Liberation Theologies in the United States

An Introduction

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Womanist Theology

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Historical Backdrop

In her sermon titled "Has the Lord Spoken to Moses Only?" Pauli Murray raises critical questions pertinent to the womanist theological project: "Does the future of humanity depend upon how quickly . . . feminine principles can be incorporated into our religious life and thought? Is God calling women to reassert prophetic leadership and ministry before it is too late?"[1] Murray uses the story of Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, the first woman identified as blessed by God with the gift of prophecy. Foreshadowing much of the womanist vision, Murray's invoking of Miriam's prophetic stance as an example of how the questions of gendering power dynamics and perspectives with Black religious life may have always existed yet awaited women of great faith, courage, and wisdom to call attention to and ultimately end such injustice. The conditions and circumstances of our contemporary era are just as needful of a prophetic critique of the racialized and gendered oppression that still plagues Christianity, both Black and white.

Furthermore, womanist theology reveals itself to be an organic discourse inasmuch as it is faithful to the church while also seeking to remake this most central and cherished institution. This is not viewed as an innovation by womanist theologians but is deemed a continuation of Black women's traditional culture of struggle, survival, and celebration that represents the likes of womanist muses such as Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Zora Neale Hurston, Pauli Murray, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Septima Clark, and countless others in affirmation of themselves of the Black community and their relationship to the divine. Also embedded in the work of these theologians is an emphasis on bringing together elements of Black literature, visual art, music, and sacred testimonies to make an urgent and impassioned plea to Black churches to address not only racism and classism in mainline Christianity but also sexism and anti-intellectualism in the historic Black church tradition.

Womanist theology was formed not only in a context in which white men controlled the public spheres of academia and the church but also within a generally embraced standpoint where, to use Gloria Hull's words, "all the women are white, all the Blacks are men."[2] The same efforts within Black theology and feminist theology that were forging a discourse to deconstruct the normative gaze of white male dominance resulted in obscuring and obliterating the exigent realities and liberative aspirations of Black women within the church, academy, and society as well.

During most of the 20th century and the development of Black denominations, Black studies discourse in general, and Black liberation theology in particular, alongside the establishment of the women's movement, women studies in general, and feminist theology in particular, a dualism increasingly emerged between Black men and women on the one hand and white women and Black women on the other. After each of these movements and ideologies established itself in America off the sweat equity and grassroots activism of Black women, the hope was that the institutions and ideologies that emerged would be inclusive of all Blacks on the one hand and all women on the other. As these movements and discourses evolved, however, the roles and agency of Black women were exploited while their needs and experiences were ignored.[3]

From abolitionism to reconstruction to the civil rights movement to the Black power movement, a dualism between Black men and women increasingly emerged. While Black men found themselves at the helm of movements and institutions that were for, by, and about Black people, Black women continued to endure the stereotypes and oppressions of an earlier period. As if by divine appointment or by the inheritance of a male-dominated society, Black men deemed it proper for them to speak for the entire community, male and female. Consequently, the interests and concerns of Black women were divided and subverted. While Black male theologians identified tensions between white Christianity and a liberating gospel, that same gospel did not bespeak any concern for the liberation of women from patriarchal Christianity.

The women's movement and feminist theology proved to be little different in effect. From the popularized liberation of women from domesticity embodied by Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem to the political activism and theological discourse endorsed by Mary Daly to its present academic incarnation, there was a failure to acknowledge the realities of Black women throughout the three evolutionary waves of modern feminism. The interests of the movement were more geared toward the needs and concerns of pre-

dominantly educated white middleclass and upperclass women and less with the needs and concerns of women of color in general and Black women in particular. Confronted with this growing reality, there were decisions to be made. For African American women, the increased oppression they suffered because of their race, as well as their gender, demanded a response not found in feminist thought and theology.

Although feminist movements and ideologies launched a strident critique against patriarchy, in all its forms, marked differences in the experiences of Black and white women in America remained. For example, Black women did not have to fight for the right to work in the public sphere because this burden was forced on them. Nor was "motherhood" contested in the same way for Black women as it was for white women. The predominance of female-dominant households in the Black community, despite the views of the "The Negro Family in America: The Case for National Action" by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and of other writers, served to preserve the Black family, not destroy it. Also, while Black women's economic lot may have stabilized or improved based on greater gender equity, their options for education, housing, employment, and health care were and are still considerably limited in a racist society. Black women's sexuality and reproductive control was also historically and still today is mythicized, manipulated, and mangled to varying degrees. Black women are generally not afforded the immediate hope to access political power because such political institutions tend not to be in place within the Black community. Feminists largely deal with the political and ideological, while Black women are in need of a discourse and movement that also embraces the spiritual and personal because these are the means to meet their common objective—the elevation and empowerment of women. While Black men and white feminists are seeking more public privilege, Black women must still struggle to ensure essential rights for themselves and their communities.

