

## Roundtable Discussion

### MUST I BE WOMANIST?

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#### Early Influences: Black Feminist and Womanist

I'm a black female religious scholar, but I'm not sure I'm a womanist. I was a black feminist before I heard of "womanist." I discovered black feminists in college when studying the black arts movements of the 1970s. I identified black feminism with the 1970s—black power, poetry, literature, and defiance. In my eyes, black feminists were radical, fire-eating, justice-loving, law-defying women. Later in my college career, I came to the term *womanist* through literature. While writing a paper on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I read Alice Walker's essays about recovering Zora Neale Hurston. I appreciated and related to Walker's quest for a role model: "I write all the things I *should have* been able to read."<sup>1</sup>

I later learned of the womanist movement in religious scholarship. While looking for religious themes in black women's writings, I came across Katie G. Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988).<sup>2</sup> It was the first time I read about black women's literature from the perspective of a religious scholar. As a result of Cannon's work and that of other womanists, I never once doubted that I could have a place in religious scholarship. I never felt the pain that no one was talking about my experience, my literature, or my role models. I know that the first

<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 13. See also Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1937).

<sup>2</sup> Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

generation of womanist religious scholars worked hard to create a world where a young woman could have this kind of experience. They gave me the experience they wanted to have; *the experience they should have been able to have*. For this, I am grateful beyond words, and I think of them as my godmothers. They mothered me into the academic study of God.

As I have met the women whose work I read, I know them as more than writers and scholars. They are passionate people of faith, dedicated teachers, gentle and encouraging mentors, and weary but joyful trailblazers. I can't imagine what kind of scholar I would be, what kind of woman I would be, if I had not encountered Walker, Cannon, and Renita Weems, and encountered them *before* William Faulkner, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Walter Brueggemann.

I tell these stories as more than personal narrative. I believe that I am one of a number of black female scholars who do not know the world or the discipline of religious studies without the influence of feminist and womanist religious scholarship. I question my identity as womanist because I've also been shaped by black feminists, and I believe that I'm part of a generation of women who have grown up (intellectually) during a time that takes womanism as a given.

### Not a Womanist: Critiques and Black Feminist Leanings

I'm not sure I'm a womanist. In her definition, Walker describes *womanist* as "a black feminist or feminist of color."<sup>3</sup> But I've long sensed a difference between the two—or at least in the way the two movements have developed. There are those who identify specifically as "womanist": Cannon, Delores Williams, Emilie Townes, and Jacquelyn Grant. And there are some people who call themselves "black feminist" but not "womanist": Angela Davis, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Smith. I haven't been able to put my finger on the precise nature of this difference, but I have some intimations.

When I read Walker's definition, I feel at home, but the trajectory of womanist religious scholarship has left me in a house without enough furniture. There are not enough chairs, couches, or beds for me or many of the black women I know and love. It isn't a place where we can be who we are in some of the most important ways we live—sexually, spiritually, or politically. I've been dissatisfied by the heteronormativity of womanist religious scholarship. Walker clearly states that a womanist "loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually." I think it no coincidence that Walker references sexual love before nonsexual love, and that this phrase falls before her reference to loving men. Walker gives a primacy to the sexual love between women, something that womanists have often failed to do.

Womanist religious scholars have done very little to address the theological,

<sup>3</sup> All references to Walker's definition are found in Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi–xii.

spiritual, and religious experiences of black lesbians (and gays). More than ten years ago, womanist theologian Renee Hill critiqued her colleagues for their failure to address the issue of lesbianism: “Christian women have failed to recognize heterosexism and homophobia as points of oppression that need to be resisted if *all* Black women (straight, lesbian and bisexual) are to have liberation and a sense of their own power.”<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, womanist theologians have long been willing to add heterosexism to the matrix of oppressive forces that affect the lives of black women (in addition to racism, sexism, and classism).<sup>5</sup> In fact, Kelly Brown Douglas does this as early as *The Black Christ* (1994) and gives it greater attention in her later book *Sexuality and the Black Church* (1999).<sup>6</sup> To her credit, Douglas writes about the entire purview of black sexuality and the black church, and other womanists actively teach about heterosexism and homophobia.<sup>7</sup> I’m not sure which is more disappointing though—that no womanist wrote more than a few paragraphs about homosexuality until the twenty-first century, or that Douglas connects the church’s need to address homosexuality with the HIV/AIDS crisis in the black community.<sup>8</sup>

Generally, however, womanist religious scholarship is typified by a silence about homosexuality. At times the silence is obvious and deafening. Womanists reference Audre Lorde’s discussion of the erotic as power without discussing Lorde’s personal expression of the erotic. Womanists discuss Baby Suggs’s sermon in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*’s Clearing without including the perhaps-sexual relationship in Morrison’s *Sula*.<sup>9</sup> Womanists frequently cite Celie and Shug’s conversation about God in Walker’s *The Color Purple*, while omitting the pas-

<sup>4</sup> Renee Leslie Hill, “Who Are We for Each Other? Sexism, Sexuality and Womanist Theology,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, vol. 2, 1980–1992, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 346.

<sup>5</sup> Delores S. Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, Bishop Henry McNeal Studies in North American Black Religion 8 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 146–47; Toinette M. Eugene, “‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot!’: A Womanist Response to Sexual Violence and Abuse,” in *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), 189.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*, Bishop Henry McNeal Studies in North American Black Religion 9 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 101; Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> See interviews with Jacquelyn Grant, Emilie M. Townes, Kelly Brown Douglas, and M. Shawn Copeland in Gary David Comstock, *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 1–3. Douglas acknowledges that there is no direct correlation between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS; nevertheless, she uses the HIV/AIDS crisis as a personal and institutional entrée into the discussion of homophobia in the black community 3).

<sup>9</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1987); Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

sionate love Celie finds in Shug's arms.<sup>10</sup> Without giving detailed attention to the issue of sexual orientation, womanists paint a picture of black women as sisters, other-mothers, girlfriends, and loving church mothers, when there is much more to the picture. Douglas asserts that this silence is part of the overall taboo of discussing sexuality within the black community.<sup>11</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher is more direct: "I suspect that for many [womanists, our silence about homosexuality] is for the same reason that many gays and lesbians hesitate to come out of the closet: fear of losing a job, of being thrown out of church, ostracized in the community."<sup>12</sup> The silence is understandable, but it quickly becomes complicity.

This silence is particularly disturbing given the fact that black lesbians were so active and vocal in the development of black feminism. In the Combahee River Collective's black feminist statement of 1977, the authors repeatedly refer to the collaboration among "black feminists and lesbians."<sup>13</sup> In "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" (1983), Cheryl Clarke harshly criticizes black female scholars for their homophobic silence: "Like her black male counterpart, the black woman intellectual is afraid to relinquish heterosexual privilege." Clarke insists that the black community address homophobia, not because of HIV/AIDS or to fight oppression, but because "ain't lesbians women too?"<sup>14</sup> Self-identified black feminists spoke out about the issue of heterosexism more than twenty years before womanist religious scholars did.

Black female ethicist Cheryl Sanders readily, and appropriately, I believe, divorces herself from the label "womanist," because she refuses to "affirm and/or advocate homosexual practices."<sup>15</sup> For this reason, she argues, no Christian should embrace the label "womanist." In many ways, I agree. If one is not willing to openly, forthrightly, and consistently critique heterosexism and homophobia with the same fervor as the critique of sexism, racism, and classism, then perhaps one should not be a "womanist."

As noted earlier, I also feel that womanist religious scholarship has not done

<sup>10</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square, 1982); Cheryl Clarke makes a similar critique in "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983), 203–5.

<sup>11</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, "Daring to Speak: Womanist Theology and Black Sexuality," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 236–37.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher in Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 259.

<sup>13</sup> Combahee River Collective, "Black Feminist Statement," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), 13–22.

<sup>14</sup> Clarke, "Failure to Transform," 205.

<sup>15</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 90.

well in reflecting the religious pluralism of black women's faith associations. When Walker writes that a womanist "loves the Spirit," womanist religious scholars seem to have read, "loves the Christian Spirit." I cannot fault womanists for being true to their own faith declarations, which often are Christian. In fact, womanist religious scholars have done a wonderful job at transforming the church from within. Marcia Riggs analyzes sexism within black churches in *Plenty Good Room* (2003). Cheryl Townsend Gilkes reminds the black church of its historical and contemporary dependence on black women in "*If It Wasn't for the Women*" (2001). In *Time for Honor*, Delores Carpenter writes extensively on the often-inequitable experiences of black female clergy in comparison with their male counterparts.<sup>16</sup> Many womanists maintain a commitment to write for both the church and the academy: Renita Weems, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, and Karen Baker-Fletcher immediately come to mind. Where others may have, and some have, given up on the church's ability to include and value the voices and leadership of women, Christian womanists cling to their faith and the ground of this faith with a tenacity that is second to none.

In this process, however, womanists have often assumed that black women's religious experiences are Christian. Sanders's earlier comment reveals both the assertion of a particular kind of Christianity and the assumption that womanist religious scholars always reference Christianity. Baker-Fletcher notes that womanists have often followed the pattern of "black Christian women" who tend to "conflate God (Creator), Jesus, and Holy Spirit during the ordinary, everyday eloquent prayers in homes, churches, and gatherings."<sup>17</sup> Without clarifying the theological difference between God and Jesus, womanists are incapable of speaking to the many black women who do not identify as Christian (or Christians with low Christologies). Intentionally or not, womanists have created a Christian hegemonic discourse within the field.

