

Amara Ifeji works at the intersection of climate and racial justice

## **The Nigerian-born activist grew up in Maine playing with the dirt—and experiencing environmental racism.**

by [Khristi Lauren Adams](#) in the [March 23, 2022](#) issue



Climate activist Amara Ifeji (Photo by Phoebe Parker)

As a child in Maine, Amarachukwu Ifeji loved to play outdoors. “I started off exploring in the dirt, and up until 18 years old, I was still playing in the dirt,” Amara laughs. “I think that pretty much holds for all environmental stewards or climate justice activists—that call or connection to place,” she tells me. Amara has made a significant impact on her home state as a climate and racial justice activist. “Now that I have grown, I have come to understand that my place is here. That’s where God has called me to,” she says. “I want to make the state I love a better place to live, work, and raise a family in.”

Amara spent most of her adolescence wanting to leave Maine. The state’s population is almost 95 percent White and just 2 percent Black. In a video for

Connecticut Public Radio, Amara speaks of her experience as a young Black woman growing up in Maine. “In Maine there are many sundown towns, where I just really cannot be found after a certain time,” she says, using a term that refers to all-White communities that discriminate against Black people, intimidate them, and discourage their presence after dark. “Those are the kinds of things that my mother was fearful of—people who harbored hate for people who look like me.”

Amara was born in Nigeria in 2001. Her family moved to the United States in 2004, first living in Maryland and later moving to Maine. Her parents experienced professional and educational setbacks in their new home country. Though Amara’s father worked as a lawyer in Nigeria, in the United States he had to attend school again, because his education and experience did not afford him the same opportunities here as they had there. Similarly, while Amara’s mother received two degrees in Nigeria, many of the credits she had earned did not transfer when the family uprooted and moved to the United States.

Two weeks after nine-year-old Amara moved to Maine, she played a game on the playground and won. At first she was elated, but that excitement faded when a White boy bitterly called her a “ni\*\*er monkey.”

“I didn’t even know how to act,” she recalls painfully. “I think I just ran away. I think I was embarrassed. I was so angry. I think that I . . .” Amara pauses, struggling to find the words. “I wasn’t embarrassed about what that kid said. I was embarrassed because I was Black. I was embarrassed because I was only one of a few Black kids at my 400-plus elementary school. That started a cycle of me struggling to come to terms with the fact that I am something that is very apparent—being Black.”

As she grew older and continued to experience incidents of racism, Amara found herself in unhealthy cycles of self-hatred. She started straightening her hair and finding ways to try to lighten her skin and slenderize her nose. She is aware now of how her self-hatred was connected to the hatred that had clearly been instilled in the boy on the playground. “In hindsight, it makes me sad that a nine-year-old grew up in an environment where they knew the weight of that word and what it could have against me,” she says.

As Amara moved through the school system, she continued to observe inequity and discrimination in various forms. An article in the *Bangor Daily News* reported on the hostile and racist educational climate Amara and other Black students faced at their

high school: constantly hearing the N-word from their peers, seeing the Confederate battle flag on display, and receiving offensive comments and jokes. That contentious environment took a toll on Amara's mental health: "I was tired of walking through the halls and hearing the N-word. No form of punishment, no form of discipline. It made me feel extremely undervalued as a student."

Throughout her high school career, Amara actively worked to create change by leading racial advocacy efforts, efforts which eventually led to policy change at her school. She spoke openly about her experiences before the city council and the school board. She organized a diversity and inclusion panel discussion at her high school. She launched the Multicultural Student Union, a group that gives non-White students a space to convene once a week to discuss their lived experiences and issues they face at school.

Amara's identity as a Black individual living in Maine intersects with her passion for racial justice advocacy. Meanwhile, her environmental interests are inextricably linked to her experience of growing up in Maine, a state full of vast forests, wetlands, mountains, and other natural landscapes. Amara didn't receive much formal environmental education in school beyond the basics about ecosystems and the outdoor Maine landscape. As a result, she sought out opportunities to learn on her own. In high school, she attended an event with the Maine Environmental Changemakers Network that shifted her perspective from a science-based one to a social one. She learned about the disproportionate impact environmental exploitation has on marginalized communities. An intersection was forming, this one between her two passions of environmental activism and racial justice.

"I had my environmental action, and I had my racial justice work, but I kind of put them in two different boxes," Amara says. She became aware that these issues intersected not only with each other but with her upbringing. "I recognized things in my past in terms of socioeconomic status. That was a barrier to access that I had in terms of fostering a connection to the environment."

Amara tells me about not being able to afford winter boots or snow pants, which meant she couldn't connect with her environment during the cold months. She recalls missing out on environmental outings because of expenses her family could not afford. She says the stigmas around Black people skiing or camping influenced her decision not to engage in either activity. And she mentions one significant barrier in particular: "My mother was very apprehensive of me going outside," she

says, “especially at nighttime, because I am a Black individual and there is a stigma in the Black community around being outside, especially at night.”

