

# Climate Brewing | Poetry and Story Telling At Intersection of Climate and Race | Ashia Ajani

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Dean Wight, Laurie Gordon, Ashia Ajani, Josh Mangelson

### **Josh Mangelson** 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

### **Dean Wight** 00:34

Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. I'm Dean Wight from Bellingham, Washington.

### **Laurie Gordon** 00:41

And I'm Laurie Gordon from Bend, Oregon and we are your hosts. We're members of the North American Climate Justice Team, sponsored by the Greater Pacific Northwest Mission Center of Community of Christ.

### **Dean Wight** 00:54

And in this series, "Climate Brewing," we are interviewing world-class scientists and other experts, who gave presentations as part of the Community of Christ, North American Climate Justice Team zoom series titled "All of Creation: From Crises to Transformation." And today, we're speaking with Ashia Ajani who led our webinar a year ago on today's topic, "Poetry and Storytelling at the Intersection of Climate and Race."

Ashia is a storyteller and environmental educator, born and raised in Denver, Colorado, unceded territory of the Arapaho, Cheyenne and Ute peoples. Writing as a queer Black femme, Ashia works to preserve, interrogate, and imagine how the Black diaspora has shaped and continues to shape, land stewardship in the Western Hemisphere. Ashia has been published in *Sierra Magazine*, *Atlas and Alice Magazine*, *The Journal*, *Sage Magazine*, *them.us*, and the *Hopper Literary Magazine*, among others. Ashia released the first chapbook, *We Bleed Like Mango*, in October of 2017. Their debut full-length poetry collection, *Heirloom*, will be published in spring 2023, with Right Bloody Publishing.

### **Laurie Gordon** 02:29

So Ashia, welcome! It's such an honor to be here together today. And here we are! As Dean mentioned, it's been almost a year since our original webinar, which was around Valentine's Day last year. And I just find that here it is, we're coming together to consider and reconsider our love for the Earth, and our imperfect hope of love with each other, and how that might shape a new world order. So I have to say that what struck me, and those of us who listened to you last year, was just how incredibly gracious and gentle you were with us during the webinar. You created such a tender space for those of us who gathered, you listened with such a grace to all that was offered. And so Dean and I are hoping that in this podcast, we can turn your example of patient, listening presence with us completely around ... making a gracious space for you to speak your personal response to the flow of ideas that you have helped structure and that you offered to us.

That said, reviewing this, the webinar and exploring your website and preparing for this conversation has been an adventure in creating more connections. It's raised a lot of questions for me. I think we can have a conversation for a very long time. But here we are at that intersection between social and environmental justice. And here we are to learn from you and, and as you share the wisdom of your life experiences so that we can open our eyes more deeply to the realities – and what all of this calls from all of us, as a response.

**Dean Wight 04:27**

So to start us off, I wanted to ask you about the words you use in describing your work. You are, as you say, working “to preserve, interrogate and imagine how the Black diaspora has shaped and continues to shape land stewardship in the Western Hemisphere.” Can you unpack that for us, particularly the intentionality behind choosing those words?

**Ashia Ajani 04:55**

Absolutely. First off, Laurie, Dean, thank you so much for having me. It's such a honor and a pleasure to return. Yeah, I chose those words, I think I'll go just kind of like word by word, what each of them, what each of them means to me.

So, “Preserve.” I put that first and foremost, because I think a lot of my work is looking at the legacy of forgetting in America. How easily, or how willingly I guess, we ostracize and deny a lot of our history because it is shameful, or it upsets us, or it makes us uncomfortable. And a lot of that history that has been especially sanitized, you know. Even thinking something as, like, innocuously learned throughout grade school, middle school, high school – I think, throughout the country everybody has some idea of who Martin Luther King Jr. was. But, oftentimes, you're presented a very sanitized version of who he was. Doesn't talk about, you know, his support of Socialism, those kinds of social movements; doesn't talk about, you know, his deep ingrained, like, Leftist sentiments; doesn't really talk, does a very like – and I'm going to probably keep repeating this word – a very sanitized portrayal of what non-violence *actually* meant to him. And so when we have that kind of dual forgetfulness and sanitation of history, that leads to kind of forgetfulness, or this kind of false remembering. Which is unfair, I think, contemporarily. But also to the people who were idolizing. It doesn't let us see them as complete human beings. And so the reason that I do “preserve” is because I want to get as authentic of a narrative as possible, which means going back into those archives.

But also, like, we are living history. I just sat down a couple months ago with my great aunt, and just simply asked her, like, “What was it like?” – most of my mom's side of the family is currently in Detroit. And I was asking her, “What was it like, living through like the Detroit riots?” And the information that she told me was just so much different than if you were to just do like a basic Wikipedia search of the Detroit riots. And I learned so much information, and then you just kind of sit and think, and you're like, oh, my gosh, like, you lived through that. You experienced that in real time. And that impacted you. And it impacts us, you know, because it titrates down. So “preserve,” because I think that, you know, I think that we have a big forgetting problem [*laughs*] in America, especially in our schools.

