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HRIR-2300 Yoruba Spirituality as an Environmental Justice Paradigm

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### Sacred Socio-Ecological Interconnectedness: Climate Change Refugees and the Eco-Memories of Migration

Misael Reyes, a 21-year-old photographer living in Moreno Valley, CA, originally left his home country of Honduras at 15 years old to escape gang violence. After two years in Guatemala and Mexico, he decided to cross the U.S./Mexico border at Tijuana to find his uncle living in the States. Misael was captured by Customs and Border Patrol agents and spent three days detained in “las hieleras” (freezers), or inhumane holding cells for immigrants taken into custody at the southern US border.<sup>1</sup> Because Misael was 17 years old at the time, he was sent to a juvenile facility in Fullerton, CA for immigrant minors. On the day of his 18th birthday, ICE agents arrived at the juvenile facility to transport him, shackled and handcuffed, to Theo Lacy, a prison on the banks of the Santa Ana River in Orange, CA, which doubled as an immigration detention facility for adults. For three months, Misael was detained and representing himself in court until he could find a lawyer and sponsor to assist him in being granted bond and release.

Unfortunately, Misael’s story is not uncommon. Millions of immigrants from around the globe flee dangerous conditions in their home countries in hope of a better life in the United States. Once they make it across the border, though, they are met with continued violence and oppression through the US carceral immigration system. However, we rarely acknowledge a major underlying catalyst of migration: climate change. The story of Misael and his family’s

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<sup>1</sup> Read more about Las Hieleras here: [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/uscrd0218\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/uscrd0218_web.pdf)

migration expands beyond fear of gang violence to natural disasters and environmental destruction.

In November 2020, Misael's parents, sister, and brother were still living in his hometown of San Pedro Sula, the second-largest city in Honduras. On November 5, 2020, category four Hurricane Eta devastated the Sula Valley of northwestern Honduras, which Misael's family called home. About two weeks later, the area was hit again by another storm: category five Hurricane Iota. The Reyes family's home and land were completely destroyed by flooding from a nearby creek. They were just a few of the 4.7 million Hondurans impacted by Hurricane Iota alone and one in approximately 1,000 homes destroyed in the country.<sup>2</sup> Already a city facing hardship, Hurricanes Eta and Iota exacerbated levels of violence, gang extortion, and COVID-19 cases as levels of poverty, homelessness, and unemployment skyrocketed and the highly relied upon agricultural sector decimated. The Reyes family fled these worsening conditions for a new home in Intibucá, where his parents are now involved in local environmental organizing through COPINH, an organization founded by the late Indigenous Honduran eco-activist Berta Cáceres. One day his parents hope to reunite with Misael in the U.S.

### **Climate Change and Global Migration**

An estimated 21.5 million people migrate from their homes each year due to natural disasters.<sup>3</sup> As the climate crisis continues to wreak havoc through devastating storms, droughts, wildfires, floods, rising sea levels, and record-breaking temperatures, this number will only continue to increase dramatically. However, it is challenging to fully understand the impact of

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<sup>2</sup> "Central America: Hurricanes Eta & Iota - 6-months Operation Update," ReliefWeb, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, June 23, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/guatemala/central-america-hurricanes-eta-iota-6-months-operation-update-mdr43007>.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Watson, "Climate change is already fueling global migration. The world isn't ready to meet people's changing needs, experts say," PBS News Hour, July 28, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/climate-change-is-already-fueling-global-migration-the-world-isnt-ready-to-meet-peoples-needs-experts-say#:~:text=And%20scientists%20predict%20migration%20will.Change%20report%20published%20this%20year>.

climate change and its impact on global migration. As seen in Honduras, the climate crisis and the increase in natural disasters worsens conditions of poverty, violence, political tension, and lack of resources that countries struggled with prior to detrimental weather. While violence, poverty, or persecution may be the stated reason for immigration, many times, climate change and environmental distress is an underlying cause of seeking asylum or refugee status. “Most climate migrants move within the borders of their homelands, usually from rural areas to cities after losing their home or livelihood because of drought, rising seas, or another weather calamity. Because cities are also facing their own climate-related problems, including soaring temperatures and water scarcity, people are increasingly being forced to flee across international borders to seek refuge,” writes AP journalist Julie Watson. “Yet,” she adds, “climate migrants are not afforded refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention, which provides legal protection only to people fleeing persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or particular social group.”<sup>4</sup> There is currently no country that offers asylum status or other forms of legal protection specifically for immigration due to climate change, mainly because the magnitude of climate immigration is so challenging to pinpoint. On February 9, 2021, Executive Order 14103, signed by President Joe Biden, directed National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to research a report on the relationship between the climate crisis, displacement, and migration. This report is the first of its kind in the U.S. and will hopefully pave the way for a more expansive immigration policy.

### **Sacred Interconnectedness Beyond Borders**

When thinking about climate migration through an eco-womanist lens, we must begin at one of the core components of eco-womanism: environmental justice cannot be separated from

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<sup>4</sup> Julie Watson, Climate change is already fueling global migration. The world isn't ready to meet people's changing needs, experts say.”

nor is it at odds with the fight for racial justice. To expand this more explicitly one step further, environmental justice cannot be separated from immigration justice. To work for liberation from one form of marginalization and oppression means to work for liberation from *all* forms of marginalization and oppression. In her book *Sisters of Dust, Sister of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation*, Dr. Karen Baker-Fletcher makes it clear that “environmental abuse, racism, sexism, and classism are interlocking forms of oppression and evil.”<sup>5</sup> Our oppressions are interconnected because our very beings are interconnected. We live in what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” Even though thousands of miles and border walls separate us, my life as a seminarian living in San Francisco is connected to the Reyes family in Intibucá. Our humanity is woven together by the Divine. Our interconnectedness within our “web of mutuality” not only weaves together all human beings, but it also reminds us of our deep connection to Creation. Combating the climate crisis relies on recognition and understanding of interconnectedness. Work to address climate change has critical multi-racial, multi-national, multi-gender, and multi-generational impacts. We need to address climate change not only for our communities here in the U.S. but for communities in Honduras and across the globe. For generations of people to come after us.

Dr. Melanie Harris, professor, minister, and mother of eco-womanism, refers to the idea of “eco-memory” in her article “Sacred Blood, Transformation, and Eco-Womanism.” She writes, “Eco-memory refers to the collective and individual memory of the earth and speaks to our continuing relationship with the planet... [An example of eco-memory] is the knowledge of the natural environment gathered by Harriet Tubman and shared among those brave souls trying to escape north along the Underground Railroad. They got their northward directional bearings -

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<sup>5</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), location 650, Kindle edition.

their compass of hope - by the guiding light of the North Star, as well as by observing that tree moss grows on the northern side of trees. These earth maps continue to inspire many to stay ‘in the struggle until the end.’”<sup>6</sup> What eco-memories exist in the borderlands amidst desert dirt and beating sun? What eco-memories live in the foreign lands traveled by climate refugees despite their fear? What eco-memories live within the swollen riverbanks and mudslides that led to their escape? What eco-memories live within the lands now conquered by border walls and detention facilities? Exploring these eco-memories brings us back to interconnectedness. It encourages us to consider that we are all people of the land tethered by the life force of Spirit and Creation, which defies all means of separation.

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