority in environmental organizations as well as in ecological scholarship, research, and activism (Kou-Giesbrecht 2020, 2). For example, Asian Americans are not often associated with the term “environmentalist” and constantly perceived as “uninterested in environmental issues” despite the fact that Asian Americans are both keenly aware of and interested in environmental issues, based on recent data (Speiser and Krygsman 2014). A survey conducted in 2014 shows that Asian Americans display the highest proportions of any racial group in the United States in understanding the impacts of climate change and its solutions. 83 % of them believe that climate change is occurring, compared to 71 % of the U.S. population, and with 86 % of them agree that acting now on climate change would provide a better life for their children and grandchildren (Speiser and Krygsman 2014). For Kou-Giesbrecht, the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in environmental scholarship and activism has to do with the pervasive influence of the “model minority” stereotype, which has contributed to the lack and erasure of the voice of Asian American communities in the conversation around climate change (Chou and Feagin 2016). The model minority myth is a widespread stereotype that people of Asian descent in America are much “healthier, more hardworking, better educated, and more affluent than other racial and ethnic groups” (Cho 2021, 176). It dangerously assumes that Asian Americans are monolithic, singularly highlighting “the wealth, health, and success of a select few” and overlooks the wide range of inequality and disparity that exists in the larger Asian American communities (Cho 2021). Leclercq, the

co-founder of climate justice nonprofit “Start: Empowerment,” claims that “Asian people not being heard or seen as activists, which has contributed to the erasure of Asian Americans in the climate space” (Horn-Muller and Chen 2023). Their stories that demonstrate their concerns for environmental issues, their experience of a variety of ecological emotions, and their practices of environmental activism have been constantly silenced, overlooked, and unacknowledged.

Practical and pastoral theologian Mary Moschella argues that because many “stories seldom heard” have not been recognized due to racism, sexism, classism, ableism, colonialism, and other forms of systemic marginalization, pastoral theologians need to uplift those untold stories by empowering marginalized communities to tell their stories and create a space for them to do it (Moschella 2018, 20–21). Moschella writes, “In the current regressive political climate, it becomes all the more important to attend to the conditions of the most vulnerable, and to create venues in which their stories can be richly told and brought into greater public awareness. These efforts support the liberative and prophetic functions of pastoral theology and care” (Moschella 2018, 22). Although the stories of marginalized communities are often missing in the public conversation, historically marginalized communities including BIPOC communities “have developed traditions of resilience out of necessity” and “cultivated resilience over the long arc of the fight for justice” including ecological justice (Ray 2021). In her book, *Inhabitanace: Ecological Religious Education*, practical theologian Jennifer Ayres examines the story of San Jose Parish in Beloit, Wisconsin, as a case study to show how a marginalized immigrant community establishes a new ecological inhabitanace from the vulnerable place of psychological, social, and economic challenges. As a Spanish-speaking immigrant faith community, San Jose Parish has trained its members actively to engage in farming and raising livestock as faith-based ecological practices. For these immigrants who have experienced the trauma of migration and displacement, this small town in the rural Midwest became their new place of inhabitanace, their new home away from home. Ayres claims that ecological religious education forms “human beings into thriving inhabitants even in the most ecologically challenging contexts and times” (Ayres 2019, 129). San Jose Parish’s work of planting, farming, and harvesting is a faith-based ecological practice that empowers its members to lament their

experiences of displacement and, subsequently, to regain hope in their new inhabitation. Ayres argues that many faith communities, especially those based in historically marginalized communities, have been doing faith-based ecological practices of education, care, and activism for their lands and their inhabitants without naming and describing them as such. Put simply, in the United States, although their experiences, stories, and practices have received little attention and recognition, communities of color have been caring for their members and lands for many years in the face of climate anxiety and other environmental challenges. It is their Christian faith that has been an integral part of this resilience and resistance.

### Fannie Lou Hamer's Practice of Racial and Environmental Justice Concerns

One of the few practical theological works that unveil untold stories of racial and environmental justice is Karen Crozier's *Fannie Lou Hamer's Revolutionary Practical Theology: Racism and Environmental Justice Concerns*. In this outstanding work, Crozier presents Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977) as a pro-womanist practical theologian by examining Hamer's religious thoughts and practices. Hamer was a Christian Black woman born in rural Mississippi in 1917 and became a formidable leader during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s: "Her Christian praxis was formed in the crucible of white domination and hostility, and her faithful way of being in the world enabled Hamer to bear witness to values and practices that affirmed and cultivated life and human flourishing" (Crozier 2021, 1). By analyzing the writing of Hamer on the U.S. democracy, racism, sexism, classism, and Christianity, Crozier argues that Hamer "articulated and exhibited a clear, cohesive practical theology that inspired friends and communities, challenges foes and changed the socio-political landscape of a nation" (Crozier 2021, 1).