“Interrogate” I chose because I am a nosy person. I love to ask questions. I love to figure out different, you know, connections. I just, I just love to ask questions, and I want to know more. And I think, you know, I want to tap beyond that kind of like surface level. I think oftentimes, especially with Black history, when we're starting to learn more of it, the impulse is to focus solely on the positive and that kind of paints, again, it paints an incomplete picture.

So, just really think about the different ways in which Black folks operated as an oppressed group, but also kind of sometimes, occasionally, aligned their interests with the oppressors. I'm talking specifically about Buffalo Soldiers. That's a very complicated history, you know, of Indigenous removal using one oppressed group against another. And so I think “interrogating” is also like reckoning with some of the stuff that maybe we're not so proud of – or maybe we are proud of? I think actually, when you talk to a lot of people in the West, they're very proud of the Buffalo Soldiers. And so, you know, kind of navigating those tensions is really important as well.

I did preserve, interrogate, and the last one ... is “Imagine!” So again, looking at the future. So what can we learn from the past in order to inform our collective future? Or maybe even you know, like, it's not collective, maybe it's individual, maybe it's very regional, or place-based. Which, when we talk about some of my work with Mycelium Youth Network, we're going to be talking a lot about place-based and why that's super important. But I think imagination, like it's, it's very important. I don't think that that's a very radical thing to say – although maybe if you ask DeSantis that he would think that that's a very radical thing to say [*laughs*]. I think if you can cultivate imagination, especially during the climate crisis, like, that's super important. You have to be able to imagine something beyond what we are experiencing now. But I think in order to do that you have to understand history, and how we got to this place.

And find a way to not also like romanticize history. I think that there's like this very big impulse, especially, you know, as colonized people we romanticize sometimes. Not all the time, but sometimes we romanticize these pre-colonial societies in these notions. Which, I mean, I completely understand, because, wow! Like, if you look at Native Americans' and Indigenous Africans' like societal structure, you know, agriculture ... like really, really cool stuff! But I think you also have to recognize the fact that, like, we can learn from those societies while also recognizing, like, that that time doesn't exist anymore. And so how do you, kind of, contend with the fact that this is something that you are aching for, but also something that might not ever be returned to? And how can you imagine, like, sort of the connections? What things do you want to pull from those memories and that experience into present? To help better inform, you know, our collective climate future? So that's the reason that I chose those three words.

**Laurie Gordon** 11:33

Yeah. And that role of imagination, I hope, we can come back a little bit further down the road and ask you some questions about how you're imagining the future. But I wanted to also recognize that you're, you're teaching a class at Cal in Berkeley called "Introduction to 20th and 21st Century Black Environmental Literature." And I was fascinated by your syllabus. And one of the things that you asked of your students was to write a short essay on "how the climate crisis and your experience with and relationship to nature, or environmental history, has impacted you personally, your family, your people, your homeland, or your life?" And so I just wanted to say, what is your own climate narrative? How is nature grounded? Or, I don't want to be too leading ... What is your climate narrative? What is your story around your relationship with nature and the natural world?

**Ashia Ajani** 12:39

Oh, yeah, I think this is gonna sound a little bit like a cop-out. I'm gonna do, like, the actual story, the story that I tell people, and then I'm also going to kind of put an asterisk. I think it has definitely evolved over time. Um, especially because I'm someone that either because of school or because of jobs, I've had to move around a lot. And so I've also been thinking a lot about how migration impacts climate stories, a lot more recently than I would have in the past. But I also want to give a shout-out and give credit to professor and author Aya de Leon, who introduced to me this concept, this particular description of an environmental and a climate story. This is something, I mean, she mostly does young adult fiction. So, this is something that I learned from her. I think of her kind of like, as a mentor, she's really dope, definitely check her out, especially if you have young people in your life, who are really interested in very dynamic fiction. But so I got the idea from her, even though I've heard, like, different iterations of like, what is your climate story? And what is your environmental story? So thank you, Aya.

Thinking, like, kind of before that my own, I grew up in Denver, Colorado, my entire life. I do have familial ties to Mississippi and Detroit. And as I was doing, you know, kind of like more family research, and also just learning about history in general, thinking about, again, kind of coming back to migration, forced migration. A lot of that migration very much was environmentally influenced. I think when we think about the Great Migration, a lot of it was talking about opportunities, like in terms of economic opportunities.

I think that there are two environmental aspects to that. One, if you cannot own the land that you're working on, if you are forced to grow specific crops, that has an environmental impact, and that's what was happening a lot in the South – a lot of Black people were getting chased off of land if they did own it. The sharecropping system was basically kind of like slavery enduring in a lot of ways.

And then you have this booming industry in the North and that's where a lot of my family went, you know, to work in the factories, the motor factories. So you think that – and you are – you're gaining this sort of upward mobility. But again, talking to my great aunt, she had breast cancer. And she worked on the assembly line at Ford. And at the specific site that she was at, she said that almost everybody she knew got some form of cancer. If people treated and were in remission for that cancer, and they came back to work, it was it was like, two years before they got another diagnosis.

And so again, it's like, what are you sacrificing in order for that upward mobility? And that was like, a really painful choice that a lot of Black folks had to make during the Great Migration. And so I think that

that's something that very much influences my climate story – is understanding that history, and understanding, like, why my mom wanted to leave Detroit.

