Polydoxy

Theology of multiplicity and relation

Edited by Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider

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10 Invoking Oya

Practicing a polydox soteriology through a postmodern womanist reading of Tananarive Due's *The Living Blood*

Monica A. Coleman

This chapter offers a postmodern womanist reading of Tananarive Due's science fiction novel *The Living Blood* to suggest principles for practicing a polydox soteriology.[1] Grounded in the strengths of womanist theologies and process metaphysics, postmodern womanist theology attends to the cosmology of Christianity and African traditional religions. Postmodern womanist theology searches for contextually-specific modes of creative transformation, and believes that black women's science fiction can serve as a source for theological reflection. A postmodern womanist reading of *The Living Blood* names divinity in the manifestations of the Yoruba *òrìṣà Oya* and in the depiction of "living blood."

Polydoxy is characterized by multiplicity, relationality, value, and mystery. A postmodern womanist reading of *The Living Blood* therefore suggests a polydox soteriology that is a route to health and wholeness. This salvific way reveals itself as polydox through the intersections of multiple religious traditions, multiple divine forces, multiple incarnations, and multiple Saviors. Multiplicity abounds. As boundaries bend and cross in the narrative world of *The Living Blood*, this reading also suggests that practicing a polydox soteriology is transnational, transcontinental, postcolonial, feminist, womanish, and dangerous, while also necessary for our health.

Polydoxy

Polydoxy is not just the opposite of orthodoxy. Just as orthodoxy indicates "right teaching," polydoxy implies that there are many teachings. This suggests that theology and life are both more complex and nuanced than to affirm one "right teaching" and there may in fact be many helpful teachings or many teachings that can be equally, though differently, "right." Yet polydoxy also implies that we can be taught by the many. That is, we can learn from multiple traditions and we can, or even that we *must*, embrace that which is multiple in order to learn. And if we are to be true to the "teaching" aspect of "doxa," then polydoxy must be teachable. It must be capable of being taught, learned, and practiced within lived communities of faith.

And yet, as the discussion on which this volume is based presupposes, polydoxy does not affirm a neutral plurality. It declares loudly that pluralism is not enough.

The acknowledgement and affirmation of the many is just one step, an introductory step if you will, toward polydoxy. Polydoxy is a full on embrace of multiplicity – of multiplicity wherever it is found – in the divine and temporal worlds.

An embrace of multiplicity necessitates a radical affirmation of relationality. For the multiple interact with one another, with us. We are multiple. Radical relationality is a challenge. Not only does it mean that who we are is constituted by our many relationships – a reminder of the ways in which we ourselves are many – but it also reminds us that we are related to those who are different from us. The stranger may not be so strange. We have "alien affinities," as Keller and Schneider suggest in the introduction to this volume.

Polydoxy must still be a teaching, however – it must say something or some things. It need not, in fact should not, be morally neutral; rather, it retains value so that it affirms one position or positions and not another. There is a significant level of normativity within a polydox construction. A polydox construction should, therefore, not only be liveable, but it should be, to some extent, *loveable*.

As polydoxy establishes a counterbalance to the certainty of orthodoxy, polydoxy is able to live with uncertainty. It is comfortable with a level of ambiguity, or mystery. Polydoxy is transparent enough to reveal the many in what appears to be one. It is flexible enough to live with apparent contradictions. Polydoxy does not collapse in the presence of conflict; rather, it expands.

Polydox theology does not negate the religious tradition or traditions it inherits, but seeks the multiple within that tradition or doctrinal heritage. Thus, polydox soteriology may take hold of a classic theological concept, and bend it both backwards – toward its own varied heritage – and forwards – in new directions, engaging with new traditions.

To summarize, I am positing that polydox theology is both the affirmation of many teachings and the ability to be taught by many. Polydox theology is characterized by multiplicity, relationality, value, and ambiguity. It is teachable, liveable, loveable, historical, postmodern, and narrative. This polydox theology engages experimental theopoetics in its broadest sense. That is, it is willing to engage with narrative and literature in order to glean theological insights. In fact, I suggest that we can learn something about polydox theology through an in-depth exploration of a science fiction novel.

Postmodern womanist theology

I have previously argued that black women's science fiction can serve as a source for postmodern womanist theological reflection. Postmodern womanist theological reflection also attends to the presence and role of ancestors, especially as they signify African traditional religions and the syncretic practices of African American religions. Postmodern womanist theology's ability to work with Christianity *and* communotheistic traditions while searching for contextually specific modes of creative transformation lends itself to polydox practices that highlight multiplicity, relationality, value, and mystery.

In *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, I posit postmodern womanist theology as a quest for health and wholeness in the midst of violence, oppression and evil.[2] It is a theory of how salvation works. This quest is a life-long cooperative process between God and the entities of the temporal world; it occurs in teaching–healing communities for the creative transformation of the world. In short, the movement of life is constituted by the past, God and the agency of the world. God offers an ideal vision of justice, survival, and quality of life that is particular and relevant for each of us. Health, wholeness, and justice occur as we embrace God's calling. The past is a critical resource for this activity. Through our memories, and the activity of the ancestors, the past is an active participant in calling the temporal world toward creative transformation.

Womanist theologies maintain an unflinching commitment to grounding religious reflection in the social, cultural, and religious experiences of black women. Womanist theologies are ultimately grounded in, and accountable to, the religious reality of black women's lives. As a form of liberation theology, womanist theologies aim for the freedom of oppressed peoples and creatures. More specifically, womanist theologies add the goals of survival, quality of life, and wholeness to black theology's goals of liberation and justice. Womanist theologians analyze the oppressive aspects of society that prevent black women from having the quality of life and wholeness that God desires for them, and for all of creation.