This christocentric discourse leaves womanist religious scholarship without a language for many black women's religious experiences. How, for example, might a womanist interpret the strength Tina Turner finds in Buddhism and the role her faith played in helping her to leave a violent relationship? More importantly, how would a womanist describe Walker's "born-again pagan" spirituality?<sup>18</sup> Few womanist scholars have dared to describe black women's spirituality

<sup>16</sup> Marcia Y. Riggs, *Plenty Good Room: Women versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "*If It Wasn't for the Women . . .*": *Black Women's Experience and Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); Delores C. Carpenter, *Time for Honor: A Portrait of African American Clergywomen* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher in Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Alice Walker, "The River: Honoring the Difficult," in *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult; A Meditation on Life, Spirit, Art, and the Making of the Film "The Color Purple" Ten Years Later* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 25.

when a womanist is one who “loves nature” or “loves the universe.”<sup>19</sup> I find this aspect of womanist religious scholarship particularly painful, because the Christian assumption does not speak to the multifaith nature of my own spirituality and scholarship.

Black feminists have been more willing to consider non-Christian religions. As a Lucumi priestess<sup>20</sup> and voodoo researcher, Luisah Teish describes “woman-oriented magical practices” in the early black feminist anthology *Home Girls* (1983).<sup>21</sup> Teish connects New Orleans voodoo and the leadership of Marie LaVeau and her female descendants to African women and black feminism, asserting that the religious practices “can be used to harness power and direct it toward social change.”<sup>22</sup> In 1981, black feminist Sabrina Sojourner described black men and women’s departure from the church into goddess religions. Acknowledging that some white feminists are well known for their rejection of Christianity (Mary Daly, Starhawk, and Carol Christ come to mind), Sojourner highlighted the goddess heritage of black women.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the anthology with the most diverse representation of black women’s spirituality was compiled by a self-identified black feminist: Gloria Wade-Gayles’s *My Soul Is a Witness* (1995).<sup>24</sup>

Womanist religious scholarship has taken few strong political stances. This is not to say that womanist religious scholarship is apolitical. Womanist scholars have excavated and analyzed the politics of African American women in history. Riggs includes political leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary Church Terrell, and Shirley Chisholm as “prophetic voices” in her 1997 anthology *Can I Get a Witness?*<sup>25</sup> Townes examines the moral fervor and influence of Ida Wells-Barnett’s antilynching campaign in *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (1993).<sup>26</sup> In *Witnessing and Testifying* (2003), Rosetta E. Ross discusses the moral and religious fiber of the work of several African American female activists.<sup>27</sup> Williams,

<sup>19</sup> Only two womanists have ventured close: Karen Baker-Fletcher, in *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), and Barbara A. Holmes, in *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Lucumi is a West African Yoruba-based religion closely related to Santeria.

<sup>21</sup> Luisah Teish, “Women’s Spirituality: A Household Act,” in Smith, *Home Girls*, 333.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Sabrina Sojourner, “From the House of Yemanja: The Goddess Heritage of Black Women,” in *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power within the Feminist Movement*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1982), 57–63.

<sup>24</sup> Gloria Wade-Gayles, ed., *My Soul Is a Witness: African-American Women’s Spirituality* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Marcia Y. Riggs, ed., *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

Grant, and Douglas have given sustained attention to the ways that slavery and white racism shaped the particular religious experiences of black women. Most womanists have not, however, connected black women's historic beliefs with the rationale for why one should continue to believe the same things in today's postmodern pluralistic context. Thus, they have been more descriptive than proscriptive and have tackled few issues of contemporary politics.

Some womanists have, nevertheless, engaged current affairs. Kirk-Duggan's work on violence discusses black women's experiences with sexual, domestic, and gang violence and the complicity of religion.<sup>28</sup> Baker-Fletcher's *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit* (1998) draws the church's attention to issues of environmental racism.<sup>29</sup> Townes's *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death* (1998) eloquently describes the health-care crises in the African American community.<sup>30</sup> These works connect black women's (Christian) spirituality to important crises and their correlative public-policy issues. They raise the consciousness of both ecclesial and academic communities, and offer suggestions for next steps. I am, however, still disappointed that few womanist religious scholars, nonethicists in particular, will boldly state, "One *ought* to believe X" or "One *should* interpret the text in Y way" because this (womanist) perspective has uncovered an important and crucial insight.

This critique brings up the larger issue of the scope of womanist religious scholarship. The descriptive nature of womanist religious scholarship suggests that it is of black women, by black women, for black women. If so, is the academic contribution any greater than telling white folk what we already know about our own spirituality? Is a book a piece of womanist religious scholarship if the author identifies herself as a womanist but makes no reference to the particular experiences of black women? Or is a work womanist because it draws on the work of womanist religious scholars? Does drawing from the experiences of black women make something womanist? Can womanists make religious assertions for all people? Or have womanists shied so far away from the universalism of white men's experiences that they are reluctant to expand the insights from black women's experiences to a more universal audience?

Perhaps it is the political edge that draws me toward the label "black feminist." The word *feminist* still conjures images of the commitments I express on a daily basis—issues around music, love, and teaching. Johnnetta Cole and Bev-

<sup>28</sup> Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Refiner's Fire: A Religious Engagement with Violence* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) and *Misbegotten Anguish: A Theology and Ethics of Violence* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002). I do not include Traci C. West's *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999) here, because West intentionally identifies herself as a "black feminist."

<sup>29</sup> Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust*.

<sup>30</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (New York: Continuum, 1998). I want to note that this work is not very christocentric and is open to non-Christian interpretation and use.

erly Guy-Sheftall boldly critique the misogyny of hip-hop culture.<sup>31</sup> In her work, bell hooks writes candidly of men, women, love, and sex.<sup>32</sup> I turn to Patricia Hill Collins every semester to check my feminist pedagogy.<sup>33</sup> To put it in anecdotal terms, when I tell my black male friends that I'm a womanist, they think of me as a black churchwoman, which I sometimes am. When I tell them that I am a black feminist, they get a little uneasy, because they start to wonder if I'm aligned with lesbians, if I'm going to question their power, and if I'm going to call God "She"—all of which I also do. I find the word *feminist*, whether modified by *black* or not, to have the disruptive effect that I want.

In her 1996 essay "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond," Patricia Hill Collins writes about the schisms between "womanists" and "black feminists." She notes that Walker's definition highlights the existing heterogeneity within black social and political thought—the same heterogeneity that exists among black women. Collins chastises the scholars who self-identify as womanist and "carefully select the parts that agree with their worldview and reject the rest," and calls womanists to distinguish between using the word *womanist* to "describe black women's historical responses" and using it to "delineate an ethical or ideal vision."<sup>34</sup>

Collins also talks about the connotation of being a black feminist. Black feminists are associated with an advocacy of the economic, political, marital, and health rights of women around the globe. One more readily thinks of black feminists as entering into conversation with white feminists, lesbians, and politics in general. Still, Collins wonders how black feminists will contend with the issues of difference, deconstruction, and individualism that typify feminism. Do they, she asks, limit their ability to communicate with black religious traditions that may have theological or biblical contestations with an embrace of homosexuality? I agree with Collins on all points. Womanist religious scholarship makes me feel that I am grounded in my own history. But black feminism makes me feel global and political. They both have shortcomings.

### Must Be Womanist: The Branding of "Womanist"

I'm a black female religious scholar. On the academic job market, that means I'm also a womanist. As I approached both the job market and the writing of my dissertation, I found that my colleagues and superiors had an often-stated assumption not only that I was familiar with womanist theology but also

<sup>31</sup> Johnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: One World / Ballantine, 2003), 182–215.

<sup>32</sup> bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Perennial Currents, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name? Womanist, Black Feminism, and Beyond," *Black Scholar* 26, no. 1 (Winter–Spring 1996): 16.



that I was committed to writing womanist theology. The assumption is that all black women in the academic study of religion are womanists. Sadly enough, it is almost a marketable necessity. Whatever my academic proficiencies, interviewing committees always ask, “Can you teach black and womanist theology?” This fact became clear: if I wanted to get a job, I had better identify as a womanist, and do it quickly. The theme continues as I prepare to publish revisions of my dissertation. The word *womanist* should appear in the title, I am told. That way, editors say, people can find the book when they do a word search and the publishers know how to identify the book.

I give these personal sketches as examples of the commodification and commercialization of the term *womanist* within the academic study of religion. I cannot imagine that the first womanists ever dreamed that this would happen. After all, as Cannon says, so many of them had to fight just to prove that black women were a legitimate subject/object of study in the field of religion.<sup>35</sup> As womanist religious scholars grew from the initial triumvirate (Cannon, Grant, and Weems) to a second and third generation of black female religious scholars, the term *womanist* was inserted and generally accepted as a significant field of study. One dare not study liberation theologies or feminist theologies without mention of womanist theology. For this, there is cause célèbre. But has this progress forced all black female religious scholars into the rubric of “womanist”?