In this context, Black feminist scholarship deemed it imperative to examine Black women in modern America. In *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White discusses how Black women's fertility and motherhood were fostered by slaveowners as a means of capital growth, as well as social control. Motherhood superseded marriage in the slave community, not because of some propensity of Blacks toward oversexed, immoral lifestyles but because this priority was imposed by "superior" white men. From the point of slavery on, Black women's sexuality became a commodity and, by controlling it, white patriarchy was able to gain and exert power over white women and Black men. Antagonism, according to White,

developed between Black and white women during this period due to these sexual politics: the intersection between sexuality and power. Under the plantation system, Black women became more embodied and sexualized, while their white counterparts became aestheticized and revered. Black women were angered because they had to bear the brunt of the responsibilities and realities that were not part of the white woman's "cult of true womanhood."[4]

White women, in contrast, were resentful of the distinctions that placed them on a pedestal and made Black women "real." A number of controlling and damaging images of Black womanhood were socially constructed by white women in order to neutralize or denigrate the Black woman's sexuality, while bolstering "true womanhood." These included the desexed, nurturing mammy; the domineering, emasculating matriarch; the hardworking, stubborn, and unattractive mule; and the promiscuous, sexually aggressive Jezebel. In time, more portraits of Black womanhood, equally harmful and unfounded, would be created. Such stereotypes were injurious because they were rooted in the monstrously manipulated, unasked-for realities of Black women. Moreover, these images were so insidious, enduring, and pervasive that they helped perpetuate the means for the economic exploitation and political oppression of Black women in America. This dichotomy of the "real" woman and the "true" woman has established an adverse dynamic in the relationship of Black and white women.

In *Women, Race, and Class* (1981)—an illustration analysis of women's activism against the evils of white patriarchy in America, from abolition and women's suffrage to civil rights and women's liberation—Angela Davis poignantly demonstrates how the relations between Black and white women in these given movements have been repeatedly damaged at crucial junctures by racism. She discusses how white women, when pressed to align themselves either by race or gender, usually opted for unity along racial lines. Feminist scholar Sara Evans states in *Personal Politics* (1979) that the civil rights movement was key to the revitalization of the women's liberation movement. She discusses how white Southern women became more involved and political by being part of the civil rights movement, and she describes the great indebtedness white women owed to the Black power movement. She does not mention the monumental debt owed to Black women, such as Ella Baker or Septima Clark, however, who were the foundation of the civil rights movement, except to say that "these black women became 'mamas' in the sense of being substitute mother figures, new models of womanhood" for these young white women.[5] This reference to such noteworthy Black women is reminiscent of the stereotypical "mammy" imagery that these women were

trying to combat and the notion of surrogacy that womanist discourse would later take on as being at the root of demonarchy found in Black male theology and feminist discourse.

Tensions between Black and white women during the civil rights movement took on a more pronounced aspect. Black women were central yet unseen forces behind most civil rights organizations such as the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), but it was not until the entrance of white women to the movement that it truly gained recognition. Black women were further slighted by having their leadership of these organizations usurped by Black men, who then proceeded to become sexually involved with white women. This additional stress on the already strained relationship between Black and white women desperately needed to be resolved before any collective effort toward gender equality could take place.

The need for African American women to form their own ideology and find their own vehicle for empowerment stems from the reality that the history, issues, and contexts confronting them are markedly different from those facing white women and Black men. Feminism, in its politics and scholarship, was firmly enmeshed in an all-white, bourgeois context that had little or no relevance to Black women. Even when Black feminists tried to bridge the growing gap between Black and white women, white ideology was still used to impart some mythical aspect to Black womanhood which could be useful to feminism on a whole.[6] Meanwhile, racial progress all too often had been equated with the reconstitution of a much maligned and abused Black manhood. This has led to a masculinization of Black thought and a growing neglect for the concerns and needs of Black women.

By the 1970s, Black women were not afforded many options to further their legitimate causes because the movements they had been so instrumental in forming were now suppressing their input. In *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman,* Michele Wallace stated that if there is to be a Black women's movement, it must both distinguish itself from white feminism and debunk the hurtful images and myths of the Black woman that are present in modern America. Such an endeavor has to put forth a positive, self-defined concept of Black women that deals with their real-lived experiences without the imposition of white women's realities and concerns. By the 1980s, there was a growing demand for just such a movement and ideology among Black women.

Black feminism was an immediate response to mainstream feminism. In *Sister Outsider* (1984), Black feminist scholar Audre Lorde criticizes white

feminism's failure to incorporate the marginalized "outsider," especially Black women, lesbians, the old, and the poor. There seemed to be great contradictions present: "If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are . . . poor women and women of Color?"[7] By becoming more politicized and ideological, Black feminist thought strives to place the Black woman at its center and gain greater equality in much the same fashion as mainstream feminism.