Because of its grounding in the religious lives of black women, postmodern womanist theology acknowledges the pluralism within African American experiences. The reality of religious pluralism is particularly important for black religions in the United States because it represents the ways in which the slaves and their descendents interacted with African traditional religions and other religious traditions. Black religion is a syncretic movement that includes the influence of European Christianity and its adaptation by slaves and nineteenth- and twentieth-century believers. Black religion also includes significant influences from indigenous religions, particularly African traditional religions.

In the crucible of slavery, African Americans blended their African religious sensibilities with the Christianity introduced to them by their captors. As a result, African American Christianity reflects both the tenets and practices of Western Christianity and African traditional religions. In addition, African Americans currently participate in a variety of African-derived religious traditions. Thus, African American religiosity includes both the unique ways in which African American Christianity syncretized Western Christianity with the religious heritage of the enslaved Africans, and the contemporary diversity of religious practice by African Americans.

Black religious historian Gayraud Wilmore implies that African Americans, regardless of contemporary religious affiliation, encounter African traditional religions in historic and contemporary settings, and that this cultural encounter influences, to one extent or another, all black religiosity. He argues that, consequently, black theologies must go beyond discussing Christianity and give more attention to African traditional religions.[3] Postmodern womanist theology accepts this challenge and strives to address the diversity of black religion – with a specific focus on forms of African traditional religions.

Postmodern womanist theology utilizes process metaphysics as a postmodern theological framework. As a philosophical metaphysics, process thought offers a religious perspective that describes how the world works with specific views of God and human agency. Process thought discusses the relationship between the world and God, and is able to account for lived experiences across the boundaries of religious traditions. As a postmodern philosophy, process metaphysics presents a view of the world that is compatible with today's knowledge about the world.

Thus postmodern womanist theology affirms the following five principles. First, every aspect of life is in a process of becoming. All entities are continually sorting through what they inherit from the world, what is possible in their contexts, and their own self-determination in light of the past and possibilities. Second, every aspect of life has an individual ability to exercise power or agency. Third, relationality is internal. We are constituted by our relationships with others in the temporal world and God. Thus, God is a part of all of us. This is a radical concept of divine incarnation. It is not specific or unique; it is universal. Fourth, God has an eternal vision constituted by the ideals of truth, harmony, beauty, adventure, quality of life, and justice, by which God calls the temporal world. While the principles of God's vision do not change, the way God's vision is manifest in the temporal world is specific to each context. Finally, in the midst of the pervasive loss that occurs as the result of constant change, there are opportunities for immortality. We are able to preserve life as we influence those around us, by the legacies we leave behind, and in our own memories of what has occurred in the past.

Postmodern womanist theology as creative transformation

Postmodern womanist theology affirms a normative process of becoming, which is a particular way of living in the world. Process theologians have often named this concept "creative transformation." Creative transformation promotes living in cooperation with God for the constructive social transformation of the world. A postmodern womanist theology strives for tangible representations of the good, drawn from womanist theology's articulation of the goal of theological reflection: justice, equality, discipleship, quality of life, acceptance, and inclusion.

The components of creative transformation are tailor-made for the exact context in which we find ourselves. In other words, the details of creative transformation will differ in every context. Creative transformation also challenges the status quo. As creative transformation draws us into the future, it necessarily changes the world as we currently experience it. Creative transformation is never forced upon the world. Although God calls us, we have genuine freedom and agency, and we must make our own decisions about whether or not to embody it. Creative transformation is always available to every entity – it is an option present in God's continual callings to the world.

Postmodern womanist theology focuses on creative transformation in the activities of teaching and healing. It draws from the womanist emphasis on the life and ministry of Jesus to highlight the ways in which teaching and healing positively bring about change in the world. It is important to note that the activity

of healing, while sometimes taking place in the body, is an activity of restoring wholeness and community where there is exclusion, corruption, individualism, fragmentation, and brokenness. Teaching and healing are the activities that lead to ideals of discipleship, wholeness, justice, quality of life, beauty, truth, and adventure. In other words, God's calling is often mediated to the world and represented in the world through the activities of teaching and healing.

Finally, a postmodern womanist concept of creative transformation occurs in and through communities. Creative transformation is communal because it is extended to everyone – not just certain members of a community. Creative transformation is also communal because it acknowledges that, in the process of becoming, we deal with more than just ourselves. We deal with the community of the past, and future possibilities. When who and what we are becomes a part of the larger world around us, we become part of the many factors that will influence the future. Thus, we cannot live, change, or become in isolation. Community is also the goal of postmodern womanist theology. Because evil occurs in a relational world, and womanist theology has always understood sin as social and systemic, salvation must respond to evil in an explicitly communal context. That is, if salvation aims at the eradication of sins and oppressions that exclude and divide people, then salvation must aim for a greater and more genuine sense of community.

As a corollary, a postmodern womanist theology extends the concept of Savior beyond the Christian affirmation of Jesus alone. Postmodern womanist theology looks for Saviors in every theological community. Postmodern womanist theology focuses on the activities of teaching and healing, suggesting that it is not the person of Jesus, but rather the activities of teaching and healing that are exhibited in the life and death of Jesus that make Jesus a Savior. The activities of a community leader who demonstrates salvation make for a Savior. Saviors lead communities that teach and they heal for the creative transformation of the world.

In sum, postmodern womanist theology affirms that salvation is found in the activity of communities. Postmodern womanist theology does not refer to individuals as saved, apart from the communities in which those individuals participate. Postmodern womanist theology speaks of theological communities as those communities that adopt, and adapt, to God's calling in order to creatively transform the world in which they live. Their leaders are the Saviors.

Postmodern womanist theology as a mode of learning

Postmodern womanist theology emphasizes two ways of learning from the past that contribute to creative transformation. First, we are called to remember our past and incorporate it into our processes of becoming. As we do so, we can use past survival techniques to help ourselves live into the future. We can also remember the destructive death-dealing aspects of the past and vow not to repeat them as we move into the future. This conscious remembering is best done in community.