The academy’s religion market does not bear sole responsibility for the branding of “womanist.” Black female religious scholars use the word *womanist* to identify a support network, Listserv, and programmatic section at local and national meetings of the American Academy of Religion. The term *womanist* was originally created to engender freedom: Walker chose the word because it was “more reflective of black women’s culture, especially Southern culture.”<sup>36</sup> She liked “the feel, the fit, the sound” of the word.<sup>37</sup> I don’t always feel or fit into “womanist.” As I choose a name for myself, I commit treason against someone—either the womanists who mentored me into religion or the black feminists who raised my consciousness, employed me, and encouraged my writing.<sup>38</sup>

Just as the field of womanist religious scholarship has grown in convergence with and departure from Walker’s life and definition, so the term *womanist* may now be larger than the women who initially claimed it. Can womanists reclaim

<sup>35</sup> Katie G. Cannon, “Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community” (Women in Ministry and Justice Lecture Series, Bennett College for Women, Greensboro, NC, March 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Alice Walker, “Audre’s Voice,” in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer’s Activism* (New York: Random House, 1997), 80.

<sup>37</sup> David Bradley, “Alice Walker: Telling the Black Women’s Story,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 8, 1984, 25–37.

<sup>38</sup> Here I am referring to my employment at Bennett College for Women, where self-identified black feminist Johnnetta B. Cole is the president; and to my meeting with Gloria Wade-Gayles at the Southern Writers’ Festival (July 1998).

the term? Do they even want to? Is this commercialization a sign of advancement? Or have hierarchical (often white and male) entities co-opted it, as yet another way to brand and classify black women and our thoughts? If this is the case, womanism has not had the revolutionary effect of its black feminist roots. Perhaps the realistic need for job security tempers the fire of the revolution.

### More Womanists: A Third Wave?

I'm a black female religious scholar, and I've been strongly influenced by both black feminism and womanist religious scholarship. In *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (1999), Dwight Hopkins identifies a first generation and second generation of black theologians, applauding the womanists for challenging the sexism of their male elders in black theology.<sup>39</sup> But Hopkins does not classify my generation of black female religious scholars.

What would it mean to discuss a third generation of black religious scholarship? Perhaps black religious scholarship is experiencing something similar to feminism's third wave. Third-wave feminism is the name given to an eclectic group of young feminists with diverse issues and strategies of addressing injustice in contemporary society. It is easier to describe *who* the third wave is than *what* the third wave is. Third-wave feminists are the generation of women and men who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s. Third wavers are the "first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of [their] lives."<sup>40</sup> Yet third-wave feminists believe that theirs is better identified as a political generation.<sup>41</sup> That is, membership in the third wave is determined not simply by age or birth rite but by affiliation with similar issues and politics.<sup>42</sup> Third wavers represent diverse issues as they break away from the definitive stance of the previous generation. Some will eschew the problems and terms of their forebears. Others will want to claim them and change their meaning. Third-wave feminists are individualistic and communitarian, academics, activists and stay-at-home moms, knitters and athletes, bitches, dykes, and ladies. Third wavers want to live out the rights for which the second generation fought.

Acknowledging a third wave within black religious scholarship may allow for the reclamation of religious heritage and terminology. I have colleagues who refuse to be called "womanist," preferring instead "black feminist," because

<sup>39</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Barbara Findlen, introduction to *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1995), xii.

<sup>41</sup> Nancy Whittier, "Turning It Over: Personnel Change in the Columbus, Ohio, Women's Movement, 1969–1984," in *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, ed. Myra Marx and Patricia Yancey Martin (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 180.

<sup>42</sup> Rita Alfonso and Jo Trigilio, "Surfing the Third Wave: A Dialogue between Two Third Wave Feminists," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 7–16.

they do not want to be associated with what they see as the shortcomings of womanist religious scholarship. I also have a cadre of friends who still want to own the label “womanist” and bring it back to its roots in Walker’s definition and writings. Some black female religious scholars still want to be called “womanist” as they broaden the field. Three examples come to mind: Dianne Stewart, who works with Caribbean religions; Tracey Hucks, who works on African traditional religions; and Debra Mubashir Majeed, who works in Islam. Still others want to qualify their womanist associations. Baker-Fletcher has claimed the label “Walker-womanist” as she articulates her convergences with and departures from Alice Walker’s expressed spirituality.<sup>43</sup>

The idea of a third wave of black religious scholarship could lead to a redefinition of womanist religious scholarship. Such naming has room for Randall Bailey, who is currently calling himself a “womanist sympathizer.”<sup>44</sup> This kind of womanism could include Darnise C. Martin’s work with African American new-thought religions, Irene Monroe’s black lesbian commitments, and my decidedly Whiteheadian process theology. This terminology may give my wave of black female religious scholars a reason to call ourselves “womanist.” We would be grateful for the work of the earlier generations, and, given the relative youth of this theological movement, we can be rather excited that there is a third wave *already*. We can identify ourselves as male and female, Christian, Muslim, pagan, new-thought, Buddhist, and Ifa. We can call ourselves academics and activists and ministers, priests, nuns, and *iyalorishas*.<sup>45</sup> We will be straight, lesbian, and bisexual, faithful and humanist. We knit, make jewelry, sing, write poetry, and dance. We run two miles a day, lift weights, and climb rocks. Some of us may be southerners, Christians, and members of the NAACP. Others of us may be northerners, Dutch, South Africans, Black Nationalists, or Greens. This wave can reserve the right to, in fact relish in the opportunity to, challenge the assumptions of those who have come before.

This wave may tackle some of the issues that the second wave missed: bisexuality, colorism and standards of beauty,<sup>46</sup> eating disorders and obesity, class realities (after all, if we’re writing books, we can’t be too far down on the class scale), mental health, progressive Christianity, paganism, indigenous spiritual-

<sup>43</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, “Womanist Passion,” in *The Passion of the Lord: African American Reflections*, ed. James A. Noel and Matthew V. Johnson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 125–36.

<sup>44</sup> Randall C. Bailey, lecture at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Black Religion (Louisville Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, March 11, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> Ifa is a system of divination among the Yoruba of West Africa. Many African Americans refer to the practice of traditional Yoruba religion with the term *Ifa*. *Iyalorishas* are priestesses in this tradition.

<sup>46</sup> “Colorism” is another aspect of black experiences that Alice Walker references in the definition of *womanist*: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” See footnote 3.

ity, and participation in other world religions—like Baha’i and Buddhism. These are the issues I want to read about. Then again, there could be other options. We might need to keep the distinction between “black feminist” and “womanist” to connote our commitments, putting on the mask of “womanist” when it’s time to get that job. It could be time for new words, or a modifier for “womanist.” Or maybe we’ll find that the term *womanist* has had its run, and it is time for a new term altogether.

#### RESPONSE

*Katie G. Cannon*

Answering Monica Coleman’s question, “Must I be womanist?” seems a logical place to begin my response. No, it is not necessary or essential that every African American female be self-identified as a womanist. The what, how, and why of the *womanist* definition bear broad application, indicating that a womanist is a self-naming sensibility that is not coerced.<sup>1</sup> Black feminists and other feminists of color embrace the label “womanist”—and the epistemological mandate that it implies—by our own conscious volition and free will. In other words, for those of us who read and subscribe to the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, “womanist” is the methodological framework that the vast majority of African American women have been using for the past twenty years to challenge inherited traditions of androcentric patriarchy, and as a method of engaging in revolutionary acts of resistance as members of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.

For two decades women scholars of African descent have exposed layer upon layer of shocking inequalities in the world of religious studies. From 1985 until now, womanists have been most vocal despite intense opposition via white supremacy, male superiority, and class elitism concerning black women’s substantive contributions as full-fledged members within theological discourse. While this is not an easy task, womanists contend that we must name—and continue to name—the particularities of God’s presence in our everyday realities, because such clarity enhances our ability to tap the sacred foundation of our common humanity.

Erasing twenty years of intellectual history by eliminating *womanist* from our ongoing vocabulary reminds me of what Sonya Murray and Derek Conrad Murray discuss as the hip-hop generation’s need to create an iconographic aesthetic by shedding conventional notions of what “blackness” traditionally symbolized in the identity politics codified in the 1980s. In their essay “A Rising

<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.

Generation and the Pleasures of Freedom,” Murray and Murray state, “Terms like ‘post-black,’ ‘post-soul aesthetic’ . . . are being coined to try and capture what appears to be a distinctive shift in a generation that has grown up after the civil rights era.”<sup>2</sup> However, I see that the real challenge before us is not to become “post-womanist” but to investigate feasible ways to actualize the definition of *womanism* so that we address the disturbing realities that Coleman describes with prophetic accuracy—without dismantling the womanist house of wisdom.

According to Coleman, “[T]he trajectory of womanist religious scholarship has left me in a house without enough furniture.” As a first-generation womanist, I accept Coleman’s critique of “a house without enough furniture” as a fair and honest assessment. The analogy that comes to mind takes me back to the summer of 1971, when I was a member of an Operation Crossroads Africa work camp of twelve young adults in the town of Pleebo, near Cape Palmas, Liberia. Our assignment was to build a library. None of us had ever done construction work before. Nevertheless, for approximately six hours every day for sixty days, we adorned our pith helmets, brogans, and work gloves; shouldered pickaxes, shovels, and spades; and rode on the back of rickety, wobbly dump trucks hauling sand from the oceanside to our work site in our effort to dig and pour a foundation. This common undertaking in any construction project is of utmost importance, because the foundation is the portion of any structure that transfers the weight of the building to the ground. The foundation is the first part of the building, in some ways the hardest part, though the least accommodating and least elegant. It establishes the basic footing for future construction.