I've mixed feelings about that. And I love Denver, I really do. But every time you know, like, you know, it's like nice to grow up with like a big family and everything, you know, and have them around. But really, it is like, kind of just me and my mom, in Denver. Now I have like other family members, I have my dad, I had some family members in his side. But growing up in Denver – I think when people hear Denver, Colorado, especially if you are not from Colorado, especially if you are not from Denver – there's a very specific perception of Denver, like, you know, it's even if it's not Denver, but it's like, you know, Rocky Mountains, it's very, like, outdoor, it's very white. All the things which are very true, but there is a very, there was and I think that there still is in kind of a very different way, there were a lot of booming Black towns in Colorado, and Denver had, like, a Black district itself: Five Points.

And so my environmental story, again, thinking about migration, and specifically like thinking about land and land use, how people were constantly pushed out. And I feel like, even, I'm very lucky, in that my mom, I lived in the same home my entire, you know, childhood. I was very lucky in that regard. Because I know so many people who just could not afford to live in Denver anymore, and were constantly being pushed out because of gentrification, because of urban renewal.

And that's really how I kind of got into Environment and Climate work. Because thinking about like fragmentation of communities, that's just going to continue it – we're seeing it happen in real-time – but that's just going to continue happening as the climate crisis gets worse. And as climate change gets worse, especially as, like, land gets more expensive. I mean, we assign value to specific landscapes, you know, I mean, the whole thing with like beachfront property, you know, not so much in a landlocked state, but on the coast.

And so thinking about kind of like, more so from a kind of Community Preservation, again, that word coming back up, like that Community Preservation lens, what is being lost, and what can kind of like, be preserved. And I think memory is like a very important aspect of that.

But I also wanted to move beyond memory, like, at some point, memory isn't enough, and you need like, physical, you know, like markers, of, you know, of community, of support, and of resilience. And so that's kind of like where I was thinking about my climate story very much in terms of like, migration memory. And also upsetting the idea that Denver is like this very white city – it is – but I mean, like, one of my friends was like – she's Black – she's like, “Oh, I'm doing like this thing with Outdoor Afro, and we're going to Denver, and I don't like know any places to go”. And I was like, “Listen, I got you” and she's just like, “I did not - after I took this tour that Ashia helped me figure it out - I did not realize like how Black Denver, like Denver was, and Denver is” and I was like, “That's what I'm here for,” you know? So just being able to also, you know, show people other, you know, other narratives as well.

**Laurie Gordon** 18:59

Well, you're giving witness to another phrase that stood out in your syllabus about the “layered experiences of personal, political, social, and ecological elements that make up a marginalized life,” that make up a life-story in relationship to all of these issues. So thank you.

**Dean Wight 19:25**

So your web page, Ashia, says that you are “an environmental justice educator with the Mycelium Youth Network. Ashia believes in the power of participatory action research, and cultural organizing in order to adapt to and mitigate the ongoing climate crisis. Ashia believes in the transformative power and imaginations of Black & Brown youth to shape our ecological futures.” So tell us about your work with the Mycelium Youth Network, and I love that name – and maybe you can go into that a little bit too.

**Ashia Ajani 20:03**

Yeah. Um, so, I started working with Mycelium Youth Network in January 2021. I was still finishing up my Master's program and, at first, I started as a part time educator. And this was like when we were still doing online school. So it felt very kind of, like, funny to be doing, like, environmental and ecological education, all on Zoom. But we made it work! And it was super fun. And, you know, very much, like, student-informed and student-led.

And the reason that I wanted to join Mycelium Youth Network was because I was getting very – I've worked at other nonprofits before – and I think I was getting like, honestly, very disillusioned, with a lot of their approach to environmental issues. Because it felt very, it felt very limiting. And it felt very much kind of, like, reactionary. And I think, also, didn't do enough due diligence to understand, like, the specific issues in the communities that they were working in.

And so Mycelium Youth Network, built in Oakland, made in Oakland, by people who are from Oakland, or who have been in Oakland for a really long time and understand ... Oakland youth, like, they're really dope, like, they're very politically involved, like they're very politically aware, especially when it comes to issues of climate, and especially when it comes to issues of environment. And it felt just kind of like a natural move to talk to students, like, what are you most concerned about? And how is it affecting your community specifically?

So, for example, um, the wildfires that happened in 2020, where the sky turned orange, like, everybody remembers that. And even though, you know, like, these are students who have, like, grown up – and, you know, every region has their, you know, their own, like natural disasters and environmental concerns – these are students that are just like very accustomed, oh, there's wildfire season. Like, that – that's just something that happens. It happens in California, you know. But you're seeing it get increasingly worse and worse and worse.

And so it's also that sort of the justice lens, that layered experience. Do you have the means to evacuate if the fires get really close? Do you have the insurance in case something, like, happens to your family, or if something happens to your home? I can't remember the exact percentage, but a good majority of students that I work with, someone in their family, or they, have asthma, or some kind of, like, respiratory problem that's oftentimes, you know, unevenly distributed by race and class. How is that going to impact, you know, your ability to withstand a wildfire? How is it impacting your breathing? How is it impacting your health?