A second approach to learning from the past focuses on the role that the ancestors play in our lives. In African traditional religions, the ancestors are closely related to the divine and are active in the everyday and ceremonial lives of

practitioners. Postmodern womanist theology understands the visions, dreams, charismatic embodiments of the Holy Spirit, and possession by African ancestors as critical to the diverse religious experiences of black women. It also asserts that the ancestors can help us to creatively transform the world and leave it a better place than we found it.

In the realm of African traditional religions, postmodern womanist theology focuses on Yoruba-based religious traditions such as Haiti's Vodun, Cuba's Santeria, Brazil's Candomblé, African American Ifa and conjure. Through both the triangular slave trade and contemporary reversionary local faith communities, the religion of the Yoruba people (of current-day Nigeria) constitutes a base for African-derived religious practices throughout the Caribbean, South America, and the United States. Although all these different manifestations of Yoruba-based religions share a similar cosmology that structures the world and key religious concepts, due to the different historical and religious contexts of the encounter between Yoruba religion and the various New World situations, they differ in ritual detail and linguistic referrals. As Yoruba traditional religion travels through space, time, and circumstance, it syncretizes, or blends, with other religious and cultural traditions – most particularly Western Christianity and other African traditional religions.

Traditional Yoruba religion can be described as the worship of a supreme deity, *Olódùmarè/Olórun*, under various ancestors, forces or deities, the *òrìşà*.[4] There is no adequate description for the *òrìşà* outside of the Yoruba universe. They have been variously described as ministers of *Olódùmarè*, forces of nature, angelic forces, lower gods and sub-deities. According to Yoruba stories, the *òrìşà* are ancestors who did not return to earth because their *ìwà* (human character or human consciousness) was so closely aligned with the character of *Olódùmarè*. While *Olódùmarè* is neither male nor female, nor embodied, the *òrìşà* have genders, stories, geographical, and natural associations. The *òrìşà* have their own characteristics, herbs, personalities, and devotees. Veneration of the *òrìşà* is such an important part of Yoruba religion that the entire religion is often referred to as "*òrìşà* worship." The telos of Yoruba religion is *ìwà pele* or cool or good character. Yoruba religion identifies 401 *òrìşà*, with five to ten *òrìşà* having more importance and appearances than the others. The wisdom and content of Yoruba is traditionally transmitted orally in myths, songs, and the *odù*, verses of wisdom and divination.[5]

The cosmology of traditional African religions does not fit into the Western philosophical and theological categories of monotheism and polytheism, mortal and immortal. A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya provides the most creative portrayal of African traditional religions in relation to Christian theological categories in his book *On Communitarian Divinity*. Ogbonnaya coins the term "communotheism" to refer to "a community of gods" operative in African traditional religions and in the Christian Trinity.[6] Communotheism is a divine communalism: "Divine communalism is the position that the Divine is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal while at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions."[7] In

communotheism, there is immanence in that there is a radical relationality among the members of the divine community and between the divine community and the world, and there is transcendence because geographic distance and "physiological de-carnation" (death) cannot destroy the radical relationality. While there is distinction (eroding any real classification of pantheism), there is no idea of a separation between the human and the divine.

The process influences in postmodern womanist theology enable it to embrace communotheistic religions like traditional Yoruba religion. As God takes in, or incorporates, the manyness of the world into who God is (the consequent nature of God), God can relate those events with God's vision for the common good, searching for the best of what has happened in order to offer those aspects back to us in our next instance of becoming. The ancestors are part of the manyness of the world that is inside of or a part of God. Yet the ancestors are also available to the world in God's calling to the world.[8] This is particularly relevant for understanding the concept of the ancestors and their role in creative transformation.

Ancestors appear to be like humans in that one often assumes that they do the same things in the spiritual realm that they did while living in mortal bodies, but they are not simply human beings who maintain activity after death. Ancestors are transformed in the afterlife; they have a divine quality to them. African traditional religions affirm that human beings can live on after death. The ancestors, along with *òrìşà* and culture heroes, have special knowledge that can be accessed by the living through rituals of remembrance, rites of divination, or spirit possession.

The ancestors can creatively transform us as they teach and heal us – helping us to be the best individuals and communities that we can be. The ancestors can also assist us as we transform the world. When the ancestors guide us toward creative transformation, they not only represent the vision of God but also become part of the transformed community itself. Metaphysically, we in the temporal world can discipline our own souls, selectively incorporate particular ancestors, and use their knowledge and agency to augment our own ability to creatively transform the world. The processes of remembering and spirit possession can produce destructive or creative effects within the world. Remembering and embracing the past does not always help us to move creatively into the future. A postmodern womanist theology insists that we learn from the past and then use what we have learned and experienced, toward God's ideals and the creative transformation of the temporal world.

Postmodern womanist theology and science fiction

Postmodern womanist theology expands womanist uses of literature by investigating black women's science fiction for an image of its theological images. Womanist religious scholarship often invokes black women's literature (nineteenth-century slave narratives and autobiographies, Harlem Renaissance literature, black arts literature and fiction from the 1980s and 1990s) as a source for black women's experiences. As a syncretic combination of the various genres of African American literature, utopian writing, science fiction, and feminist literature, black women's science fiction offers its readers numerous resources. It critiques current society and offers an alternative vision of society. It shows the value of imagination in the process of creative transformation. The society it portrays includes portraits of justice, community, feminism, and gender and sexual equality. Black women's science fiction addresses some of the problems of the day and creatively suggests solutions.