Those of us who have been busy doing womanist work from the moment that we enrolled in seminary believe that we have built a solid womanist foundation. We officially began constructing this womanist house of wisdom in 1985, and as intellectual laborers we continue to work day in and day out so that our scholarly infrastructure is built on solid rock instead of shifting sand. Let us celebrate this analogous reality by acknowledging that the second generation of womanist scholars has completed the structure of the womanist house of wisdom,<sup>3</sup> and now it is time for Coleman’s contemporaries, whom she identifies as the “third wave,” to furnish the interior, to provide supportive objects that indicate a readiness for occupancy.

<sup>2</sup> See Soraya Murray and Derek Conrad Murray, “A Rising Generation and the Pleasures of Freedom,” in “Post-Black, Post-Soul, or Hip-Hop Iconography—Defining a New Aesthetics,” special issue, *International Review of African American Art* 20, no. 2 (2005): 3. Growing numbers of African American women and men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five find the strident understandings of “blackness” and “soul” that were codified in the 1970s by civil rights activists and black power strategists foreign to their twenty-first-century self-understanding.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the womanist house of wisdom, see Katie G. Cannon, Alison P. Gise Johnson, and Angela D. Sims, “Womanist Works in Word,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 135–46.

There are additional truths in Coleman's essay, for example, her critique of womanism and sexuality: "Womanist religious scholars have done very little to address the theological, spiritual, and religious experiences of black lesbians (and gays)." In both substance and tone, Coleman prompts an examination of our starting point—the sexual realities of American women of African descent as a result of the transatlantic slave trade—regarding human sexuality. She invites us to break the silence regarding the extremely touchy subject of heteronormativity. We womanists, for our part, must lay bare the persistent and collective struggle of African Americans to counter more than four hundred years of dehumanizing, racist stereotypes of the "black body as ugly" while simultaneously being an "object of sexual desire."

Although it is fairly uncontroversial to say that the vast majority of African American women are caught in the midst of competing sexual realities, the extent that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons experience death-dealing dynamics (for example, rape, battering, medical butchering, sex-motivated murder, forced prostitution, and physical mutilation) in the dailiness of life is often a forbidden topic in ecclesiastical conversations. Until recently, black women's bodies have been degraded, demeaned, and demonized—locked into an oppressive gaze of so-called normative beauty created in opposition to us, and in turn we, as first-generation womanists, have been taught (and far too many womanists continue to teach black females) that we must suppress, repress, compress, and depress the sexual aspect of our humanity by reinforcing norms and practices that proclaim procreative sex as a gift from God and relational or recreational sex as the devil's handiwork. In essence, the moralizing hegemonic construct of irreconcilable opposites insists either that sex is a positive blessing for procreative purposes only or that sex is a negative curse that lays claim to bodily pleasure. Interestingly enough, when perceived through the lens of heteropatriarchal imagination (that is, the assumption that normal sexual activity should occur only between female and male in a reproductive context), the pleasures of genital-sexual eroticism lock African Americans between rigidly disembodied hetero-homo binaries.<sup>4</sup>

Coleman's essay is both lucid and candid, incorporating equal measures of personal and academic integrity as she outlines the narrative history of the womanist movement in juxtaposition with feminism. As readers, we easily grasp some of the jarring circumstances and religious complexities that cause the post-civil-rights-movement generation of African Americans to question this intellectual inheritance. The primary dilemma here, and one that Coleman employs as her overarching inquiry, is whether our twenty-year struggle to build this womanist house of wisdom can ever result in a third-wave womanist's home.

<sup>4</sup> Katie G. Cannon, "Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Palgrave / Macmillan, 2004), 11–30.

## RESPONSE

*Arisika Razak*

I am extremely grateful for Monica Coleman's insightful and scholarly discussion of womanist ideology. Her enumeration of the adaptations, excisions, and reframings of the womanist concept that have arisen in individuals and communities who utilize this term is long overdue. In a world of multiple identities and diverse and conflicting ideologies, Black women must courageously name and explore our differences if we are to form true alliances with one another. The shared experiences of racism, sexism, and classism—difficult and ubiquitous as they are—have not been sufficient to bring us together in movements benefiting the diasporic collective, and although the term *womanist* may have been offered initially in hopes of forming a common language for the experiences and activism of Black women, our differences have proved to be at least as significant as our similarities. Coleman's fearless exploration of this concept's contested terrain offers us a welcome starting point for the elucidation of our differences.

Although I don't define myself as a Black religious scholar, much of Coleman's discussion resonates with me. I am not a Christian, but I am an activist and healer. As a practitioner of women's spirituality, I take refuge in a tradition that embraces female embodiment and divinity, liberatory work, and activism, as well as a direct and personal relationship to spirit and openness and acceptance of a diversity of identities.

Unlike Coleman, I define myself as a womanist. I find identity and meaning in Walker's four-part definition of *womanist*, which she defines first as "A black feminist or feminist of color."<sup>1</sup> This widely quoted definition, which has been embraced by some and fiercely criticized by others, praises Black women's leadership ability in current and historic liberation struggles that benefit *all* members of the African American community.<sup>2</sup> *Womanism*, as defined by Walker, validates our ability to love, support, and nurture women and men "sexually and/or nonsexually"; honors the diversity, beauty, and "roundness" of our physical form(s); and proclaims the importance of rest, healing, and self-care. Walker notes that the activism and agency of African American women occasionally put us in conflict with our elders—but she chooses to focus on the sharing and mentorship that are a traditional part of idealized Black mother-daughter re-

<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent references to Walker's definition of *womanist* are found in Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, I am using African American to refer to people of African descent with roots in the United States. For reactions to Walker's definition of *womanist*, see Clenora Hudson-Weems, "African Womanism" and "Self-Naming and Self-Definition: An Agenda for Survival," both in *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1998), 149–62 and 449–52 respectively.

relationships. In listing what we love as Black feminists, Walker praises music, dance, the Spirit, and the Folk. She includes the often-neglected self in her list and explicitly names the moon, for its cultural and biological links with women and the natural world in a variety of cultures.<sup>3</sup>

I embrace Walker's definition, because each of its parts is important to me. For me, the struggles for racial justice, women's rights, and the right to love whomever I wish—of whatever race or gender I choose—along with my freedom to worship the sacred as I know, name, and experience it, come together in a weave that honors my slave and free ancestors of African lineage, my Euro-American and indigenous roots, and my love and respect for the healing powers of the earth. For me, this holistic tapestry of liberation is best named by the term *womanist*, a term that is feminist, Afrocentric, healing, embodied, and spiritual.<sup>4</sup>

### My History

Unlike Coleman, who views feminism and womanism as separate ideologies, feminism—at least Black feminism—and womanism are not conflicting ideologies for me. I grew up in Harlem with a mother who was a single parent, a political activist, and an elementary school teacher. In 1957, when I was nine, we picketed Harlem's Woolworth store weekly, protesting its segregated lunch counters in the South *and* its hiring practices in the North. The Black women around my mother were not soft, pampered stay-at-home women; they were courageous, intelligent, middle- and working-class women who struggled loudly and vociferously against the racism of the systems around them and tried to fashion a better world for themselves and their children. My notion of what it meant to be a feminist was always modeled on the powerful Black women around me who struggled for the rights of all Black people and who were second class to no one—male or female.

My consciousness was also shaped by the fact that I lived in Harlem during the 1960s and 1970s, a period of profound Afrocentric cultural revival. I grew

<sup>3</sup> See Barbara A. Mann, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); Queen Afua, *Sacred Woman: A Guide to Healing the Feminine Body, Mind, and Spirit* (New York: One World / Ballantine, 2000), 65; Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Viking Arkana, 1991), 145–48; and Christiane Northrup, *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom: Creating Physical and Emotional Health and Healing* (New York: Bantam, 2002), 105–6.

<sup>4</sup> The term *Afrocentric* is sometimes used to support homophobic and hetero/sexist thinking. I use it to describe African American efforts to create a perspective that serves the needs of diverse African diasporic peoples and their individual and collective experiences. Catharine Goboldte writes, "For African-Americans, the reclamation of African-centered perspective and ethos is liberatory praxis." See "Laying on Hands: Women in Imani Faith Temple," in *My Soul Is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade-Gayles (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 242.



up listening to Malcolm X preach on 125th Street, worked in various Black liberation organizations, went to the newly formed Yoruba Temple for religious services, and briefly lived in a polygamous family. I was part of the first wave of Black student organizing at Swarthmore College, where our Black history study groups included the college's Black domestic workers, along with African students from Lincoln University, the oldest of the historically Black universities (founded in 1854) and also possibly the first to admit students of African descent.

It was an exciting time for African Americans. Black women wore “natural” hairstyles instead of straightening their hair. African clothing and dance were popular, and African spirituality, ceremony, and languages were named, claimed, reenacted, and rearranged by African Americans hungry to reclaim their roots. African diasporic religion, history, and culture were fiercely debated—intellectually, spiritually, culturally, and politically—and new identities emerged in each discussion. Were we the original Asiatic Black people, as Elijah Muhammad suggested?<sup>5</sup> Should we reclaim a heroic (and feudal) past as kings and queens in ancient Kemit and Ethiopia?<sup>6</sup> Should we valorize the work of our enslaved forebears, demanding reparations in the form of our own state? Was polygamy a realistic and necessary alternative for Black women or just an excuse for Black men to “stray”? Popular and academic discussions of these issues occurred in streets, classrooms, and meeting halls; they were the subject of popular songs, plays, poetry, and sermons. The times were loud, strident, creative, spiritual, violent, and beautiful—just as in a birth.