The definition of Black feminism is somewhat slippery and ambiguous because it was important to designate who could be a Black feminist and what such a distinction meant. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), bell hooks boldly articulated a number of vital aspects that feminism must deal with in order to be effective. First, she states that there is no way to deal solely with sexism; activism must consciously vie to eliminate all hetero-patriarchal forms of oppression. Second, in order to provide the oppressed with a realized definition and destiny, personal power must be usurped. Third, echoing the view of Audre Lorde, hooks states that the voices of men as well as "Others" are needed in women's politics if its end is to be truly universal and humanistic. Fourth, and most important, there is a need to reconcile the notion of the good society as based on each group's reality with observed imbalances rectified by revolutionary process. Her demands challenged a new generation of Black women in academia to assert their right not only to be free and equal but also to make themselves a formidable force to be reckoned with.

However, hooks's desire to contest the firmly ensconced institutions of white patriarchy through political activism only seems practical when following the framework designated by white feminism. Patricia Hill Collins states in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) that "Black feminist thought is *of* African-American women in that it taps the multiple relationships among Black women needed to produce a self-defined Black women's standpoint. Black feminist thought is *for* Black women in that it empowers Black women for political activism."[8] Collins agrees with hooks that "by advocating, refining, and disseminating Black feminist thought, other groups—such as Black men, white women, white men, and other people of color—further its development."[9] Black feminism requires a level of commitment and shared experience, as well as perspectives, that may not be possible for those who are not Black women.

There is a compensatory and conciliatory nature to this inclusive vision that is not expressly the Black women's concern since they have historically been "the most vulnerable and exploited members of American society."[10]

Historical analyses of Black women's lives and experiences take previously unexplored or negative depictions of these women and present more positive and empowered images of them; in this regard, Black feminist scholarship is comparable to such formative contributions of their white counterparts. Black feminist scholarship, such as Christie Farnham's "Sapphire? The Issue of Dominance in the Slave Family, 1830–1865," Elizabeth Clark-Lewis's "'This Work Had an End': African-American Domestic Workers in Washington, DC, 1910–1940," and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent* came from an increasing need to have the Black women's historical presence recast in a manner other than simply having been helpless slaves and victims of an unjust society.

However, a problem with Black and white feminisms is the fact that women are taken out of their historic and cultural context and appropriated as model "feminists" in posthumous support and promotion of the movement. The use of these womens' identities, vocations, and experiences in this manner has an inherently manipulative aspect to it. The refusal of feminism to leave the contributions of these historic women politically unencumbered is worsened by the fact that these women must adhere to criteria of intellectualism that may not have been their reality. By not recognizing the lives of these women within their given contexts, feminist movements both deny them the full agency of their actions and diminish those accomplishments that do not fit into the overall feminist vision. This feminist standard that all women, past and present, must meet is neither universal nor mutualistic. The Black woman never had the opportunity to impart an Afrocentric ideology on America in the same way in which her white counterpart was able to reinforce Eurocentrism.

Consciously or not, Black feminism was in search of something more, as evident in the work of its premier theorists, Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks. Despite hooks's assertion that Black women should remain an active part of the mainstream feminist movement, it seems that "as long as the white-male experience continues to be established as the ethical norm, Black women, Black men and others will suffer unequivocal oppression. The range of freedom has been restricted by those who cannot hear and will not hear voices expressing pleasure and pain, joy and rage as others experience."[11] White feminists have been bound to the heteropatriarchal systems of institutions in ways that still bias and hinder the dismantling of privileges

and advantages they share with their male counterparts in American society. The reality that "all African-American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society which denigrates women of African descent"[12] will bring forth unity between Black feminism and womanism.

In the hopes of initiating Black women's return to Afrocentric thought and practices, Alice Walker, in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), provided the definitive criteria and basis for womanism. Walker defines "womanist" both with regard to the individual and the movement, as

> 1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e. like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another Black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.
> 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural and counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
> 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves the struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
> 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.[13]

In Walker's definition, a number of characteristics emerge, unique to African American women's virtues, such as a sense of community, a longing for justice, and a deep and personal love of oneself, of others, and of the Spirit. In combination, these elements not only create a complete and fully realized depiction of Black womanhood but also call for an epistemology and vocation for Black women to self-define and self-determine both themselves and the discourses to which their destinies are delineated and affixed. Thus the

womanist also has an interest in knowledge production in the hope of not merely being informed *by* her context or given reality but *of* this context as well. With this newfound knowledge of herself and her reality, the womanist makes an informed choice in how she is going to improve both her life and the lives of loved ones and how they are studied.

Unlike feminism, womanism is not an overarching paradigm that all women must ascribe to but a guide to self-definition and self-determination to which a Black woman chooses to adhere. Womanism is not a form of revolutionary asceticism, nor does it impose intellectual or moral superiority, but it is a means of putting Black women in contact with a more subjective, communal, redemptive, and critical means of dealing with her reality, within both the African American community and America at large. The personal and spiritual qualities of womanism can be attributed to the fact that "the confessional element of 'womanist' means that it is a term which cannot be imposed, but must be claimed by the Black woman who is engaged in the eradication of oppression from her own faith perspective and academic discipline."[14] The definition of the "womanist" that Alice Walker presents is a prototypical and evolving one, as womanist scholars seek to revise and redefine its real-life applications.