So, you know, finding ways to make these connections with youth. Then we can kind of move from okay, we understand how this is happening. How can we move into solutions? And how can we

specifically move into resilience? I think that a lot of what I was lacking in other organizations was, like, the resilience aspect.

Not to be you know, like, cynical, but, like, I think a lot of people on the ground are kind of like, "Government ain't going to do anything." Like, you know, we saw how Katrina, you know, like, responded ... like, we see those, you know, those uneven responses, depending on where you are. And if you live in, like, [inaudible], nobody's really gonna care. Like, after we had a bunch of rains – when I tell you, the roads are tore up! And they've still been tore up. But, like, no, no moves have been done to, like, repair the roads. And so you have like ... I thought the potholes in Detroit were bad, but once you get like ... nobody's coming to fix that.

So! We're thinking about, you know, kind of like community organizing on a grassroots level, very much influenced and directed by youth, which is where that youth participatory action research aspect comes in. So while we might, you know, collaborate with scientists, we might collaborate with academics, we're also very much focusing on what youth want to address – and having them direct and lead the research themselves. Because oftentimes, what happens is that, like, when we're doing like these kinds of participatory action research ... Youth get taken advantage of a lot, especially when it comes to like scientific contributions. And when it comes to, you know, like intellectual property. So what we want to do is we want to make sure that, like, youth know, and are recognized, for their achievements and their implementations in their community – through that guidance, and through that support, and through that help. So ..

I really love my job. I love the aspect of, like, doing that research. But I also, again, with like the imagination aspect and cultivating wonder, I just love being able to, like, take students out on hikes, for us to really do like foraging tours, for us to do kind of like observational walks around the lake, to do this thing called eco-mapping, where we talk about environmental vulnerabilities and, you know, environmental assets in our communities. Like that's super cool.

And for it to be very much place-based. Because I think sometimes we get really bogged down in, like, the global – which is really important, you got to keep that lens in mind, and that's something that we also talk about – but to think really specifically, like, "Okay, if you live on, let's say, like – have you been to San Francisco before, you know, it's really hilly? [*Laurie: Yeah*] So if you live, like, at the end of the hill – and again, we're not used to flooding, but you know, sea level rise is an increasing problem – flooding is happening. Like, how is your region specifically going to be affected by sea level rise? How is it going to be impacted by flooding? What building infrastructure is needed? What, like, community assets are needed in order for people to recover?

I strongly believe that, like, you know, at a certain level, you can't help from certain natural disasters happening – you know, that's why you call them natural disasters – like hurricanes gonna happen. In certain areas, tornadoes are gonna happen, in certain areas wildfires, they're gonna happen! They're not supposed to happen at the scale that they're happening, but they are going to happen. Um, how do you recover?

Recovery is like, I think the thing that oftentimes gets neglected in the conversation. Because – again, I keep using this as an example, because it's just unfortunately, like, really like, a prime example of this –

I mean, New Orleans. New Orleans really isn't the same after Katrina. And a lot of that had to do with recovery. A lot of that had to do with private companies coming in buying up land, you know, pushing people out. It had to do with a lot of people losing their homes, you know, a lot of people dying, a lot of that cultural memory getting erased. And so how, how are we thinking about that? And also thinking about, you know, like uneven impacts of climate, all within kind of like a classroom setting?

**Dean Wight 27:19**

That's interesting. I was just in New Orleans. And, you know, I've been there, obviously, before Katrina, and a friend of mine said, "Look, when you're there go and look at, look for this particular, you know, cafe in this place just to the east of the French Quarter," and "that was my favorite place to be," and so on. And so we went and looked! And it is a structure that is still under repair all these years later. And I think it opens episodically. But that, and, as you say, the potholes and the, the infrastructure that has not been restored is very apparent.

**Laurie Gordon 28:02**

Well, on the way in which we, when things get broken down, we can't go back to the way things were. So what we can do, I'm really drawn ... you know, Terry Tempest Williams wrote that book on *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, in which she used that word "mosaic" to say we can't put the fragments back together to recreate what we had, but we can put them together to create something new and very beautiful out of the fragments. You know, re-, re-weaving the world, re-creating that world. But with a desire to restore the relationships that are, that are, right.

I was struck by your, um, "Nurturing the Next Generation" essay, which I think is about your work with the Mycelium Youth Network? And in which you said "45% of youth aged 16 to 25 say that their feelings about climate change impact their everyday daily lives." And I was also struck by the story you told about coming to this place where you were teaching when we were under COVID lockdown. You were teaching online, and you had just a series of tiles on the screen. And you started talking about the difference between dirt and soil. And you said "Dirt is displaced soil. It's not alive. You can't plant a productive garden. But soil is alive, brimming with micro-organisms and nutrients giving way to life." And, and you said then a couple of your high schoolers turn their cameras on going, "Really? Is that right?"

Just that moment of that story in your essay really speaks to me that power of storytelling, that is what your life is so dedicated to ... um, the difference between dirt and soil. And, then, how your observation, later, that there's a lot going on in the soil underneath that we can't see, that is bubbling and perking along.