In retrospect, I recognize that many of the beliefs generated in this era were not conceptually sound. African feminists have criticized African American attempts to “essentialize” Africa or to incorrectly find support for American sociocultural identities in African traditions.<sup>7</sup> However, my consciousness as an African American activist was shaped by three decades of organizing in Afro-

<sup>5</sup> Elijah Muhammad was a prominent developer of the Nation of Islam (a.k.a. the Black Muslims), a popular Black nationalist group emphasizing self-determination, economic self-reliance, Black people's right to self-defense, and a strong heterosexist agenda. The group offered a strong counter to Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent philosophy, and, until his break with the organization, Malcolm X was one of its chief spokespersons.

<sup>6</sup> The Egyptian hieroglyphics KMT, transliterated as “Kemit” or “Khemit,” mean “the Black place” or “place of the Blacks.” See Asa Hilliard, “Bringing Maat, Destroying Isfet: The African and African-American Presence in the Study of Ancient KMT,” in *Egypt: Child of Africa*, ed. Ivan Van Sertima (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994), 127–47.

<sup>7</sup> See Oyeronke Oyewumi, ed., *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 2003). Several essays critique African American “essentializing” of Africa, that is, the blending of culturally distinct African cultures into one universalized, fictitious whole, based on poor scholarship and psychological projections. An example of the latter is the search for evidence of lesbian relations in woman-to-woman marriage, which in Igbo society is not a union between two people but a social institution concerned with lineage rights and family continuity.

centric, feminist, and multicultural contexts that grew out of my engagement with the ideas of this era. Like many Black women, I followed a trajectory that took me from work with multiracial civil rights groups in the 1960s, to Black liberation and cultural nationalist efforts in the 1970s, to multicultural and feminist groups in the 1980s and health organizing in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

This work taught me the importance of naming. Working with other Black people, I called myself “Negro,” “Black,” “African,” or “Afro-American.” Working with women whose ancestors came from Africa, Asia, or the indigenous populations of North and South America, I called myself a “person of color” or a “third-world woman.” Feminists of color taught me that I could work to eradicate racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia without giving up membership in the Black race,<sup>9</sup> and Euro-American feminists gave me new names for “date rape” and domestic violence.

### Other Influences

My resonance with the term *womanism* includes other factors as well. A personal quest for “time-out” from the sexism and hierarchy of cultural nationalism in New York led me to California in 1969. There I became involved in a passionate and embodied relationship to the land. A former city dweller who had lived in the concrete landscapes of New York and Philadelphia, I spent part of the next two years camping out, and part of those years living in a commune in the Santa Cruz mountains. Living without electricity, I rose and slept according to the rhythms of the sun. I camped out during the summer and discovered that I could safely drink the water that flowed (apparently) inexhaustibly from the earth. (In 1970, it was safe to drink waters that flowed in streams and creeks in the mountains of California.) Sleeping under the stars, I opened my senses to the physical realities of the land and our human dependence upon it. My relationship to the world fundamentally changed. I became attached to the landscape of northern California in deep, intuitive ways.<sup>10</sup> More than femi-

<sup>8</sup> The Combahee River Collective links the emergence of Black feminist thought to the “second wave” of American feminism and to Black liberation movements: “It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of black and white men.” Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 233.

<sup>9</sup> See Cheryl Clarke, “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” and Barbara Smith, “Some Home Truths of the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement,” both in Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, 241–51 and 254–67 respectively; and bell hooks, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End, 1984), 1–15.

<sup>10</sup> I recognize that there is a certain amount of romanticizing in this statement. For the most part, my commune mates and I were middle-class people with enough privilege to “drop out” and live communally, and none of us farmed the land as a means of survival.

nism or cultural nationalism, Walker's concept of womanism as she writes of a womanist's love for the moon speaks to a love for the land and the night that emerged for me. This love for land is one of my anchors in women's spirituality, my spiritual lineage of choice.

However, it is Walker's support for the body that I most cherish. As a practitioner of women's spirituality, I have a sense of the sacred inextricably tied to the physical experience and embodied awareness of the female body—which I love and appreciate, sexually and nonsexually. I commend Coleman for her fearless discussion of the heteronormativity and homophobia that are endorsed by some who name themselves womanists.

As a midwife of more than twenty years, I am intimately aware of the path of active surrender, personal sacrifice, emotional empowerment, and spiritual transcendence that women traverse as they move through the birthing process. Standing as a witness, companion, and helper to women in labor was a life-changing event for me, as was my own experience of giving birth at home. Nothing I had ever experienced prepared me for the holiness of the moment in which a laboring woman turns away from preoccupation with the world to focus on the world-making within her body—a moment that, for me, reveals the face of God/dess as sustainer, nurturer, and creator of worlds.

I am a practitioner of women's spirituality in part because it explicitly celebrates the power and sacredness of women's bodies. The sacredness of woman-centered experience—experience apprehended by the senses, grounded in the world, or mediated via the embodied mysteries of childbirth, menarche, sexuality, and menopause—lies at the heart of women's spirituality. In Walker's description of a woman who “Loves love and food and roundness. . . . Loves herself. *Regardless*,” I find recognition for the embodiment that women's spirituality celebrates, as well as explicit validation for African American women struggling to love themselves and their bodies in spite of negative messages from the dominant society or the African American community.<sup>11</sup>

As a women's health-care practitioner for more than twenty years, I believe that rejection and hatred of the female body is endemic in the United States, leading to low self-esteem, self-destructive behaviors, and women's exploitation

<sup>11</sup> Contemporary society has decreased stereotypical portrayals of Black women as self-effacing mammies, lascivious jezebels, and tragic mulattoes. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69–92; and Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 3–18. However, the absence of *large, dark, full-featured, natural-haired* Black women in mainstream media, coupled with the disproportionate use of Black people's bodies to illustrate biological and cultural deviance in science and academia, and the lack of our likeness in mainstream religious iconography, continues to make us uncomfortable with our bodies.

via the cosmetic, health, and entertainment industries.<sup>12</sup> Many women internalize this cultural rejection of the female body, which is linked with hatred of female physiology and dissociation from embodied physical experience. This cultural stance has led to a wide variety of personal, social, and cultural ills, particularly in the West.<sup>13</sup> Some authors believe it to be especially marked among African American women.<sup>14</sup>

Black feminists such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks have documented Black women's negative beliefs about the body in personal or scholarly works without using the term *womanist*.<sup>15</sup> Others, such as Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and Valerie Lee, do use the term in their critique and analysis of the social regard accorded to the Black woman's body in the dominant society.<sup>16</sup> I don't advocate that we all use one term, and I recognize that Black feminism has not resolved this issue. Still, *womanist* integrates my own spiritual, political, and health perspectives best.

As a concept that is not linked to any particular faith tradition or denomination, womanism serves African American women of diverse spiritual beliefs. Walker's concept is historically grounded in the faith traditions of African Americans enslaved in the United States, who re-visioned their masters' Christianity and formed a religion of liberation. However, Walker did not conflate womanism and Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Although I respect Christian womanists who use Walker's definition to interrogate biblical texts and to reclaim female agency within Christian institutions, I also believe that it is important to preserve this

<sup>12</sup> See Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: Perennial, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> See Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); and Northrup, *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*.

<sup>14</sup> "Self hatred may be one of the deepest sources of conflict and turmoil within the African American community. This may be especially true concerning women and their bodies." Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The 'Loves' and 'Troubles' of African-American Women's Bodies: The Womanist Challenge to Cultural Humiliation and Community Ambivalence," in *If It Wasn't for the Women . . . : Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 181. On a personal note, in practicing as a midwife for twenty-three years, I found that women of many cultures experienced shame about the body. A small number of African American women apologized for how they looked, for how they smelled, and for having the bodies and genitalia of women. A fellow Black nurse-practitioner asked me once how I could be a midwife when it was so "nasty."

<sup>15</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Holt, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Gilkes, " 'Loves' and 'Troubles' "; Valerie Lee, "Literary Recovery of the Granny: The Body, the Mind, the Material" and "God and the Grannies: Testifying Theory," in *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 51–78 and 79–99 respectively.