Where Black male theology and feminist theology invited the church and the academy to an ethical analysis that expanded the theological moral purview to include a systemic social analysis of the working of Eurocentrism on the one hand and patriarchy on the other, so, too, a later generation of Black female theologians shone a light brightly on the death-dealing intersection of race, sex, and class as a central site for theological and ethical reflection. In much the same way that Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1960) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* (1959) presciently called forth new modes of analysis for the then-dominant liberal theologies and that James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (1973) challenged liberal and progressive forms of white male theology, what we have with the dawn of womanism is the necessary voice of critique that constructs new understandings of a more thoroughgoing and inclusive liberation theology in the 21st century.

By claiming this radical space, womanist theology is doing a bit more than recognizing the "mainstreaming" of an insurgent movement within academia. What is highlighted, instead, is the character of womanist theological discourse as that which is best able to interrogate and subvert contemporary systems and discourses of domination in the context of late-modern North America. As a liberationist discourse (one that was nurtured by and grew

in critical dialogue first and foremost with the works of James Cone and Bev Harrison among a host of others), the role of womanist theology has helped to identify and challenge the pervasive white and male biases that are deeply embedded within the field of study; in turn, it has reshaped the traditional inquiry and raised candid questions between the two locales of whiteness and maleness. Womanist theology insists that new questions guide the research so that Black women's moral wisdom and experience of the divine and evil can provide answers to the existential questions that face marginalized persons and communities. Womanist theology is so keenly aware of those people withstanding the destructive onslaughts of the demonic systems of oppression, within both the church and society, and those who stand in solidarity with their struggle, because we have confronted the very same withering realities.

Therefore, Black women's moral wisdom becomes a resource for all of humanity and not merely a repository exclusively available to Black women themselves. Moreover, womanist theology distinguishes between "possibilities in principle" and "possibilities in fact." This is essential for theological discourse in that notions of faith, eschatology, and redemptive suffering have been used by dominant discourse as a legitimizing trope for forestalling justice, freedom, and liberation. At the same time, womanist theologians are cognizant of the need to find incarnation, redemption, and resurrection in "the struggle." Womanist theological reflection as struggle resonates with the experiences of preceding generations of Black women like Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, Mary Jane Smalls, and Prathia Hall, to name a few, who fought on the front lines of racial and gender justice in the church and in society. Often these women did not and were not going to improve materially, yet they had an abiding faith and steadfast hope that, by their righteous living, a "change was going to come," even if it was one inherited by future generations.

These Black Christian women brought their social concerns and plights to the forefront of religious discourse. They used progressive language and biblical precedents for theological justification of women's rights and suffrage. They deemed that it was impossible to claim divine justice without social justice, which included upholding dignity and respect for Black women as fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. Black women's real-lived experience was an affirmation of God's mothering ability to be a God of the oppressed who is intentional in mandating that social transformation is a requirement of the gospel. These predecessors gave meaning to a theology of relationship that was concerned with human participation as a vital part of the struggle for the liberation God desires, and social transformation was a

consequence of redemptive suffering. These preaching Black women activists asserted that God rejects oppression and surrogacy of Black women.

Description

The term and concept "womanist" began to take on a life of its own when Katie Cannon, in the article "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness" (1985), employed it as an accurate and necessary interpretive principle through which Black women's theology could be assessed experientially and critically as more than discourse but as a theology native to Black women that provides "the incentive to chip away at oppressive structures, bit by bit" while "hold[ing] on to life in the face of formidable oppression."[15] Cannon described the early stage of womanist theology while she was a doctoral student as survival-work: "drawing on the rugged endurance of black folks in America who outwit, outmaneuver, and outscheme social systems and structures that maim and stifle mental, emotional, and spiritual growth."[16]

Long before Katie Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988), Jaquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (1989), Delores Williams's *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993), and other estimable works within the womanist corpus, womanist theology was *lived* out. The groundbreaking efforts that helped carve out this intellectual legacy emerged along the fault lines of a Eurocentric academy and the heteropatriarchal ranks of male clergy which were charted by Black female students at Union Theological Seminary in New York City (a major location for Black liberation theology and feminist liberationist ethics) who were committed to unraveling and naming the systems of oppression that made mental and physical casualties of eleven of their Black female colleagues. According to womanist pioneer Delores Williams, who was a student at that time, Black parents kept coming to get the spiritually and physically scarred bodies of their Black daughters while the remaining Black women were continually challenged to justify by many of their classmates "how in the hell God could call [them] to preach let alone be worthy of a Ph.D."[17]

Black women were confronted with the fact that, although they may be in the higher echelons of academia, their plight still touched the realities of the rank and file. They were prepared to experience the grave uncertainty and isolation that comes with being pioneers in their own right. As an intergenerational cadre of Black women in the form of Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, and Jacquelyn Grant, not only were they dismantling the "master's house" but also they were using the "master's tools," to use Audre Lorde's

words,[18] to build new houses on old foundations. They were ready to develop their own modes of control and mined the motherlode of their own experiences that was God-conscious, community-minded, racially proud, and womanishly intuited in order to break the strongholds of the centuries-old patterns of racism, sexism, and overall exploitation to ensure the survival of an entire people, male and female.