African American literary theory argues that African Diasporic literatures distinctly portray traditional African religious imagery in the plot development.[9] As part of this literary corpus, black women's science fiction references ancestors and their activity in the context of the novel. Looking, particularly, at pan-African women's literature, literary scholar Alexis Brooks DeVita asserts that pan-African women writers, consciously or unconsciously, invoke symbols that reflect African goddesses, including the female *òrişà* of traditional Yoruba religion.[10] DeVita believes that ancestors help the protagonists of African Diasporic literature to achieve their own forms of fulfillment. DeVita argues that the influence or intervention of a female *òrişà* or her symbols indicates a heroine's access to divine power and assistance.

Postmodern womanist theology draws upon this literary theory in its examination of black women's science fiction. Postmodern womanist theology looks for overt and subtle references to syncretized traditional Yoruba religion in black women's science fiction. Because black women's science fiction includes elements of traditional African religions, it helps postmodern womanist theology to draw from multiple religious traditions. Black women's literature can also serve a prophetic function in theology. Black women's science fiction can provide concrete images, models, and proposals for what could happen or what should happen. A postmodern womanist reading of black women's science fiction will reveal polydox practices that highlight multiplicity, relationality, value, and mystery.

Within the relatively small world of black women science fiction writers, Tananarive Due is one of the most well known – besides Octavia Butler. The author or co-author of eleven books, Due's only series is the *African Immortals* trilogy. Hollywood actor Blair Underwood has optioned the first book in this series – *My Soul to Keep*[11] – for movie production. The second book of the series, *The Living Blood*, offers the most historical background on how the African immortals introduced in the first book became immortal.[12] In so doing, it is the most explicitly religious volume in the *African Immortals* trilogy.

The Living Blood tells the story of an African immortal named Dawit who confers his immortality – "living blood" – onto his pregnant wife, Jessica. Born with the blood (as compared to receiving it as an adult), their daughter Fana consequently possesses powers that greatly surpass those of any of the other African immortals. Immortality first came to the people through Khaldun, who came into possession of this blood as a mortal shepherd, in the first century CE. He is now leader of the Brotherhood, a group of 59 men on whom he conferred immortality. The Brotherhood lives in a secret colony in the ancient Ethiopian city of Lalibela, where they spend their centuries learning languages, math, science, music, and meditation.

The blood has the power to heal. Jessica and her physician sister Alexis run a rural clinic in Botswana, using the blood to heal sick children. In a converging story line, Florida physician Lucas Shepard hears of the clinic, and ventures to Africa to find the sisters and bring the blood back for his leukemia-stricken son, Jared. Unfortunately, another man named Shannon O'Neal begins searching for the blood so that he can use it to his own personal and economic gain. He hires merciless mercenaries who kidnap and kill for possession of the blood.

Things begin to go awry when Jessica becomes aware that Fana, at three years old, has fast-growing powers; i.e., she can kill with a glance. Jessica journeys to Lalibela to find out how to control her daughter's powers. Jessica's arrival upsets the balance of the Brotherhood, which scatters into rival factions. Meanwhile, evil is present in the form of "shadows" that beckon Fana. The Shadows speak to Fana during mysterious trances, teaching her to make storms. The story is resolved in the midst of a hurricane that Fana unwittingly causes. Jessica and Dawit must reunite to learn how to raise their daughter and rescue her from the destructive storm she is spinning. A glimpse into the future shows a small community of mortals and immortals living on a secluded farm where they gather their blood to help heal the world of disease.

A postmodern womanist reading of *The Living Blood* names divinity in the manifestations of the Yoruba *òrìşà Oya*, and in the depiction of the living blood. There is a Cuban understanding of *Oya* operative in Due's depiction of the powerful hurricane spun by female power. Likewise, the living blood has characteristics similar to the Yoruba concept of *àşẹ* – divine connection, transferable, morally neutral power. The story of the blood's acquisition reproduces the religious encounter of enslaved Africans and Catholic missionaries. Finally, we see black women as Saviors who use the blood to heal and start a community of healers.

In traditional Yoruba religion, *Oya* is the Yoruba *òrìşà* of change. In her work *Oya: In Praise of an African Goddess*, Judith Gleason refers to *Oya* as the *òrìşà* of change represented in radical weather conditions.[13] *Oya* manifests herself in several natural forms – wind, especially tornadoes, fire, the river, and the African buffalo. *Oya* is represented in the lightning that is partnered with the elements of thunder and rain. *Oya* is also the mother of *Egungun*, the collective spirit of the ancestors. Thus *Oya* is another guardian to the realm of the ancestors: "It is *Oya* who brings the voice of those ancestors who preserved the wisdom that leads to the development of good character."[14] *Oya* is the most powerful female *òrìşà* and is well known for her sense of justice and intolerance for the abuse and oppression of women.[15]

Devotees of *Santeria* often associate Caribbean hurricanes with *Oya* and the slave trade. These Cuban devotees of *Oya* describe tropical storms with a particular travel pattern that begins on the Western coast of Africa and moves over the Atlantic Ocean.[16] *The Living Blood* describes the hurricane in the same way:

> In its present form, it was merely an infant struggling to survive, drawing sorely needed strength. It had all the means to preserve itself: the cooing growls of playful thunderstorms that had sprung from the coast of Africa, the balmy waters of the Atlantic Ocean stroking it from below, and the even, persistent kisses of winds whipping from above.[17]

Gleason interprets this stormy pattern as an attempt to resolve the evils of slavery:

> Now storms along the seam, at their most violent … [drift] southwest over the Atlantic with ever-increasing amplitude, suddenly strike the Caribbean. Thus, by grace of atmospheric forces beyond human control, the tornadoes of west Africa, following the slave-trade routes along which those who first named them were hauled to the hurricane-prone islands of their diaspora, achieve in the New World their apotheosis.[18]

Devotees of *Santeria* identify *Oya* in the storm. *Oya* is a witness to both the presence of Africans in America and the unique ways in which black religions blend traditional African religions with Christianity.