<sup>17</sup> In an e-mail message to the author, sent June 9, 2004, Alice Walker notes, "It has felt odd to see Womanism so 'embedded' in Christianity. Time to liberate Her."

concept as one that is open to and inclusive of a wide variety of non-Christian traditions.<sup>18</sup>

### Womanism: A Few Controversies

Whereas I appreciate Walker's emphasis on the self and the body, Oyeronke Oyewumi and Clenora Hudson-Weems object to womanism's personal and somatic emphasis.<sup>19</sup> Oyewumi asserts that "Euro/American discourse of the social is somatocentric. . . . [W]hat is believed to undergird social hierarchies, privileges, identities, and ultimately social interest derives from the body":<sup>20</sup>

In much of Africa "womanhood" does not constitute a social role, identity, position or location. . . . Each individual occupies a multiplicity of overlapping and intersecting positions, with various relationships to privilege and disadvantage. . . . It would be counterproductive in the African setting to single out gender, which thus far has been elaborated only as a biologicistic category—a body-based identity—as the primary source and focus of political agitation. . . . [I]n Western conceptualization gender . . . cannot exist without sex . . . [but i]n many African societies . . . there are many social categories that do not rest on bodily distinctions of gender. A good example is the "female husband" of Igbo culture.<sup>21</sup>

Oyewumi believes that sociocultural constructions of motherhood may be a better base for building unity among women in Africa than concepts of womanhood.<sup>22</sup> Reviewing a few of the nongendered or gender-neutral languages of West Africa (including Yoruba, Wolof, Igbo, Efik, Benin, Fulani, Songhoi, and Manding), she notes that the closest equivalent for the English terms *brother*

<sup>18</sup> See Renita Weems, "Womanist Reflections on Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, 1980–1992, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 216–24; Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection between Women of Today and Women in the Bible* (New York: Warner, 2005); Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); and Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Let My People Go! Threads of Exodus in African American Narrative," in *Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Semeia Studies 42 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 123–43.

<sup>19</sup> Oyeronke Oyewumi, "Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker and Screening the Color 'Black'" and "Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood, and Other Foreign Relations," both in Oyewumi, *African Women and Feminism*, 159–85 and 1–24 respectively; and Hudson-Weems, "African Womanism" and "Self-Naming and Self-Definition."

<sup>20</sup> Oyewumi, "Alice in Motherland," 161.

<sup>21</sup> Oyewumi, "Introduction," 2. According to Oyewumi, marriage in some African societies refers to social relations within a family rather than sexual relations between individuals (14–16).

<sup>22</sup> Oyewumi, "Introduction."

and *sister* is the culturally normative expression “my mother’s child(ren).”<sup>23</sup> She states that what she calls “motherhood” is “an African communitarian ideology and ideal,” and suggests that the Spanish term *comadre* (used by Chicanos) and the Caribbean term *macomere* (used in Trinidad, St. Lucia, and Haiti) are cross-cultural examples that illustrate the importance of motherhood as a *social* institution linking women together in a system of mutual support.<sup>24</sup>

Hudson-Weems rejects Walker’s definition of *womanist*, pointing out that it emphasizes an *individual* woman’s sexuality and culture. She has proposed the name “Africana womanism,” writing, “Africana womanism is a family-centered rather than a female-centered perspective. By necessity, we are concerned first and foremost with ridding society of racism, a problem which invariably affects our entire family, our total existence.”<sup>25</sup>

I respect the views of both of these writers, yet my standpoint is shaped by my personal experience. I am an African American raised in America and marked by its mores and culture. I do not have an “African” experience of family or embodiment,<sup>26</sup> but I share American and African American definitions of the personal and the somatic. *The personal is political for me*; as a survivor of date rape, I claim the ownership of my body and my sexuality as fundamental human rights. My quest for liberation is personal, spiritual, cultural, sexual, and political, and my health work with Black women leads me to believe that our loving ourselves is a *political* issue.

My appreciation for the biological abilities of women’s bodies may raise the specter of essentialism, which would limit women’s spheres of influence and activity solely to those endeavors supported by biology. This is not my intent. I understand that valorizing childbirth is problematic for women who cannot, or choose not to, biologically mother.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, as a former single mother, I agree with feminists who have challenged cultural notions that romanticize children and child rearing.<sup>28</sup> I understand that “celebrating our beauty” can lead to capitalist and commercial exploitation and co-optation. In spite of these limitations, however, female embodiment is a crucial issue for me, and I identify as a wom-

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 11. Oyewumi offers several terms for this expression: in Manding, *Badenya*; in Yoruba, *Omoya*; in Igbo, *Nwanne*; in Wolof, *Doo mi ndey*; and in Efik, *Eyen-eka*.

<sup>24</sup> “Motherhood: An African Communitarian Ideology and Ideal” is the title of a section of Oyewumi’s *African Women and Feminism*. See also 11, 5–6.

<sup>25</sup> Hudson-Weems, “Self-Naming and Self-Definition,” 450.

<sup>26</sup> For one critique of African Americans’ essentializing of Africa, see Oyewumi, “Alice in Motherland.”

<sup>27</sup> See Laurie Lisle, *Without Child: Challenging the Stigma of Childlessness* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1995); and Alice Walker, “One Child of One’s Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s),” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, 361–83.

anist in part because this term offers the best integration of my beliefs about female agency, embodiment, and spirituality.

In response to Coleman's question, I don't think we all have to be womanists. There are alternative terms, and there are new terms that have yet to emerge. If we choose this term, I believe that we have to think clearly about its origins and its meaning. Whereas Coleman suggests that *womanist* may have outgrown its roots, I respectfully disagree. *Womanism* was defined by Walker in the 1980s. Thus, it is an *African American* concept, and it speaks to African American concepts of embodiment. It supports diverse spiritual traditions and is not based in Christianity—and it includes the natural world in its description of what must be loved and cherished. Although it supports African American cultural traditions, it also suggests that we must be prepared to question the authority of our elders. It rejects the homophobic and heterosexist agendas that still exist within the Black community and the dominant culture. It promulgates a holistic framework that incorporates cultural, historic, personal, sexual, and spiritual perspectives, and recognizes individual and collective needs for self-care and healing. I don't know that it was ever intended to be an international definition. Although I respect the urge that others may have to modify it, I have problems with those who reject its inclusivity while using it to situate and name themselves.

#### RESPONSE

*Irene Monroe*

Monica A. Coleman's essay is a courageous attempt to expose three inherent weaknesses in womanist religious scholarship. By raising critical and constructive questions for both theological and ethical inquiry, Coleman stirs a body of work that has for too long been uncritical of itself and unreceptive of different voices inside and outside of its camp. Although all three points in Coleman's essay are essential and interrelated in depicting these inherent weaknesses that at present exist in womanist religious scholarship, I will expound on the heteronormativity of womanist religious scholarship. In so doing, I aim to demonstrate how the heteronormativity of womanist religious scholarship excludes queer voices.<sup>1</sup> I also aim to demonstrate how the heteronormativity of womanist religious scholarship creates an essentialist construction and ap-

<sup>1</sup> *Queer* is an all-embracing, self-referential term that includes sexual and gender minorities like gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender, queer, and intersexual people. The letters LGBTQ are synonymous with *queer* in my writings, and I often use the two designations interchangeably. Similarly, in my writings I use the words *African American* and *black* interchangeably.

plication of this opus of work, thus truncating its growth and compromising its academic respectability.

As an African American Christian lesbian ordained minister, theologian, and activist who speaks, writes, and loves unapologetically from this standpoint, I stand in the womanist religious scholarship camp similarly to the way I do in the Black Church—as a sister outsider.<sup>2</sup> As a sister outsider, I am tangentially aligned to these communities with the nagging experience of marginalization, if not complete dispossession.

For me and others like me, being both of African descent and queer creates a distinctive epistemology that shapes not only our identity but also the distinctive interpretative lens we use to zoom in on the world with regard to politics, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, issues that contribute to both the church and the academy. Our method of identifying, or “linguaging,” ourselves as both of African descent and queer is evident in the terms we use, such as “in the life”—an identifier, a code, that derives from the Harlem Renaissance. Another is the term “same-gender loving,” which became popular in the African American queer lexicon in the 1990s. Both terms are indeed a radical pronouncement for LGBTQ people of African descent, because they are statements about openly engaging in gender expressions and sexual orientations counter to the accepted norm, and about naming this engagement in the face of virulent homophobia in the Black Church and in African American male religious scholarship in the academy that could very well cost us our careers, if not our lives.

Unlike white feminist and African American male religious scholarship that excludes me because I am black, female, and lesbian, womanist religious scholarship appeared to offer hope at first. With Alice Walker’s second definition of the term explicitly stating that a womanist is “A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually,” I felt the excitement of finally participating in an African American sisterhood organizing across sexualities.<sup>3</sup> Also

<sup>2</sup> In general usage, “the Black Church” refers to the variety of black Christian churches in the United States. These congregations, which are often called “storefront churches,” are not officially affiliated with the historical black denominations but are made up of African American Christians who worship in traditional black-church style. In formal usage, “the Black Church” refers to those historical and independent black Protestant denominations that were founded after the Free African Society in 1787, including the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA, (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC). Today the distinction between the general usage and formal usage is not discrete but porous and fluid. Audre Lorde’s phrase “sister outsider” depicts the marginalization of African American lesbians in the black community. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> All references to Walker’s definition of *womanist* are found in Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.



I experienced the excitement of engaging in an intellectual collaboration with African American women in the nascent stages of development of womanist religious scholarship.

However, as the women in this field grew in numbers, the dominant and controlling voices in the academy were those of Christian heterosexual women. Noticing how her voice and visibility in womanist religious scholarship was becoming marginalized, womanist lesbian theologian Renee Hill stated, “The lesbian voice is silenced in Christian womanist theology. Heterosexism and homophobia are nonissues in the Christian womanist paradigm for liberation. There is no widespread discussion on sexuality in African American Christian theology in general. Christian womanists, like their male counterparts, focus for the most part on the impact of racism on the Black community.”<sup>4</sup>

Some womanist Christians would say that the battle in womanist religious scholarship is not one between heterosexual and lesbian women but rather, as womanist ethicist Cheryl Sanders argued in 1989, one whose purpose is “to set forth an authentic representation of Walker’s concept in [womanist theological and ethical thought].”<sup>5</sup> This statement came back to bite Sanders, as her troubles began in not recognizing and honoring the various ways African American women had come to use and to share the term, especially with other women of color.