Steeped in Black family virtues and schooled in the moral tradition of the Black church that taught that trouble doesn't last always, that the weak can gain victory over the strong (given the right planning), that God is at the helm of human history, and that the best standard of excellence is a spiritual relation to life obtained in one's prayerful relation to God, womanism challenged later "more pragmatic" claims that justice had to be meted out and instead held out for the standards and excellence that only tenacity can bring. It is this womanist tradition born in the face of chaos and nurtured in fervent hope that facilitates the thinking-being-doing continuum that gives oppressed people the self-esteem and courage to strive and to achieve great heights amid seemingly insurmountable odds. These ethical insights and social teachings are what help to further the unfinished work of the liberal, progressive, and liberationist vision of normative theology in an effort to keep academia and the church alert to what standards should be and what constitutes excellence for our discipline, church, and society.[19]

Womanist theology strips away false, objectified conceptualities and images of the divine and evil that undergird the apparatuses of systemic oppression and replaces them with images and cultural discourses that provide life-giving hope in the face of these webs of domination. To this end, womanist theology serves as a clarion call for a new heuristic and academic enterprise that focuses the power of Blackness (Black theology) and the personal as political (white feminism) as it shifts the margins to the center (Black feminism); more important, it seeks to debunk, unmask, and disentangle in order to place the most marginalized experiences of Black women at the heart of a burgeoning narrative of religious awareness and spiritual empowerment that makes it easier to see the radicality of the gospel from the aspect of the outsider/within and the least of these. Womanist theology is a movement and an ideology that places the African American woman at its center and strives to improve the lot of the African American community at large.

By defining herself as a womanist, the womanist theologian takes on the responsibility of improving the life chances for Black women by enumerating principles and insights gained from the moral wisdom of Black women who were able to foster love for all and the building of relationships that heal and

set individuals and the community free. She calls for the church to transform embodied relationships by taking society from domination to partnership, alienation to connection, despair to hope. Womanist spirituality encourages following the example of a Jesus who befriended the marginalized and oppressed and who stood for developing relationships that respect bodies and souls.

Following Cannon's groundbreaking text *Black Womanist Ethics,* early womanist scholarship emerged that provided a concrete basis for the rationality of a womanist movement within the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society for the Study of Black Religion (SSBR), as well as the methodologies and resources that could be readily utilized. Cannon's text and subsequent writings highlight a conceptual framework that is vital for understanding the nature and meaning of Black women's experience. To womanist theology, Delores Williams offers the framework of surrogacy as a way of understanding the historically situated abuse of Black women's bodies and the manner in which this abuse was justified by a turn to religiously defined intervention.

Beginning this analysis with an interrogation of the Hagar story, Williams turns to the central figure of the New Testament: as Jesus offered himself for the sins of the world, Black women were expected to offer themselves for the benefit of the status quo. This alternate perspective on the theologically arranged abuse of Black women brought an important critique against religious discourse as developed by white men, white women, and Black men, and it problematized their often uncritical appropriation of scripture. In so doing, Williams, and womanist theology by extension, forced a reevaluation of the nature and meaning of suffering and liberation and pushed for an appreciation of the Christ-event as opposed to a concern with the person of Jesus (trapped in maleness). According to Williams:

> If black liberation theology wants to include black women and speak on behalf of the most oppressed black people today . . . theologians must ask themselves some questions. Have they, in the use of the Bible, identified so thoroughly with the theme of Israel's election that they have not seen the oppressed of the oppressed in scripture? Have they identified so completely with Israel's liberation that they have been blind to the awful reality of victims making victims in the Bible? Does this kind of blindness with regard to non-Hebrew victims in the scripture also make it easy for black male theologians and biblical scholars to ignore the figures in the Bible whose experience is analogous to that of black women?[20]

Williams's challenge of uncritical use of scripture and other resources forced self-evaluation on the part of other liberation theologies, but it also provided a way of developing a unique theological cartography. For example, the move beyond the gender-bound Jesus, critiqued by Jacquelyn Grant and then Williams, to the Christ of Community allowed for a more-sustained modeling of behavior by privileging what the Christ-event means for the transformation of life options within the context of existential circumstances. Sin, then, had to do with the mistreatment of Black women through racism, sexism, classism, and other modalities of discrimination and oppression. Suffering, as Williams notes, should not be understood as the proper reality for Black women; surrogacy is to be rejected. And salvation involved the restoration of proper life options consistent with Alice Walker's definition offered above. Scholars such as Grant, Cannon, and Williams offered an initial framing of womanist theology, one that would be refined and extended as womanist theology developed over the decades.