Oya possesses Fana as she creates wind and rain. While playing with a friend, Fana learns she can create wind. Her friend realizes that the breeze comes from Fana. Playing with her powers once again, Fana also creates rain:

> Fana shot herself into the sky, so high she nearly became dizzy. She gently wrapped herself in the invisible mist high in the sky, making it grow cooler. She drew upon the mist, pulling on it as far as she could reach, collecting it, tugging against its natural will until she felt something above her rupture, as if she'd torn a bedsheet in half, and suddenly all the ground near her feet was shaded. A cloud![19]

Fana's cloud creation is associated with a central characteristic of *Oya*, a loud tearing sound: "*O-ya* means 'she tore' in Yoruba."[20] Fana can direct *Oya's* manifestation in the world. When Fana makes it rain, her friend becomes afraid of her powers and tells her that she should not control the weather: "Who decides when it rains, you stupid girl? … God decides … Spirits decide … Not you."[21] Her friend does not realize that *Oya* is possessing Fana.

Fana can use *Oya*'s power to produce either creative or destructive effects in the world. Fana's initial response to her powers is a desire to use them creatively. Fana imagines working with *Oya* to end famine and drought and to improve the lives of the people around her. Despite the creative potential of Fana's ability to create wind and rain, her storms serve as the impetus for the destructive hurricane hitting the Caribbean and Florida. Fana's small act becomes a storm that kills hundreds of people, homes, and property. Unknowingly, Fana calls the storm and *Oya*'s destructive side is loosed. Because she is a child, Fana cannot control the storms. The creative or destructive effects of *Oya*'s powers will depend upon the actions of Fana's parents, in other words, on Fana's community.

The story of the blood's acquisition reproduces the religious encounter of enslaved Africans and Catholic missionaries. The living blood cannot be destroyed. People with the blood flowing through their veins are likewise indestructible. Although they can be injured and crippled with pain, they are immune to death. When killed, the blood causes the resurrection of the whole person with his identity. The blood also gives its carriers both a heightened physical sensitivity and the ability to read the thoughts of other people. Disciplined members of the Brotherhood

can read the thoughts of people around them and gently intrude sentences and ideas into other minds. That is, the blood radically intensifies relationality.

The living blood is remarkably similar to the Yoruba concept of *àṣẹ*. *Àṣẹ* is the name given to a fundamental element in the Yoruba cosmos. It is a force found in all things. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson calls *àṣẹ* "the power to make things happen, [it is] morally neutral power, power to give, and to take away, to kill and to give life, according to the nature and purpose of its bearer."[22] It imbues all creation, empowering people, objects, and natural elements with the influence of *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣà*, and yet the people who possess it also determine it. It is the life force of creation and of the *òrìṣà*. It is quantifiable and transferable as if it is a substance, and yet it is also living – granting ability, creativity, and efficacy. *Àṣẹ* is found in ritual tools, words, people, *òrìṣà*, and elements of nature. Henry and Margaret Thompson Drewal state that *àṣẹ* is "absolute power and potential present in all things – rocks, hills, streams, mountains, leaves, animals, sculptures, ancestors, and gods – and in utterances – prayers, songs, curses and even everyday speech."[23]

Àṣẹ is often also associated with the blood of women. This is the basis of the fear of the *aje*, often translated as "witches." "*Aje*" are older women who are perceived to have large amounts of *àṣẹ*. *Àṣẹ* is often represented by menstrual blood – symbolizing the ability to create biologically. Menstruating women are often seen as losing *àṣẹ*; therefore those who are postmenopausal are considered to have "more" *àṣẹ* (and are more powerful). People do not want to offend them for fear that these older women might use their strong forms of *àṣẹ* against them. In the Yoruba religious worldview, *àṣẹ* is associated with the unique blood of women – blood that can be shed without causing death. Jessica, Alexis and Fana must deal with the same fear of their connection to the living blood. Even while befriending Jessica and Alexis, the southern Africans refer to them as witches. Jessica tells Fana, "[w]e are not witches. You are not a witch. You are just a very powerful child. People are afraid of power. They're even more afraid of what they don't understand."[24] When people do not understand the power of the living blood, the power of women, or the power of *àṣẹ*, they demonize the women who possess it.

In the novel, the story of obtaining the blood of the crucified Jesus also directly relates to the syncretic practice of traditional Yoruba religion in the Americas. Khaldun originally obtains the living blood from a man who had stolen the blood of Jesus. This man believed that Jesus' ability to conquer death was tied to the power in his blood. When Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, the man filled a pouch with Jesus' blood. Although the blood was cold for three days, when Jesus rose, the blood became warm. The man offered several friends, including Khaldun, the gift of eternal life through a "Ritual of Life" that involved killing the men and then sharing the blood with them until they came back to life. When Khaldun was revived from death, he was given the task of performing the ritual on this man. After killing the man with a deadly poison, Khaldun hoarded the blood for himself.

When enslaved Africans were introduced to the Americas, their captors tried to convert those who were not already Christian to Christianity. The Jesuit historian Edward Reynolds describes one of Pedro Claver's (1580–1654) catechetical methods among Africans in Cuba: "He taught them, too with pictures and especially

with one: a representation of Christ on the Cross, with his blood being gathered by a priest below, who, in turn, poured it over Negro neophytes."[25] With this imagery, Claver suggests that salvation literally comes from the blood of Jesus. Claver is said to have baptized over 300,000 slaves.[26] In *The Living Blood*, this story is reflected in a syncretic understanding of Jesus, salvation, and traditional Yoruba beliefs that emphasize the power of blood (*àṣẹ*) and its manipulation for good or evil.

In *The Living Blood*, creative transformation comes about as Jessica, Alexis, and others pledge themselves to a vision of "a new world" where the sickest and poorest children receive healing. A creative transformation of the blood appears in three ways. First, Jessica and Alexis commit to sharing the blood to heal. Second, Jessica dedicates herself to raising Fana to use her power to heal, and third, the community makes a commitment to using the blood to heal the world.