The reality that many Black young people are afraid to walk outdoors in the evening is an intersectional environmental issue. The 2012 killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was shot while walking through a neighborhood on the way back from a convenience store, underscored this fear. Deemed suspicious by another man in the community, Martin was guilty of nothing more than being Black and walking with his hood up in the evening.

“If I did not recognize that there was a link between social justice and environmental issues, I don’t really think that I would be in this work,” Amara says. “These aren’t two different things that I am working toward making better. They are one.” This two-pronged issue is known as environmental racism. Large segments of the population are disproportionately affected by environmental barriers. Yet the world of environmental activism is “extremely White,” Amara points out. “And those who are typically affected by things like natural disasters and environmental phenomena are BIPOC individuals. One in three African American individuals live within 30 miles of a coal plant. That is called environmental racism if I ever did hear it.”

The environmental racism Amara has seen around her has motivated her to commit to the work of environmental equity. According to MobilizeGreen, a nonprofit organization focused on jump-starting green careers for diverse students, “environmental equity describes a country, or world, in which no single group or community faces disadvantages in dealing with environmental hazards, disasters, or pollution.”

Eventually, Amara evolved from a young woman merely interested in environmental issues to a climate justice activist. “I attended some climate strikes, other environmental protests as well,” she says. “I became more active in facilitation at different conferences. That’s when I started investing more time into gaining more knowledge.”

Amara was involved in the Bangor High School STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) program for much of her school career. There she engaged issues like water quality and heavy-metal pollution. She participated in an independent research project that focused on the Flint, Michigan, water crisis and efforts to resolve heavy-metal contamination in drinking water.

Later she became president of the Stormwater Management and Research Team, a youth-led water-quality management team that provides female students with opportunities to explore environmental STEM work. There she worked weekly for almost a year to sample the Penobscot River in order to ensure that the water was safe for recreational use. One of her most notable accomplishments was securing funding for the organization to provide programming for girls who are underrepresented in STEM subjects, especially girls of color and girls who are socioeconomically marginalized.

Through this program, Amara led students through field sampling, toured stormwater treatment facilities, and exposed them to pressing environmental issues. During the school year, she facilitated weekly meetings and personally mentored each member on a water-quality research project. The institute was a success, and a group of girls from the program received awards at the Maine State Science Fair for the research they did on water quality.

Amara is now a grassroots development coordinator with the Maine Environmental Changemakers Network, which describes itself as “a youth-led intergenerational network that connects young Mainers . . . from diverse backgrounds who are passionate about the environment with peer mentors, and established professional mentors, in the sector.” Through this position, Amara continues to advocate for intersectional climate justice solutions through various programs and initiatives.

Land has historically been an important part of Black people’s identity and spirituality. Our African ancestors believed that land was a gift from God. Because of this, they took great pride in the land and saw themselves as stewards of God’s resources. But slavery forced our ancestors to work the American soil and build the infrastructure of this nation through sweat and blood with no reward. Heber Brown, the founder and director of the Black Church Food Security Network, has said in these pages that “the African American community has suffered so much from disconnection to the land” ([“Black churches tackle food insecurity,” Nov. 18, 2020](#)). He goes on to assert that spirituality in the Black community was injured by this wickedness that took our land and divided our families. Through his network, Brown has found a way to work on rebuilding the Black community’s connection to the land, a connection that was once stripped from us.

Amara’s passions reflect her own deep spiritual connection with the environment. It is a homecoming of sorts, a calling back to the land on which our ancestors toiled.

She explains: “Through my work, I’ve led efforts to allow individuals, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to recognize that the environment and the outdoors is not just a place for an individual who looks this way or has these resources. It is a human right.”

Amara is rooted in the dirt she played with as a child, and she loves her home state. At the same time, she takes a critical view of Maine and issues there involving the environment, racism, and more. Amara boldly speaks out against these problems—out of love and concern. Her critique of racial and environmental inequity involves speaking truth to power—everyone from her school administration to the state government—and it is rooted in her experiences.

Amara is now attending Northeastern University in Boston, majoring in politics, philosophy, and economics with a minor in environmental studies. While school and other opportunities may take her far from home, she holds Maine in her heart and can see herself pursuing a career in politics, beginning with the Maine House of Representatives.

One of the more profound traits I notice in Amara is her ability to see beauty in everything around her. Every time Amara describes the landscape of Maine, she does so with careful intention and wonder. I also notice that when she speaks of people, she goes beyond what may appear on the surface and affirms the goodness in all of us.

Because of Amara’s capacity to see this beauty, she holds onto the belief that the world can be better. She combats racism and misogyny from the perspective that those problems should not exist, and she believes that people are fully capable of rising above hate and discrimination. Amara believes that even the worst people can become better, kinder human beings. She approaches her environmental activism from the belief that our society can maintain an eco-friendly and sustainable approach. She knows that our environment is capable of flourishing if we take care of it.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Ecosystems of justice.” This article is adapted from Adams’s new book, Unbossed: How Black Girls Are Leading the Way, published by Broadleaf Books. Used with permission.*