Subsequent womanist publications—such as Renita J. Weems's *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (1988), Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus* (1989), Delores S. Williams's *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993), Emilie M. Townes's *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (1993), and Kelly Brown Douglas's *The Black Christ* (1994)—emerged from the theological disciplines to add to the range of issues to address within the context of the Black church and the greater realities of African Americans in American society. *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (1993), the first anthology of womanist theological discourse, edited by Emilie M. Townes, addresses the question of theodicy by employing a critical, deconstructive methodology that integrates race, class, and gender analysis of the issue of evil and suffering in a manner that traditional, feminist, and Black scholars have often missed. It is in such a manner that womanist theology continues to challenge existing ontological (ways of being) and epistemological (ways of knowing) theologies that confront and eradicate the injustice and oppression facing Black women in America.

Sources

Black Women's Real-Lived Experience

More than scripture or (Black male or feminist) theories, African American women's experience is the primary lens through which womanist theology is assessed ontologically and epistemologically. In large part, womanist theol-

ogy stems from the experiential process of Black female scholars of religion who have tried to carve out meaning in theological discourse. To wit, in addition to being religious scholars, womanist theologians are also predominantly ordained ministers, which means not only have they themselves experienced the disconcerting reality of living at the interstices of racism, sexism, and classism in the church and academia, but also they have direct access to the primary institution that could capture the range of Black women's experience and agency. That is, Black churches are the one institution totally controlled by Blacks wherein Black women make up the majority of its congregants and provide most of its human and fiscal resources but lack a space in which they can express themselves freely and take independent action. Thus, central to womanist theology was the need to unmask sacred spaces and debunk the living laboratory where patriarchal surveillance, sexist treatment, and economic exploitation of Black women was simultaneously proclaimed and practiced.

Black Women's Literature

To assess the experience and give voice to Black women outside of one's specific context, womanist theologians turned to the literary tradition of African American women writers as a constant resource and means of discourse in womanist theology. The wealth of writings found in "the Black woman's literary tradition documents the 'living space' carved out of the intricate web of racism, sexism and poverty. The literary tradition parallels Black history. It conveys the assumed values in the Black oral tradition. And it encapsulates the insularity of the Black community."[21] The works of African American women writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison, to name a few, serve as both a rich, unexplored repository of experience and knowledge to be studied and an untapped inspiration and shared testamonies for womanist theologians. Black women's literature aids in an alternative reading and deconstructive analysis of how the Bible takes one of the most important tools of Eurocentric patriarchal oppression, Christianity, and extracts its positive and liberating elements. Both Black and white textual sources can be used to deal with the reality of sexual politics as they relate to Black women. Womanists' use of these texts is an innovative and effective means of addressing issues such as domestic violence, prostitution, sexual abuse, and rape, all of which are increasingly pressing concerns in the lives of Black women. Black women's writings were regarded as sacred texts that examine racism, sexism (or male supremacy or patriarchy), and economic exploitation not simply as acts of violence but as social sin.

Once brought to light, Black women's experiences and the problems that ensue can be dealt with realistically and constructively. Womanist theology honors and centers Black women's experiences as sacred worlds that make possible the analysis of ways in which race, gender, and class give meaning to religious experience. Therefore, these hidden traditions retain power in the hands of Black people, function socially to influence domestic relationships for women and girls, and offer supernatural assets for strength and survival for all of humanity.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

While Walker's four-part definition of "womanist" has been adopted as a standpoint that adequately names the self-avowed identity of womanist theologians, the reflection used for cultivating methodologies and coming to theological conclusions is found in the discourse of "womanism." Thus, while Walker has defined what it means *to be* womanist, Black womanist theologians have defined what it means *to do* womanism.

As a leading voice in the womanist movement, Delores Williams states:

> Womanist theology is already beginning to define the categories and methods needed to develop along lines consistent with the sources of that theology. Christian womanist theological methodology needs to be informed by at least four elements: (1) a multidialogical intent, (2) a liturgical intent, (3) a didactic intent, and (4) a commitment both to reason *and* to the validity of female imagery and metaphorical language in the construction of theological statements.[22]

Multidialogical intent allows womanist theologians to advocate in praxis and discourse with a wide array of sociopolitical, cultural, and religious communities focused on the survival and empowerment of the oppressed. *Liturgical intent* within womanist theology ensures that the fruit of womanist labor will be a relevant reflection of the action, thought, and worship of the Black church tradition. The *didactic intent* in the womanist theological perspective contends that theology should have a pedagogical dimension. *Theological language*, generated by womanist theology, illustrates the amalgam of Black women's history, culture, moral wisdom, and religious experience that is instrumental for transforming academia, church, and society. Following Williams's schema, the womanist theological project is indicative of its intentionality: Black women asserting themselves in the fullness of their historical

reality, social conditions, and religious experience as the core of their theological interpretation.