Jessica partners with her sister Alexis to use the blood to heal children with terminal illnesses. Jessica and Alexis refuse to possess the blood's powers and withhold its healing potential. They live in constant fear that the clinic will be shut down by the Brotherhood, inquisitive health officials, or the violent actions of people who demand the blood's powers for themselves. Nevertheless, they share the blood.

Jessica also understands that her creative transformation of the living blood involves teaching her daughter to use the blood's gifts to heal. Because she is a child, Fana is unable to control the powers that the blood gives. On one occasion, Fana becomes privy to the child-molesting thoughts of a soldier in Rome's airport. Without even realizing it, Fana's fear kills him. When Jessica realizes that Fana has no control of her blood-given powers, she insists on taking her to the Brotherhood's colony in Lalibela to learn the best use of her powers.

It turns out that Fana need not use her powers to creatively transform the world. Khaldun describes Fana's potential in this way: "Fana is both salvation and destruction. She will either be our most awaited friend or our most fearsome enemy."[27] Jessica wants to teach Fana to engage life through the way of creative transformation. She warns Fana against destructively transforming the living blood: "Promise me right now, that you will never use your mind to hurt anyone else. You're not going to abuse what God has given you."[28] Jessica's commitment to using the blood to heal extends to teaching her daughter to use her powers to heal. Meanwhile, Fana's hurricane is destroying the Caribbean and Florida. Fana's parents must comfort Fana, and walk through the turbulent winds to rescue their family and friends in order to quell the storm.

In the novel's final chapter, the reader sees a vision of creative transformation. It is 2005 and Jessica, Alexis, Dawit, Lucas, Fana, and others live on a secluded farm. This community includes mortals, and immortals, that are not unlike Jesus' band of disciples: "Soon, all twelve of them were at the table with their heads bowed. Some of them were family by genetic blood, others by immortal blood, others by their common mission. They linked hands around the table."[29] After five years of growth, the community opens its doors to the wider world. They invite a diverse group of people – healers, a lawyer, a journalist – who know they have been summoned together to hear about a medical miracle, and to learn ways to share it with the untold numbers of people who need it.

This community is a salvific community. It represents a departure from the previous form of a living blood community – the Brotherhood. This is to be expected as Jessica and Fana themselves bring novelty to the immortal community as the first females to possess the blood. This community strives to use the blood's power responsibly and heal illnesses in the world. It is a diverse community of men, women, and children, mortal and immortals, healers, lawyers, and journalists. Salvation, in this community, is not based on the unique constitution of the immortals, but by its participation in a vision of healing. This is a community with a future.

A postmodern womanist interpretation of *The Living Blood* identifies Jessica as a Savior because she uses the blood to heal and starts a community of healers. Fana is a Savior-in-training as Jessica, and others in the community, teach her to use her powers for creative transformation. Although Jessica does not refer to herself as a Savior, she interprets her activity as the fulfillment of a divine calling. Jessica attributes it to a divine source: "God had given her this blood. That was good enough for her."[30] Jessica is a Savior because she helps to start a community that uses the blood for the positive social transformation of the world. As far as Jessica is concerned, her possession of the living blood is a gift that she must use to heal other people.

Like Jessica, Fana can serve as a Savior if she uses the blood to heal. Although Khaldun first identifies Fana as a Savior, he bases his identification upon her constitution. Khaldun believes Fana can mediate between the Brotherhood and the rest of the world. He describes Fana as "a child born with the power to stand between mortal and immortal, the two races of man."[31] Khaldun defines a Savior as the mediator between two ontologically different types of beings. Jessica rejects Khaldun's desires for Fana because they do not include using the blood to heal:

> And if she performs miracles, it'll be because that's what her heart tells her to do. It'll be because she'd had a good example from me and her aunt, who believe in helping people with this blood … I'm not going to force her to feel like some kind of traffic officer trying to keep mortals and immortals apart.[32]

Jessica and Khaldun echo the traditional Christian Christological debates – is it Jesus' unique constitution/person or activities/work that render Jesus a Savior? Jessica states that it will be Fana's creative use of the blood that will make her a Savior. Fana emerges as a Savior-in-training because her storms lead to the development of the healing community.

Polydox soteriology

A postmodern womanist reading of *The Living Blood* discloses a polydox soteriology. Here we see a route to health and wholeness through the intersections of multiple religious traditions, multiple divine forces, multiple incarnations and multiple Saviors. Such a reading also suggests that polydox soteriology is transnational, transcontinental, postcolonial feminist, and womanist.

The Living Blood illustrates a polydox soteriology that does not reject the Christian doctrine of salvation. In *The Living Blood*, salvation is connected to

Christian declarations that salvation comes through Jesus in general, and through the blood of Jesus, in particular. Womanist theologians have varied perspectives on the role of Jesus' blood in salvation. Christian womanist theologian Delores S. Williams rejects objective theories of atonement, wherein the sins of humanity are satisfied through Jesus' death on the cross. Williams boldly writes, "There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross."[33] Rather, Williams's concept of salvation is rooted in Jesus' work – the ethical ministry of words, the healing ministry of touch, the ministry of expelling evil forces, prayer, compassion, and love.[34] In *Power in the Blood?*, Christian womanist theologian Joanne M. Terrell locates salvation in the suffering of Jesus on the cross.[35] Terrell pays particular attention to the African American Christian language of Jesus' blood as one of the vehicles through which humanity is restored to the right relationship with God. Terrell believes that God reveres blood. For Terrell, Jesus' death and blood are offered as a once-and-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world. Thus, Jesus' blood-loss has eternal efficacy. There is something of God in the blood of the cross. The lives of those who have suffered and shed blood – both Jesus and contemporary sufferers – can serve as a sacramental witness to the power of God. Salvation comes from the lessons learned after instances of suffering. The very life force, the blood, of sufferers is part of the sacred means that point us toward salvation. In this argument, Terrell affirms a subjective theory of atonement wherein salvation is achieved as human beings learn from and emulate the activity of Jesus.