As a Civil Rights movement leader, Hamer is best known for her work in voting rights and women's rights activism. However, Crozier reexamines Hamer as an environmental justice advocate who considered how the intersection of racial injustice, colonialism, environmental violence, and global warming affected Black people living in the United States' "wilderness" (Crozier 2021, 9). Hamer writes, "Should earth against my soul engage and fiery

darts be hurled, when I can smile at Satan's rage, and face this frowning world" (Hamer 1971, 6). Hamer also reflects critically on "the cruelty and antagonism that can be experienced and encountered in the Earth that is neither friendly, welcoming, or encouraging of her human flourishing in her darker-hued skin" (Crozier 2021, 77). For Hamer, the earth was the United States, that is "wilderness," an inherently hostile environment in which Black people could never exercise their human dignity and agency. The environment was systematically designed to "control, constrain, oppress, and suppress the natural movement and identity of black lives within United States border" (Crozier 2021, 78). Hamer resisted calling America "the land of the free and the home of the brave;" instead, she called it, "the land of the tree and home of the grave" (Hamer 1971, 126). In her speeches and written works, Hamer talked extensively and explicitly about the environment she inhabited, namely how the Deep South that was death-dealing and life-limiting for her and other Black persons: "Always under the constant pressure of being extinguished or disposed, Hamer knew she was perceived as an environmental and sociological problem" (Crozier 2021, 80). Because Hamer was born and bred in the wilderness of the United States that perceived her as "an environmental problem" without human dignity, she innately experienced and embodied a variety of ecological anxiety, such as existential angst, anxiety about the human condition, and problematic uncertainty about the future that emerged from the "forced segregation, dehumanization, subjugation, and denial of black self-determination" (Crozier 2021, 82).

Because eco-anxiety is inherited intergenerationally—an alarming reality especially for Black Americans in the United States "wilderness"—Hamer was determined "to protect and preserve vulnerable people who intentionally and systematically were denied access to sustainable resources and relationships" (Crozier 2021, 88). In her pursuit of ecological justice and racial justice as an environmental movement advocate, Hamer, claims that the environment in which Black people lived must be protected and preserved in order to alleviate the eco-anxiety of Black people and fight for liberation and healing.

As the environmental movement advocates for clean, quality water, Hamer had to advocate for access to running water because this public resource was not readily attainable for poor black Mississippians. Although she did not have running water in the house, she was none-



theless charged for the use of nine thousand gallons of water because the white predators were after black prey in the United States “wilderness.” As environmentalists advocate for the drastic decrease of fossil fuel emissions by multinational corporations and individuals, Hamer had to walk, carpool, or drive for miles for basic needs such as health care. Hence, for Hamer, it seems safe to say that her fight for racial justice included an engagement of the broader environmental challenges and conditions (Crozier 2021, 90).

According to current research on race, gender, class, religion, and the environment, Hamer’s work represents an important source for understanding and practicing ecological justice and ecowomanism, which is “critical reflection, contemplation, and praxis-oriented study of environmental justice from the perspective of women of color and particularly of African descent” (Crozier 2021, 88; Harris 2017, Loc 2598 of 2847).

In 1971, Hamer was invited to Tougaloo College, located in Jackson, Mississippi, to speak on the nation’s struggle with environmental and sociological challenges of racism, racial injustice, and racial dehumanization in her speech titled, “Is It Too Late?” Hamer opened the speech by stating, “In the streets of America, my home and land where my fathers died, land of my family’s pride, I have taken a stand for human rights and civil rights not just for my sake, but for all mankind” (Hamer 1971, 132). Although the United States “wilderness” had always been an unwelcoming environment for her and fellow Black people, she courageously hoped for “a more intimate sense of belonging to the nation that included yet transcended the domestic terror of lynching, murder, and assassination” (Crozier 2021, 83). Furthermore, Hamer not only recognized countless Black individuals who sacrificed their lives for the healing and reconstruction of the nation, but also expressed the importance of interracial solidarity with all people who belong to her homeland (Blain 2021, 55). From the perspective of ecological justice, Hamer’s ecological emotions—such as anxiety, grief, anger, loss, and frustration—were harnessed for practicing racial and climate justice, not only for Black communities, but also for *all people* in her land who were affected by systemic racism, global warming, climate change, rising sea levels, and fossil fuel emissions. In short, Hamer’s work of activism for racial and climate justice powerfully demonstrates how “climate anxiety must be directed toward addressing the ways that racism manifests as racialized violence” (Ray 2021).

Deeply informed by her Christian faith and commitment to justice and compassion, Hamer, as a practical theologian, was able to channel these challenging ecological emotions toward collective liberation for all people as well as for the earth on which she lived.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, as we continue to observe how the voices and experiences of marginalized communities are often overlooked in discussions about climate change and eco-anxiety, this article seeks to encourage the practical theological community, particularly those who identify as White, to view climate change through the lens of racial justice more intently. This commitment will create more opportunities for BIPOC communities to center their narratives of resilience and resistance amidst racial and environmental injustices. Ray challenges individuals experiencing eco-anxiety not to ask, “What can I do to stop feeling so anxious?” or “What can I do to save the planet?” but instead to critically consider, first and foremost, “Who am I?” (Ray 2021). In other words, as we continue to deepen and expand our practical theological reflections on climate justice, we must ask, “How are my social roles, power, and positionality influencing the conversation about climate change and justice?” Encouraging those who are “ecologically anxious” to engage with this question will help them understand our profound interconnectedness and inspire them to seek meaningful ways to resist the structures of injustice that exacerbate climate change and crisis.

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