Why does this matter? As womanist theology takes full account of racism, sexism, and classism inherent to mainline Christian theology, it refuses to surrender to an interpretive method that insists on compartmentalizing race, class, gender, and sexuality as separate and even singular concerns in the analysis of Black women's faith. This makes womanist theology clearly distinguishable from other theologies of the oppressed that preceded it—namely, Black liberation theology and feminist theology. Therefore, although rooted in their quest for social transformation and the end of human oppression, womanist theological interpretation does not take for granted that all of these theologies can be lumped into a single box yet contributes critical insights and interventions that have challenged other theologies to their God-talk.

With the publication of the edited volume *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (2006), womanist theological ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas illuminates how womanism has been used as a vantage point for the theoretical orientations and methodological approaches of the Black women scholar-activists who brought this discourse from the church to academia and from experience to scholarship. While keeping the foundational elements of Walker's four-part definition intact, womanist scholars have essentially explored the four tenets of "womanism":

1. RADICAL SUBJECTIVITY
   a. A process that emerges as Black females in the nascent phase of their identity development come to understand agency as the ability to defy a forced naiveté in an effort to influence the choices made in their life—how Black women's conscientization incites resistance against marginality.
   b. An assertion of the real-lived experiences of one's rites of passage into *becoming* a Black woman, *being* "womanish"; the audacious act of naming and claiming voice, space, and knowledge.
   c. A form of identity politics that is not a tangible, static identity that measures and gauges the extent to which one is or is not what others had planned or hoped for one to be.

2. TRADITIONAL COMMUNALISM
   a. The affirmation of the loving connections and relational bonds formed by Black women—including familial, maternal, platonic, religious, sexual, and spiritual ties. Black women's ability to create, remember, nurture, protect, sustain, and liberate communities which are marked and measured not by those outside of one's own community but by

the acts of inclusivity, mutuality, reciprocity, and self-care practiced within it (opposite of the biological deterministic assumption that a woman's role is to serve as nurturer and protector).

b. The moral principles and practices of Black women living in solidarity with and in support of those with whom they share a common heritage and contextual language; having a preferential option for Black women's culture, esp. their constructive criticism, "tragicomic hope," "in/visible dignity," and "un/shouted courage" which furthers the survival and liberation of *all* Black women and their communities.

c. The synthesis of double consciousness which occurs via the mastery of striking a balance between diametric opposites and the ability to address and readdress, deconstruct and reconstruct while simultaneously subverting the forces that destroy Black communities and devastate the lives within them.

d. The ability of Black women to wrest younger Black women from the strongholds of internalized oppression (i.e., colorism) and self-delusion (i.e., exceptionalism) and restore them with self-awareness, collective memory, and communal pride.

e. The inherited and shared legacy of Black women who have "made a way out of no way" from generation to generation.

3. REDEMPTIVE SELF-LOVE

a. An assertion of the humanity, customs, and aesthetic value of Black women in contradistinction to the commonly held stereotypes characteristic of white solipsism. The admiration and celebration of the distinctive and identifiable beauty of Black women.

b. A reaffirmation of Black womanhood in all of its full creation. The essence and freedom of Black women's cultural, physical, and spiritual expression.

c. Black women's unconditional and relentless resolve to enjoy the range of their common sense and the pleasures of their individual senses.

4. CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

a. The epistemological privilege of Black women borne of their totalistic experience with the forces of interlocking systems of oppression and strategic options they devised to undermine them.

b. An unequivocal belief that Black women hold the standard and normative measure for true liberation; the capacity of Black women to view things in their true relations or relative importance; and while expected to be among the chief arbiters of accountability, advocacy, and authenticity, they, too, must be faithful to the task of expanding their discourse, knowledge, and skills.

c. A hermeneutical suspicion, cognitive counterbalance, intellectual indictment, and perspectival corrective to those people, ideologies, movements, and institutions that hold a one-dimensional analysis of oppression; an unshakable belief that Black women's survival strategies must entail more than what others have provided as an alternative.

This notion of womanism marks the essential features of the numerous interdisciplinary methods (literary analysis—biomythography, virtue ethics, and diasporic analysis; sociological methods—case study method, sociohistorical methodology, emancipatory metaethnography; and historiography—slave narratives, moral biography and autobiographical method, and emancipatory historiography) employed by womanist theologians to unearth the untapped resources found in the Black women's real-lived experiences and literature.[23] Consequently, womanism shifted from a solo enterprise to a broad field of inquiry. This transition is representative of how Black women's moral wisdom can be a vantage point for apprehending scholarly context, criteria, and claims.

While it remains a discourse produced by Black women, womanism is open to intentional allies who seek to work in solidarity with and on behalf of Black women who have made available, shared, and translated their wisdom, strategies, and methods for the universal task of liberating the oppressed and speaking truth to power in both the church and society.