Although the words *religion* and *Christian* do not appear in Walker’s definition of *womanist*, there are both religious and secular usages for the term. It is, however, in the areas of spirituality and religion that we see the deep chasm along sexuality lines among African American women, and their various ways of defining and defending the term *womanist* that I will expound on.

African American Christian women have used the term *womanist* to define and defend their witness to and participation in God’s power and presence in the world. *Womanist*, in the religious sense, is used primarily by African American women who are Christian ministers, seminarians, or feminist scholars in the field of religion. Womanist Christian thought and practices began to flourish in the mid-1980s as a way to challenge racist, sexist, and white feminists’ religious practices and discourses that excluded African American women’s participation and experiences in church and society. For womanist Christian ministers and seminarians, Walker’s definition serves as a springboard for their preaching style, liturgy, and pastoral ministry. For womanist Christian academicians, the definition shapes and frames their analytical and theoretical approaches. By using African American women’s experiences of struggle and survival as their

<sup>4</sup> Renee L. Hill, “Who Are We for Each Other? Sexism, Sexuality, and Womanist Theology,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, 1980–1992, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 346.

<sup>5</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, “Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 85.

starting point for inquiry, these clergywomen and scholars examine the simultaneous forces of race, class, and gender oppression in African American women's lives. A womanist approach also celebrates African American women's religious history and validates their theological beliefs.

However, many African American women who practice various forms of womanist spirituality argue that Christian womanists not only have desecrated Walker's meaning, practice, and intent of the word but also have reinscribed the institutional fetters that come with any organized religion and its many concomitant "isms," including heterosexism. Walker emphasizes African American women's love for the Spirit in the term *womanist*. The guiding principles of a womanist spirituality are the interconnections and intersections of all oppressions. Therefore, justice making within the context of womanist spirituality is birthing spiritual communities of women of color on the margins, at home, and abroad who oppose the suppression of women's spirituality and sexualities that institutionalized religions foster in both creed and doctrine. A womanist spirituality knows that spirituality and sexuality are inextricably connected and that "[loving] other women, sexually and/or nonsexually" is one of the paths a woman might take to become liberated and enlightened to self-knowledge.

In an interview with her biographer Evelyn White,<sup>6</sup> Walker shared her views about her own liberation from patriarchal repression of female sexuality and bonding between women:

I think the process started with wanting myself. Women have to understand that regardless of who does not want us, we have to want ourselves. Then we can begin to see and appreciate other women and the amazing possibilities of self-love and acceptance we can find in our union with each other. We can sit back and wait for men to love us until we are blue in the face, but since I loved women already, I decided, why wait?

There is also a place of humility that comes from really understanding that we have all entered this plane through the legs of a woman. And that it is a holy place. My love of women intensified during all those years I researched female genital mutilation and thought about women holding down other women and girls to destroy that holy and profoundly sacred temple.<sup>7</sup>

Walker's best seller *The Color Purple* is the first of her novels embodying the guiding principles of a womanist spirituality. The novel centers primarily on the life of Celie, the protagonist, who is a young African American incest survivor plagued by the multiple oppressions of race, class, gender, sexual orienta-

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn C. White, *Alice Walker: A Life* (New York: Norton, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Alice Walker, "Alice Walker: On Finding Your Bliss," interview by Evelyn C. White, ReadingGroupGuides.com, [http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/by\\_the\\_light\\_of\\_my\\_fathers\\_smile-author.asp](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides/by_the_light_of_my_fathers_smile-author.asp). Reprinted from *Ms.*, September–October 1999.

tion, and organized religion. With the help of strong African American women in her community, including a character named Shug Avery, Celie becomes one who “Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility . . . and women’s strength,” to return to Walker’s definition of a womanist. In so doing, Celie becomes empowered as a woman who “Loves herself. *Regardless*” (again quoting Walker), resulting from her newfound spirituality and liberated sexuality. The deconstruction of black male heteropatriarchal religions, and by extension all organized religions, in *The Color Purple* was brought to the academy’s attention by womanist theologian Delores Williams. Williams points out that Celie’s understanding of God and her interpretation of the Bible are the factors that have allowed Celie to participate in her own oppression:

Nobody had paid attention to Alice Walker’s portrayal of the protagonist Celie’s understanding of God’s relation to her life.

This oversight is significant because the portrayal communicates some of Walker’s most significant messages about black women’s oppression and liberation. Celie’s initial notion of God shows us that black Christian women often support their own victimization when they cling to traditional ideas about God. Shug Avery helps Celie transform her understanding of God, and we become aware that black women must arrive at notions of God which accommodate their struggle for liberation as women.<sup>8</sup>

Given the body of work by Walker, Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas,<sup>9</sup> and others, why have many Christian womanist scholars fallen prey to the beliefs and practices of black heteropatriarchal religions, the very things they have doggedly tried to expunge from their lives in order to attain both personal and ecclesiastical liberation?

I posit that the problem with some Christian womanists derives not so much from the fact that they are in the church and/or the academy as from the fact that their own deep-seated internalized heterosexist beliefs and practices make them black churchmen and theologians “in drag.”<sup>10</sup> As “drag kings,” they disassociate themselves from their female center—Eros and Spirit—to don, in token moments, their usually highly respected, visible, and vital positions within these heteropatriarchal institutions. And it starts with these patriarchal women in both the church and the academy maintaining the status quo by policing queer behaviors.

It must be noted that not all Christian womanists are homophobic and het-

<sup>8</sup> Delores S. Williams, “The Color Purple,” *Christianity and Crisis*, July 14, 1986, 230.

<sup>9</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> “In drag” is an idiom in the queer lexicon referring to cross-dressing, wearing clothes normally worn by the opposite sex. Female-bodied or female-identified persons who temporarily attempt to pass as men are referred to as “drag kings.”

erosexual, and some do welcome a black sisterhood across different sexual orientations, theological beliefs, and practices, as well as disciplines. Nevertheless, it is the policing of womanist religious scholarship “to set forth an authentic representation of Walker’s concept in that work,” as Sanders put it, that first created a divided sisterhood and a heteronormative representation of it. The warring tensions concerning various sexualities of African American Christian women who first shaped and informed the scholarship made Sanders query what constitutes an authentic representation of Walker’s term *womanist*:

In the first instance *womanist* carries the connotation of black lesbian, and in the second it denotes black feminist, a designation that includes women who love women and those who love men. . . . On what grounds, if any, can womanist authority and authenticity be established in our work? In other words, what is the necessary and sufficient condition for doing womanist scholarship? To be a black woman? A black feminist? A black lesbian?<sup>11</sup>

Although Sanders, in my opinion, sets up the heteronormative paradigm in womanist religious scholarship, she does not maintain it by herself. Christian womanist scholars and ministers who are lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer do also. When these Christian womanist scholars do not openly write, teach, and preach from their social locations, they too silence LGBTQ voices by maintaining a tacit “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.<sup>12</sup> Despite their appending heterosexism to their litanies of interrelated oppressions in their writings and homilies, cheering from the sidelines us openly African American LGBTQ scholars, they collude with the status quo, because our queer voices become subsumed by a heteronormative universality that renders us not only invisible but also speechless.

The policing of womanist religious scholarship points not to one Christian womanist but to all who heard my, Hill’s, and others’ concerns and laments about the heteronormativity of womanist religious scholarship and yet did nothing to create a multidialogical context to talk, pray, and worship with African American women across our many diverse identities and sexualities both inside and outside of the church and the academy. Also, along with the policing of womanist religious scholarship has emerged an essentialist construction and application of the work. This essentialism has created dichotomies among African American women and others between who’s in and who’s out of the sisterhood, thus ghettoizing womanist religious scholarship and truncating its field of scholarship. The didactic intent of womanist religious scholarship should be to

<sup>11</sup> Sanders, “Christian Ethics and Theology,” 85.

<sup>12</sup> In general, “don’t ask, don’t tell” describes any instance in which a person must keep his or her sexual orientation and any related attributes a secret. It is the common description of the current military policy that prohibits anyone who engages in homosexual conduct from serving in the armed forces of the United States.

offer to everyone various heuristic models of analyses and methodologies that would encourage others to do justice-making work in the church, society, and academy.

Furthermore, womanist religious scholarship and scholars collude with the Black Church. Many espouse in their scholarship a liberationist praxis, yet their praxes are devoid of action to address the plight of the damned, disinherited, dispossessed, and disrespected when it comes to LGBTQ parishioners, colleagues, and students and the AIDS crisis ravaging our communities. Active, churched womanist liberationist scholars do not challenge themselves, their churches, or ministers who applaud African American LGBTQ people in the choir pews yet excoriate us from the pulpits. Our connections and contributions to the larger black religious cosmos are desecrated every time homophobic pronouncements go unchecked in these holy places of worship. And, because of the Black Church's theological qualifier to love the "sinners" (us) but to hate the "sin" (our sexual orientation), we are permanent souls *of* the Black Church but we are never fully permanent souls *in* it. Consequently, some of us not only have left the church but also have abandoned our individual and collective hopes that womanist religious scholarship will lead the way.