I think the other piece I wanted to ask you, just real quickly, about with your work with the Mycelium Youth Network is: I think in some place I read that you do Traditional Ecological Knowledge, which to me is a place of deep wisdom that needs, that, that you're tapping, and I just ...?

**Ashia Ajani 30:39**

Uh huh. Yeah, so, I think that my relationship to TEK – Traditional Ecological Knowledge – very much was facilitated through Mycelium Youth Network, because we are a Black and Indigenous and Latine-run organization, primarily. I would say that, like, my relationship to TEK is very much through a kind of like, Black insurgent lens. And I want to, like, differentiate that from some Native American forms of



TEK, because I think sometimes they get, like, appropriated and get used in a very ... disrespectful way, honestly, that doesn't give props and credit to, you know, the people who are, who are most knowledgeable about that. So, just wanted to say that.

And then also ... I love, I love science. I love discovery, I love, like, you know, exploration. I love experiments. I love, like, collecting with students. But I also recognize that sometimes some of these like scientific, especially Western science, some of these Western scientific frameworks are very limiting. And so one of the reasons that we do TEK is to expand and open students' eyes to the ways in which their ancestors – and their contemporaries – are envisioning and imagining research. You know, not extractivist means of ... collecting samples and materials. Like the power of observation, things like that. And so my background is very much in thinking about what are different ways, especially out West – what are different ways, because, again, because it's so place-based – what are ways that Black migrants, whether they came as slave folks, whether they came as maroons, cowboys, farmers, indentured servants, even incarcerated, you know, persons – what are different ways that they learned how to work with their environment?

Did I answer the question? I just I wanted to make sure ...

**Laurie Gordon** 32:56

Yeah! Yes you did! And sort of threading through the essays I know that Dean had, I think you had some questions on one of your other articles on the “Jungle in the Garden”? And that ... I'll let, I'll let Dean ask his question, but.

**Dean Wight** 33:11

But before I get to that one, you mentioned incarceration and, and one of your articles really focuses on that sort of connection between what damage has been done to our climate and our environment, and, and its relationship to the [inaudible], the manner in which we approach and bear excessive incarceration. And you talk about an example of someone who, within the prison system, took on a coal-fired plant being proposed nearby. And I just found that to be a striking example of, you know, that relationship between two very significant impacts of colonial history and the way we do things together. I don't know if you want to comment more on that, but it was just interesting to me.

**Ashia Ajani** 34:14

Yeah, so that particular example... So I this is, this is an article that I wrote when I was at Yale School of the Environment; I was writing for *Yale Environment Review*. And what we do is, the purpose of it is, to take scientific articles and kind of just like break them down a little bit more, so that people who might not have that background can access and understand and interpret that information. And so this was based off of an article written by David Pellow. Who has an amazing book called, like, *What is Critical Environmental Justice*, that I highly recommend that everybody read. Definitely a little bit more of a difficult read but, again, this is why I always encourage like book clubs, collective reading, you know, like we help each other understand things.

But he was specifically talking about how ... It's almost kind of like, you know, what came first, chicken-or-the egg? High rates of policing and Black communities or high rates of environmental harm? And oftentimes these two things, like, feed into each other – particularly as it relates to incarcerated people.

Oftentimes, with incarcerated people, there is, you know, EPA has an EJ committee, they have a section, a lot of incarcerated people don't get that representation. They can't report, like, EJ violations, in the facilities that they're being held in. And they can, in some facilities, they can report OSHA violations because, technically, they are workers. Which is why cross-collaboration between incarcerated individuals and non-incarcerated individuals is so important. Because the way that this person who was incarcerated was able to get enough attention was, again, organizing within the facility, and then also connecting with people who are outside.

So as soon as you know, like, people start to get word, and they're like, "Oh, wait, I live in close proximity to this, too. Like ... this is also impacting my health." Finding those connections are super, super important, especially for people who might not have as much social capital, and ability to and, honestly, just honestly, the ability to complain. Like, I think there's this idea that if you're incarcerated, like, you deserve everything that happens to you while you're incarcerated. And it's like a form of ... social abandonment, which is really gross. And also ... let's say that incarceration happens because it's supposed to, like, rehab people. To me, that defeats the purpose if you're just making people even sicker.

So I think that that article is really important, because I think it opens our eyes to how environmental harm is also a form of criminalization. It's basically saying, like, "Oh, like this is happening, because you deserve it."

Which is like really messed up. So ...

**Dean Wight 37:10**

Laurie, Laurie mentioned, the other article, which I found very affecting: "Where the Jungle and the Garden Meet," in which you explore, as the journal said, "how colonization cultivated a world that prefers the garden to the jungle. It's time to restore the jungle." And, um, I don't know if you can do it justice in the conversation, it's so dense with information and meaning, but can you try?