The soteriology portrayed in *The Living Blood* engages classic Christian questions about whether salvation comes from the person or the work of the Savior. *The Living Blood* suggests that there is something about the constitution of the Savior, something unique about the Savior's blood, that makes the Savior both human and immortal, ordinary and divine, capable of death and resurrection. Khaldun identifies Fana as the Savior following this vein of Christian soteriology. Like the theology of Delores Williams, a postmodern womanist reading emphasizes salvation as the activity or "work" of healing – connected to the root word of salvation, "salve." Like Terrell, a postmodern womanist reading of *The Living Blood* argues that the blood can teach us something important about salvation. Yet, departing from Terrell, a postmodern womanist reading asserts that even those without the living blood can function as Saviors if they lead communities that use the living blood for healing the world. That is, no one person atones for all.

The polydox soteriology in *The Living Blood* bends backwards toward some strands within Christian soteriology – salvation as connected to the blood of Jesus; salvation as health; salvation through the person and/or work of the Savior. Yet it also bends forwards and away from concepts of salvation that focus on declarations of belief or justifying the work of God in one person or persons. Indeed part of the *poly*doxy of this salvation is that it involves salvation through many people, to many people and through more than one religious tradition.

In *The Living Blood*, salvation comes about through the invocation of multiple religious traditions and multiple forms of divinity. There is Christian imagery in the connection to Jesus, as well as clear connections to traditional Yoruba religion through the connection to the *òrìṣà Oya* and *àṣẹ*. *The Living Blood* reveals

connections to the particular historical and religious experiences of formerly enslaved Africans in Cuba. The hurricane that Fana creates follows the same route as the triangular slave trade. Cuban *santeros* recognize *Oya* as an embodiment of angry ancestors in such weather patterns. By echoing this story about *Oya*, found only in Cuban Santeria, *The Living Blood* wrestles with the syncretic nature of black religiosity. Black religiosity often is not purely traditional African nor Christian. It is a complex mix with recognizable parent strands – in this case Catholicism and traditional Yoruba religions – while being its own novel practice.

Likewise, *The Living Blood* describes the acquisition of the blood with a story of blood stolen from the crucified Jesus Christ. A similar story is conveyed in an icon used in Pedro Claver's historical missionary practices in Cuba. It is difficult to know how enslaved Africans understood this story. On the one hand, many of them probably brought complex understandings of blood and *àṣẹ* to the encounter. On the other hand, Claver was very sympathetic toward the enslaved Africans and is still heralded as a patron saint among many Afro-Caribbean Catholic communities. This polydox soteriology occupies a third space as it speaks directly to the role of religion in the colonial activity of Spain against the enslaved Africans and the indigenous population of Cuba. This polydox soteriology draws from Catholicism, traditional Yoruba understandings of *àṣẹ* and Cuban Santeria – while quietly condemning theft. *The Living Blood* condemns the theft of Jesus' blood by Khaldun, the violent ways the mercenaries try to steal the blood, and – as postmodern womanist reading assumes – the theft of African bodies in the slave trade. Polydox soteriology becomes postcolonial as it condemns colonial activity, and yet works with its consequences to heal the world. Polydox soteriology does not eschew the conflicts of religious and political history; rather it acknowledges, assesses, and utilizes this toward creative transformation.

This reading of salvation in *The Living Blood* bears other markers of polydoxy (in addition to multiplicity). The normative goal of creative transformation gives value to the multiple options available with the use of the blood. The process roots of postmodern womanism affirm relationality and universal incarnation of divinity. Relationality can be seen in the radical incarnation of blood and divinity. Not only is incarnation universal in the way that the blood can be transferred to anyone, but divinity is evident in multiple forces. There is divine power or divinity itself in the wind, rain, the hurricane, the blood, Jessica, Fana, Dawit, and many others. Finally, there is an element of mystery. While both blood and *àṣẹ* are real in their contexts, they maintain a level of mystery. We never know how or why they are efficacious. Even the medical doctors in the novel cannot discern the composition of the blood, or why it works the way that it does.

If we read *The Living Blood* through a postmodern womanist theological lens, we can learn how to practice a polydox soteriology. We learn that the route to health will be global. It may be as transnational as Jessica's journey from Botswana to Ethiopia or as transcontinental as the triangular slave trade and the current movement of African Americans between the United States, the Caribbean, and the continent of Africa. Yet a polydox soteriology is also necessarily postcolonial. It acknowledges the colonial practices of enslavement and proselytization that

led to the creation of entire religious and cultural traditions, while advocating the practices that lead to liberation, justice, and freedom.

A polydox soteriology is also feminist and womanist. It challenges the status quo and sees salvation in the activities of women. Perhaps, as in *The Living Blood*, women (and women's communities) are uniquely qualified to initiate polydox soteriology. Perhaps they can invoke female deities concerned with women's justice to destroy exclusive death-dealing practices in the world and promote healing and wholeness.

A polydox soteriology may be complex, but it is liveable and loveable. It was the love between Jessica and Dawit that created Fana, in the first place. The powerful force of salvation was created quite literally from love. The community envisioned at the end of the novel is bound together by the blood, but more so by their intentional creative harnessing of the blood, and the affections they have for one another. As they plan a way forward, they also experience the bonds of love: through marriage, sexual expression, and child rearing.

If *The Living Blood* is any indication of a polydox soteriology, then we must also understand that a polydox soteriology may be dangerous. The potential for creativity also contains potential for destruction. While there are some who are interested in the common good, there are also many who are interested in personal and private goods. Individualism and greed often engages violence to get its way. Many individuals and institutions are invested in a single "right" way. This is as true of politics and economics as it is of religion. Pursuing polydox soteriology involves risk – if only because it challenges neater, more unitary approaches toward the same goal. Nevertheless the world is complex and diverse, and a polydox way appears to be necessary – if we are to heal the world.