Ongoing Issues

Appropriating Walker's Definition

The question of whether Alice Walker's definition of womanist can be faithfully applied within a Christian theological framework, a concern that Cheryl J. Sanders posed at the dawn of the womanist movement, remains a point of concern for womanist theology.[24] While specific to Sanders's critique was Walker's emphasis on self-assertion, the secular nature of womanist, and the incorporation of lesbian experience, the overarching appropriation of a nonscholar and a non-Christian is striking. Many inside and outside of womanist camps continue to resolve the dissonance caused by Black Christian women's theological development and scholarship appropriating the self-avowed expression of a confessed pagan. Taking this observation even further, non-Christian womanist scholars have critiqued much of womanist theology as a de facto Christian discourse that has silenced Walker's focus on "love for the Spirit" regardless of what form it takes, thus claiming that

womanist scholars have stymied the working for the healthy perpetuation of all faith groups.

With the publication of her anthology, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, Floyd-Thomas, along with over twenty other scholars, made the claim that Walker's articulation of the definition and identity of "womanism" does not exclusively guide womanist discourse. Floyd-Thomas contends that much of the bourgeoning discourse within womanist scholarship is of women who celebrate religious pluralism and other expressions of the divine, to include African traditional religion, humanism, and Islam, as illustrated exceptionally in the work of womanist theologians and historians such as Debra Mubashir Majeed, Dianne Stewart, and Tracey Hucks.

Embodiment and Sexuality

Another perennial concern within womanist theology is that, while Walker's vision celebrates lesbianism and many of the scholars, themselves, are lesbians, issues of embodiment and sexuality, particularly as they address this group, have failed to punctuate the discourse. Based on the sense of compassion and accountability that emerges from womanist theology and progressive scholarship, many scholars—like Kelly Brown Douglas and Renee Hill—have decided to do the radical work of bringing the issue of sexuality, homophobia, and heterosexism from the margins of womanist analysis to the center, while the mainstream of womanist discourse has remained silent on this issue.

Accessibility and Practical Implications

A weakness of womanist theology, alongside other marginalized theological discourses, has been moving from dialogue into the practical problems of its nonacademic community. Although social and ecclesiastical change originated as the primary aim of womanist theology, many have noted that most of its impact has been merely theoretical. Many have cited the need for a political program to stop sexism and an alliance between womanist scholars and women's organizations in Black churches in order for change to be implemented. Because womanist theology has developed in predominantly white seminaries, suspicion and the independent status of Black churches has prevented much impact on the local level.

In an effort to bridge this gap, inroads have been made for womanist theology to not only have the Black church in mind but also be accessible to it.

The works of womanist biblicist Renita Weems (*Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*) and womanist theological ethicist Marcia Riggs (*Plenty Good Room: Women versus Male Power in the Black Church*) are of note in this regard as they have focused attention on fostering dialogue between Black church laywomen and womanist scholars. Consequently, the leadership taken by these well-regarded womanist scholars has inspired other scholars to either make their scholarship more accessible or intentionally write texts that can and should be used for Bible studies among the laity.

NOTES

1. Pauli Murray, "Has the Lord Spoken to Moses Only?" in *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 75.

2. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982).

3. For further exemplification, see Nancy Cott, "What's in a Name? The Limits of 'Social Feminism'; or Expanding the Vocabulary of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 3 (1989): 809–829.

4. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

5. Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Random House, 1979), 53.

6. These efforts are aptly chronicled in works such as Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1972).

7. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1984), 112.

8. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 32.

9. Ibid., 78.

10. Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 4.

11. Ibid., 3.

12. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 22.

13. Alice Walker, *In Search of My Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1983), xi–xii.

14. Emilie M. Townes, "Voices of the Spirit: Womanist Methodologies in the Theological Disciplines," *Womanist* 1, no. 1 (1994): 1.

15. Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty N. Russell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 40.

16. Quoted in M. Shawn Copeland, "A Thinking Margin," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 228.

17. Delores S. Williams, interview with author, New York, April 30, 2004.

18. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 110.

19. Delores Williams, "Excellence beyond Standards (Is. 25:6–9; Phi1. 4:4–13; Mt. 22:1–10)," *Christian Century,* October 17, 1990, p. 931

20. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 149.

21. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics,* 7.

22. Delores S. Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices (1986)," in *The Womanist Reader,* ed. Layli Phillips (London: Routledge, 2006), 121.

23. For a detailed examination of these methodologies, see Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006).

24. More recently, like Cheryl Sanders in 1989, Monica Coleman has raised the question in her essay "Must I Be a Womanist?" which has sparked a lively debate within and beyond womanist theological circles concerning Black female religious scholars and the authenticity of womanist identity. See Cheryl J. Sanders, "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (1989): 83–112; and Monica A. Coleman, "Must I Be a Womanist?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no.1 (2006): 85–96.

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