**Ashia Ajani 37:41**

Yeah, absolutely. So I hear this metaphor invoked a lot. And, like, this is such a layered ... Because again, we are history enduring, we're living history, right? So there's so much history, and so much ideology behind this separation. I think the best way to start is just kind of thinking ... back to the Age of Enlightenment where, even though there's, like, this move away from ... I don't wanna say medieval, but a form of Christianity that's, like, very uninterested in discovering. I think sometimes we learn a little inaccurately about this transition in high school (if you go over it in high school) where Enlightenment was kind of like – oh, my God – this rejection of Christianity. No! It was just kind of, like, a different form of it. It was basically taking – oh, there's evidence in the Bible – I think it's a story like Cain ... no, no, not Cain ... the guy who, he's dark skinned. And the reason that he's dark skinned is because he's being punished.

Dean [inaudible]

I'm a little rusty [*laughs*], but basically using this justification of colonizing and civilizing groups of people. And, in doing so, there's this association with darkness, or undesirable populations as wild, as uninhabitable, as ... Even like, like that, that book *Heart of Darkness* is a good example of this. You know, this is an untamable landscape, but actually needs to be tamed in order for it to be productive, in order for the people to be civilized in it, in order for, you know, like, again, pick up the white man's burden and we're gonna like civilize all these people.

Come to find out [*laughs*] now, you know, upon reflection, that when this happens, it actually destroys biodiversity. It impacts land use. And, you know, it's basically a form of cultural genocide. I think we think about, you know, land and people as interwoven, interacting. I mean, like, what you do to people, is what you do to land and vice versa. So, basically taking this jungle, trying to whittle it down to this garden – which is not to say ... like, indigenous folks globally [did have] various forms of gardens, you know, various forms of cultivars – but we're specifically kind of thinking about the garden as this like, very manicured ... very like these are the plots, very privatized form of gardening that is prioritized. And then anything outside of that is, like, uncivilized.

And so oftentimes, this rhetoric and this ideology gets perpetuated in the way that we think about people in the Global South. Particularly as a lot of people in the Global South – and also, you know, like communities, disenfranchised communities in the Global North – the reason that these places are having such horrible climate impacts is because they are “uncivilized.” They don't know how to recover, they don't know how to cultivate the land, like ... And then, again, it's, like this kind of self-perpetuating idea that you're just doomed from [inaudible]. Which is very racist, and very classist, and very xenophobic.

And then, you know, especially as we already see a lot more climate refugees coming to places in the Global North – and maybe not so much America, although I will say I think, even though the concept of a climate refugee is relatively recent, if you look at a lot of the reasons that people are migrating, I would argue that it is as much political and social as it is environmental, as well. Especially in places like Central America, people from Sub-Saharan Africa who are moving up to, or getting stuck, you know, at the Moroccan border, but trying to like move into Europe. And especially people in Polynesian islands ... whose islands might, you know, might be underwater in our, in our lifetime.

And then there's like this idea, oh, well, they're going to bring all of their problems to our lands, so we got to keep them out. And so it really, it's just, it's a form of assault, social ostracization, it's a form of violence. It's a form of, like, rewriting history. And it's a form of, like, not recognizing that the reason that people are having all of these problems is because of colonization. It's not because, you know, Europe or America is somehow so much better, and so much more resilient, and so much more able to, like, recover. It's because of these perpetuating harms.

**Laurie Gordon** 43:03

But one of my questions was going to be, what was, to ask you to name the common roots of systemic racism and the climate crisis, but I think you just did a good job of doing that.

You know, the co-opting of a religious impulse in really destructive ways the, the ways in which we think it's okay to extract and manipulate and use human bodies; the way in which we think it's okay to extract

and manipulate and use the climate; or to use the earth and the climate that comes from that common impulse of just treating the other as an object, as a thing instead of as a precious being in and of its own right - we heard recently, Katharine Hayhoe who speaks a lot about climate change, say, climate change is nothing less than, let me try this again - maybe Dean can help me with it - **climate change is nothing less than the failure to love**. Nothing less than the failure to love and the ways in which that colonial enterprise has created this massive tangle. I mean, just our systems are so tangled up, all of these different forms of social injustice and environmental injustice.

And I feel like what you're trying to do and the imperative of our times is trying to untangle this massive entanglement so that we can start reweaving connections and restoring our relationships with the land and with each other in ways that allow for the flourishing of life for all. Your naming that that desire to keep everything close and sterile and insular and instead of open and wild and biologically diverse and therefore able to thrive.

So that Dean and I both, Dean - Dean texted me and said, "You've got to read this read, make sure you read this one essay", that it speaks to that place where all of us are wrestling to, to untangle the, this massive enmeshment and try to, to free each other towards a completely different way of living, changing our life way so. Your work really speaks to that, to that peace and so much, and you had talked too, about envisioning freedom then as a place during the webinar. And that envisioning, you actually asked us to, to start envisioning.

But one of the things I wanted to notice was your slide you put up - not everyone has the same encounters with nature and cutting humans off from nature is a colonial enterprise. It prioritizes productivity and extraction of labor over reciprocity, that beautiful reciprocity. When I first heard you, you know, Robin Wall Kimmerer's, and other people, are just really taking that reciprocity as an antidote to the way our systems are so broken.