Notes

1 Alice Walker writes a four-part description of "womanist" which includes the phrase: "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health." A. Walker (ed.), *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983, pp. xi–xii.

2 The argument in this section is a summary of postmodern womanist theology as laid out in my book: M. A. Coleman, *Making A Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology,* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008.

3 G. S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998, 3rd ed., p. 280.

4 Many *òrìṣà* in Yoruba religion have multiple names although they signify the same force. This is partly attributable to the distribution of the religion throughout Yorubaland, and the Yoruba-based religions in the New World. This chapter may refer to *Olódùmarè/Olorun*, *Obatala/Orişa-nla*, *Orunmila/Ifà*, *Èṣù/Elegba/Elegbara*. This chapter will also use the "ş" to indicate the sound of "sh." There is no consistency in scholarship (usually because of the inconsistent capability of word processors and attempts to translate into English) so "*àṣẹ*" is also "ashe" and "*òrìṣà*" is also "orisha." Note *òrìṣà* is the same in the plural or singular usage.

5 For more information see: G. Edwards and J. Mason, *Black Gods: Orisa Studies in the New World*, Brooklyn, NY: Yoruba Theological Archministry, 1985; E. B. Idowu,

Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief, New York: A and B Books, 1994; and J. Olupona and T. Ray (eds), *Orisa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2008.

6 A. O. Ogbannaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity*, New York: Paragon House, 1994.
7 Ibid., p. 23.
8 I have made this argument in greater detail in "From Models of God to a Model of Gods: How Whiteheadian Language Facilitates Western Language Discussion of Divine Multiplicity," *Philosophia*, 35: 3–4, 2007, pp. 329–40.
9 W. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976; and H. L. Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theology of African-American Literary Criticism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
10 A. B. DeVita, *Mythatypes: Signatures and Signs of African/Diaspora and Black Goddesses*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.
11 T. Due, *My Soul to Keep*, New York: Eos, 1998.
12 T. Due, *The Living Blood*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
13 J. Gleason, *Oya: In Praise of an African Goddess*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.
14 A. Fá'lokun Fatunmbi, *Oya: Ifa and the Spirit of the Wind*, Bronx, NY: Original Publications, 1993, p. 12.
15 A. Isola, "Oya: Inspiration and Empowerment," *Dialogue and Alliance*, Spring–Summer 1998, Vol. 12, p. 61.
16 J. Gleason, "Oya in the Company of the Saints," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 68, 2, 2000, p. 276.
17 Due, p. 373.
18 Gleason, p. 31.
19 Due, p. 74.
20 Gleason, p. 5.
21 Due, p. 75.
22 R. F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, New York: Vintage, 1983, p. 5.
23 H. Drewal and M. T. Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983, p. 5.
24 Due, p. 93.
25 E. D. Reynolds, *Jesuits for the Negro*, New York: America Press, 1949, p. 22.
26 Joseph Murphy reflects on this practice: "We can only imagine how Yoruba slaves would interpret this catechesis or what truth of Christian dogma they would derive from it." J. M. Murphy, *Santería: An African Religion in America*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988, p. 110. As a side note, Claver is best known for his missionary activities in Cartagena, Columbia, but he did work in other Caribbean countries, including Cuba.
27 Due, p. 271.
28 Ibid., p. 98.
29 Ibid., p. 509.
30 Ibid., p. 208.
31 Ibid., p. 273.
32 Ibid., p. 274.
33 D. S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, p. 167.
34 Ibid.
35 J. M. Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998.

11 "They'll know we are process thinkers by our …"

Finding the ecological ethic of Whitehead through the lens of Jainism and ecofeminist care

Brianne Donaldson

There is a poignant dissonance within the hymn from which the title of this paper is derived: "They will know we are Christians by our love." Written in 1968 by Chicago Parish Priest Peter R. Scholtes, one can hardly miss the irony. Scholtes, marked by a tradition that reveres religious power and priestly piety, suggests "love" as the outward sign which most aptly demonstrates this group identity. Yet it is not the regalia of the pontiff or the sacraments at the altar, but love as unity, cooperation, and in-group team building that permeates each refrain of Scholtes' melodic vision.

However, there are no instructions in these lyrics regarding what to do when one reaches the liminal edge of Scholtes' in-group perimeter. Whether the dynamics of love or power win out when identity collides with difference is unclear. The choir is naked it seems, without the cover of any ideological garments when encountering the multiplicity that lurks outside the group's edge.

English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead locates the creative unfolding of life at these edges, where multiplicities collide and, although he left no record of hymn writing to help subsequent generations navigate this precarious borderland, there is much about power and love to be gleaned from his considerable writings. In Whitehead's process worldview, every event in space-time uniquely creates itself from the past it inherits, always constituted and affected by an array of relationships – from a historical multiplicity – and contributing its own becoming to the future of manifold possibilities. To paraphrase Whitehead, the many become one and are increased by that one.[1]

Difference is not merely tolerated in this process, but its presence is vital to the liveliness of reality as we can, and cannot, see it. Radical relationism of this magnitude begins where, according to Catherine Keller, "the mere celebration of difference breaks down – where the exuberant affirmation of pluralism seeks more than the rupture of old boundaries and the proliferation of new ones."[2] It begins where "love" moves us beyond group identity into the margins of a wild, unruly encounter with otherness.

Counterintuitive love of this sort is not easily lyricized for the masses. In fact, exchanging the values of western culture, built upon boundaries of self-, human-, national-, and consumer-centeredness, for values that might acknowledge, say, that "the life of an insect might be every bit as valuable as my own," would be a