So and then you are and you also talked about climate, you know, reparations, and asked us to spend five minutes envisioning reparations. I think you've been touching on this, but I am wondering about just giving you the space to share your vision of what climate and racial reparations would look like, and to share a vision of the world that that you're working with such passion, with the hope that it can be brought into being.

#### Ashia Ajani 47:19

Well, ah, it's something that I think about like daily and on. Let's say, like, I think about like, so I have a, I have a newsletter. And after like the atmospheric storms, it was like kind of wild because like I was, I have to drive into work because public infrastructure in Bay Area is - we have Bart we have buses, it's kind of lacking. Like, it's like wild that like, from where I live the school that I teach at in SF is about nine miles. If I drive, it takes me like 20 minutes. If the traffic isn't bad, it took me about 20-25 minutes to get in. If I take Bart, I take three buses, and it takes me like an hour or five minutes to get in. So I'm driving because I'm perpetually running late - and something I gotta work on - but I am always running late.

And this is during like the rainstorms and I see the worst traffic that I've been in, I think, possibly because, you know, people are trying to drive a little safer, because it's like, there's a lot of rain and wind out. But I look up. And it says like something - I don't remember exactly what - it says it's like

“Weather conditions bad. Please avoid travel”. This is on the Wednesday! . . . like, you know, when people have work like, you know, to like pick up their kids, and nobody at these workplaces., and none of the schools are being closed. Like none of you know, nobody's saying like, don't come into work. Like everybody who's like is like, you know, who's heading in is heading into work.

And so I'm thinking like, wow, wow, we have lost our way. Like, like real bad. Like, you were asking people to come in during like a storm. And, I mean, like, [inaudible] people lost power; property got damaged; cars got damaged; people, people died, you know, and it's still like, avoid travel. But you know, like, if your boss says you got to come in, you got to come in.

So when I think about stuff like that, I'm just like sitting in my car, and I'm thinking like, wow, how awesome would it be to have completely electrified public transit? How awesome would it be if we just slow down? I don't know. Like, if y'all are familiar with like, kind of just like the degrowth movement, but just like thinking about like, why are we working so much all the time? I'm very lucky. And I'm very blessed that I only work, like, a four-day work week. That's not standard at a lot of places. In fact, people are oftentimes not getting paid for overtime. I think about the dissolution of a lot of these, I think really big, I think about the dissolution of a lot of these systems that we've come to accept as normal that really are in, in very many ways unnatural.

And I think about, I would love to see the halt of fossil fuel use in my lifetime. That's a very, I think, honestly, even when I'm working with my students, sometimes I'm like, yes, it's great that I can show you how to build your own air filter like [inaudible] air filter; it's great that I can show you how to protect yourself against indoor air pollution; it's great that I can show you about how like the coast has changed over the past few years, and how we can build resilience to that. I honestly in my heart of hearts believe that halting fossil fuel use, like, that's the biggest thing that needs to happen for any, like, really major change.

And I think that that's something that's difficult for people to envision, again, where that imagination aspect comes in, because we have maintain a very specific status quo and in such a heavy reliance on fossil fuels. And I guess even to that point, like, scientists [have said], that we could switch over to renewables, completely renewables, at any given time. I will push it a step further, like, do we need to maintain this level of productivity? Even if we can with renewables? Do we really need to?

So yeah, that's my biggest thing, my biggest thing is just, god, just get rid of fossil fuels. And that impacts so many other industries, too. As someone who, like, I love clothes, I love to shop – like, retail therapy is my favorite. But I'm also very acutely aware about how many fabrics are made from petroleum products, you know, how cheap clothes are, how many clothes end up in landfills. I think about you know, how much plastic we have in grocery stores, all of that petroleum, you know. So that's why I think that, like, holding our fossil fuel use like that, that's a really important major change, because it touches like really all aspects of society.

### **Dean Wight 52:08**

In our webinars - and the ones we're planning for the future - you know, we have really come up against this notion that while we spent a lot of time talking about how individual behavior of folks in our audience might change, what they might do individually, the realization that that's some someone said,

maybe only 25%, of what really needs to be done and the other 75% is changes that are systematic, and that, in fact, will help people then adjust their own behavior because of how systems adjust what they produce and, and how we operate within our communities and so on. And so I think the notion of fossil fuels, particularly has risen to the surface for us, as well. I noticed that we're coming up on about an hour's time. Laurie, I want to give you one more opportunity to get in a question that you may have. And then I want to close with a question about, about hope.

**Laurie Gordon 53:22**

So here's the thing that we haven't mentioned about Ashia is that she's a phenomenal poet. And just to remind you, her book, *Heirloom*, is going to be published this spring, so keeping an eye out for that. One of the things that you said, when you brought the webinar to our climate participants, was a section you had to kind of quickly skip over. But I want to come back and ask you to say more about poetry as a witness. I mean, you've been talking about, we talk about these systemic changes that require also a change of heart, that intuition to slow down and be, to rethink what makes life vibrant, and alive. So my last question is, could you say more about poetry as a witness, and wondering if you want to share a poem or a part of a poem, as witness that speaks to so much of what you have been sharing with us today? Or just whatever you want to share about poetry?

**Ashia Ajani 54:33**

Yeah, I think I'll combine actually the last two questions - the one about poetry and about hope, because poetry kind of gives me hope. Which is funny because so much of my poetry, I think poetry also, you know, it's like, it's like an emotional dump for me in some ways, because a lot of my poetry deals with waste and loss and grief. But in that, you know, is also an ability to, like, to provide myself space to mourn, and to think, you know, like, more seriously about the things that I do desire for the future.

And so I have a poem called "Lifecycle", which is just kind of like just thinking about, like, waste and, just how, how interconnected we are, oftentimes by our waste [laughs], and by our trash. And so I have a piece or a little section that I'll read here.

**[NOTE: Proper formatting of this poem was not known at the time of transcription]**

America is a landfill,  
underwater bloodline brined, it soured  
My neighbor pours the leftover liquid from a pot of greens into his garden  
Billowing green stink arises stains room for ripening

Black folks despise waste.

As well, I'm thinking a lot about you know, how oftentimes, especially during, like, heavy redlining periods, Black neighborhoods were, were designated landfills. But even in spite of that, like we took our own waste - or our own, you know, like what would be trash - and recycled it back into the earth, like, in gardens, especially. If you have leftover water that you've boiled for vegetables, if you let it cool down first, and then you put it back into your garden, you're actually putting nutrients back into your soil. And so you're rehabbing the soil as well, and you're also you know, like, impacts your crops.

And then also like thinking, you know, culturally to about how I remember, like, when I would like, I was a picky eater when I was a kid. And I remember when I would sit with my grandma, arms crossed, and she was just like, she was like, we don't waste food. And, you know, like, so you, you might not have it for lunch, but you might have it for dinner, you might have it for breakfast the next day [laughs].

And that was just kind of like a lesson in sustainability. It really was, it was I mean, it was a lesson and also, you know, from her background, growing up very impoverished, and not wasting food. But you know, that relationship, I think is really important. The way that we think about, you know, waste and what is discarded. What is discarded, doesn't really get discarded a lot of the time, sometimes it just sits there in perpetuity.

So I think sometimes too, about like, hope is going to - stay with me - I think sometimes too, about hope as like a landfill, like, what are you accumulating? What kind of experiences are you accumulating? What is, like, going to stick? What is going to, like, persist? And when you think about, you know, like what is going to persist, what is going to continue to be - I think then you find really cool ways of disrupting that paradigm.

**Laurie Gordon** 58:06

And fertilizing the next generation.

**Ashia Ajani** 58:10

Exactly nurturing the next generation.

**Dean Wight** 58:13

I want to stay on this question of hope for a minute, because there's so much about our growing climate crisis that can induce despair. And particularly from the vantage point of those that are most affected by its consequences. That, you know, we've taken on as our North American climate justice team's mission to promote action, by those least affected, but most responsible for climate crisis. But we often feel discouraged as well. And you had mentioned the other day when we chatted that, a lot of what gives you hope is your work with youth in the Youth Network. Can you talk a bit more about that?

**Ashia Ajani** 58:58

Yeah, I mean, I think that, thinking about that percentage that was mentioned earlier, like, you know, 45% of us, like, think that climate change impacts their everyday life. We still out here living though, you know, and that's beautiful. And that's awesome. We're still making memories, we're still like, you know, reaching cultural hurdles. Like we're still inventing culture, you know, we're still making music, we're still making art. And that's an important part of like memory keeping, you know, like our archive.

And there's like a, it's a Black proverb that I like, you know, I heard it in my family first, but "all I got to do was stay Black and die", you know, and I think about that, not as like, even nihilistic but like, yeah, like you know, I got me; I got my skin; I got this heritage; I got this, like, I got this power and tapping into that is super important.

And I see youth tapping into that too. I see them you know, building ways of new, new ways of relating to each other. I see them disrupting a lot of the things that we consider normal. Even though sometimes

it gets on my nerves, like, in class, like, sometimes students just, like, they'll just like be chillin, you know, like, and like they're disrupting this idea that you have to be kind of like, you know, like focused, sitting in a classroom, like, you know, for eight hours a day. When we go to the garden, like just watching their eyes light up, you know, and just being able to, like, you know, that's what school should be, it should be, you know, like a place of, like, inquiry and discovery. And they're demanding that and that's, that's really awesome. And it gives me hope. And you know, I think also, it helps that when you're outside, oftentimes, you see the sun, and yeah, the power of sunlight on your mood is just, it's wild [laughs].

**Dean Wight** 1:00:46

And on that note, Ashia, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today and to share all of the things you've shared with us. There's so much to learn from you.

**Ashia Ajani** 1:01:01

Oh, thank you. And likewise,

**Dean Wight** 1:01:03

Thank you. For our audience, I would just encourage you as an audience to dive deeper into Ashia's work, which you can find on their website. And that website, all lowercase, is: ashiaajani.com.

**Laurie Gordon** 1:01:21

a-s-h-i-a-a-j-a-n-i

**Dean Wight** 1:01:27

All right. Thank you so much.

**Ashia Ajani** 1:01:29

Thank you.

**Josh Mangelson** 1:01:38

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