#### RESPONSE

*Debra Mubashshir Majeed*

Some might argue that Monica Coleman's "Must I Be Womanist?" represents the ideological concerns of a young, thoughtful scholar who expected the shoulders of her mentors to be strong and broad enough to both *carry* her to her destiny and *shield* her destiny for her until she met it. In other words, Coleman appears to cast herself—and other "third-wave" womanists, like me—as both benefactor and victim, both a daughter and a granddaughter of a movement whose subversive agency has been both inspired and handcuffed by trailblazers who spoke the truth, but not audibly enough, not persuasively enough, not often enough, and not completely enough to clarify the meaning of "womanism" for succeeding generations. Speaking of the work of those "passionate people of faith" who encouragingly "mentored and "mothered" her, Coleman declares, "I've been dissatisfied by the heteronormativity of womanist religious scholarship." From the outset, she acknowledges the intellectual minefield she has entered as well as the utmost respect with which her questioning begins. Still, she chastises her mentors for not removing the guesswork, for leaving her with questions about her intellectual and activist identity that she does not want. For me, the question isn't whether her theorizing is accurate. Instead I wonder, does she alone harbor perceptions about the utility of the womanist

legacy for non-Christian women attempting to name themselves from within the boundaries of womanist thought, or has the Christology of the Western womanist agenda rendered other religious traditions so invisible that non-Christian women may live more authentically outside of—and perhaps far away from—the womanist camp?

In 1994, I faced a similar intellectual dilemma; I wanted someone else to reduce my options for me, too. Thankfully, Jacquelyn Grant refused to do so. In that year, she traveled to Pasadena, California, from Atlanta, Georgia, to present a public lecture on her groundbreaking work *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> I was a second-career master of divinity student at Fuller-Evangelical Theological Seminary, contemplating my field of study for a doctoral degree. With the aid of event coordinator and good friend Aleese Moore, I was able to spend a few private moments with Grant prior to her departure. She agreed to meet me in a nearby hotel lobby.

I was intimidated by Grant (and, for that matter, by Katie Cannon, Emilie Townes, and Renita Weems too). So I arrived early—or so I had intended. However, I found that Grant was already seated, in a rich, oversized bamboo chair that resembled more a throne than seating for the dispensation of career advice. I knew our time was short, so I was direct. I shared the short version of my life's journey and interests and then asked, "So what can I study?" Without a blink, and in her usual authoritative voice, Grant replied, "What do *you want* to study?" After losing a couple of rounds of this form of conversational volleying, I declared, "You mean there's no list from which I am to pick?"

I walked away feeling naive, dejected, and enormously wasteful of Grant's time. The idea that one could (or should at least attempt to) connect her seminary training to her passion had never occurred to me. I expected Grant to help me choose the shape of my doctoral work, based upon her wisdom concerning the academy and her knowledge of what was acceptable for an African American clergywoman to study. Instead, she refused to overlook my intellectual interests or to support any attempt of mine to remain within the ideological boundaries others tried to draw around African American female scholars. On that wonderfully sunny California afternoon, Grant challenged me to recognize that I had options even she could not circumscribe. She knew full well that I might endure nights of intellectual and spiritual jihad on the path to realizing that I should craft a dissertation project bearing some resemblance to my personal aspirations rather than limit my advanced studies solely to someone else's predetermined categories. (In this context I use the Arabic term *jihad* to connote internal struggle for personal improvement and community betterment, not the popular—and misleading—understanding of "holy war.") I am convinced, as well, that Grant and her trailblazing peers never intended the "womanist" con-

<sup>1</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, AAR Academy Series 64 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

cept to remain a fixed identity to whose bones only they could give flesh. I believe Grant knew that the young scholar meeting with her might one day choose to assert her own identity and agency by reframing the guidelines established by these pioneering womanist scholars and/or by creating an ideological lens that would more clearly celebrate multiple and diverse positions of belonging.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, in 1999, Katie Cannon helped concretize my belief that early womanists didn't intend the concept to remain fixed, during a break in a Womanist Approaches to the Study of Religion session at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), in Boston, Massachusetts. By then I was a Muslim—having made my transition to Islam the year before—and a regular session attendee. By then I had also grown weary of a womanist agenda that routinely made normative the Christian experience of African American women.<sup>3</sup>

On some level, trailblazing womanist scholars contributed to their own denial of self—as understood in relation to the whole—as much as they reinscribed the marginalization that African American Muslim women also confront by consciously or unconsciously engaging in external colonialism, a system that creates a hierarchy of black religious expression; negates non-Christian traditions, especially Islam; and questions the moral agency of Muslim women as spiritual and social witnesses. Such a system also can relegate African American Muslim women to the perceived role of “subject without agency.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, perhaps the historic absence of articulated Muslim perspectives within womanist conversations in the academy has provided an excuse or rationale for disassociation on the part of some Muslims scholars who feel more comfortable within traditional disciplines such as Islamic studies, where their religious knowledge, experience, and expression may be more overtly validated. When Emilie Townes writes, for example, “The spirituality that issues from Black women's lives is found in the moral wisdom of African women,” her theorizing is guided by a Christian orientation of the Creator and the Creator's relationship to humanity, an orientation that rarely differentiates the faith experiences of black Christian women and other African American women.<sup>5</sup>

Arguably, most African Americans self-identify as Christians. Their alle-

<sup>2</sup> miriam cooke considers the issue of “multiple belongings” as part of her rationale for the utility of Islamic feminism. See miriam cooke, “Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies,” in *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan (New York: Routledge, 2001), 142–60.

<sup>3</sup> Womanist scholar Cynthia S'thembile West provided one of the few exceptions to the practice. See “Revisiting Female Activism in the 1960s: The Newark Branch Nation of Islam,” *Black Scholar* 26, nos. 3–4 (1996).

<sup>4</sup> Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 11.

giance supports the “natural” tendency in black America and the academy to *speak* of African American religion and *mean* Christianity. Thankfully, Townes, like many other womanist scholars, is keenly aware of the methodological tensions that arise when christocentric language and/or symbols are employed universally to speak of worship, the Creator, devotion, Spirit, and love, regardless of audience. Like several of her contemporaries, Townes wrestles with the resulting disequilibrium and collaborates with non-Christian scholars in drawing attention to changing perspectives and the varieties of womanist discourses on African American women.

Even so, at the 1999 AAR panel I felt, to some extent, that I was witnessing external colonialism at the hands of womanists. It was clear that the contributions of Muslim scholars, such as Aminah McCloud and Amina Wadud (the pioneering generational peers of Grant and others), needed to be cited and addressed.<sup>6</sup> So, in true womanish fashion, I shared my discomfort with Cannon, at the time a member of the Womanist Approaches steering committee. In womanist Cannonese, her response went something like this: “Well, Debra. You’re right, we are missing the Islamic perspective, but few of us know anything about Islam. It would be great to have Muslim scholars share their stories.” In other words, “Soon-to-be-Dr. Debra, when will *you* submit a proposal?” Cannon’s challenge inspired a Womanist Approaches–sponsored panel at the 2000 AAR annual conference, in Nashville, Tennessee, which drew attention to womanist spirituality and social activism in the lives of African American Muslim women. She also compelled me to consider designing a framework, Muslim womanist philosophy, that presupposes the primacy of Islam in the historical experience of some African American women at the same time that it critiques both the ascribed and achieved identity of African American Muslim women.

For decades, white women have presumed to speak about black women in their discourses about gender, black men have claimed to include black women in their treatises about race, and feminist and immigrant Muslims have perpetuated stereotypes that imprison African American Muslims beneath a veil. In like manner, the teaching and research of most Western womanist scholars have often been trapped in a christological centrality that confines the totality of Af-

<sup>6</sup> Wadud’s *Qur’an and Woman* deftly articulates the intellectual and social benefits of a woman-centered reading of the single most sacred scripture to Muslims. Aminah McCloud, author of *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Islamic studies scholar at DePaul University, served as the presider for the Afro-American Religious History Group panel, whose theme was “The Legacy of C. Eric Lincoln and the Study of Islam in North America,” at the 2004 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, in San Antonio, Texas. Among the panelists was Muslim scholar Jamillah Karim, then a doctoral student at Duke University, who presented her research on Muslim women in Atlanta. Their presence marked the rare occasion up to that time when Islam had been the focal point of a session of the Afro-American Religious History Group.



frican American religiosity within the boundaries of Western Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the embodied curiosity and motherly empowerment of these early womanists, coupled with the religious void of Western womanist thought and my own activist odyssey of faith, fueled my efforts to situate the lived realities of African American Muslim women squarely within a womanist framework that spoke to their African ancestry, their American citizenship, and their Islamic faith. The result: Muslim womanist philosophy.

Muslim womanist philosophy is a perspective created to reclaim, enhance, and produce thoughtful explorations of African American Muslim life. It provides an opportunity to study Islam and explore the realities of Muslim life through the experiences of African American Muslim women. It also responds to the tendency of the Western womanist agenda to render Muslim women voiceless and invisible. The method responds to the racist and patriarchal culture of the United States and is grounded in the nuances of black struggles for survival, in quests for Islamic legitimacy, and in the social activism of African American Muslim women.

Similar to its more established ideological sibling, womanist theology, Muslim womanist philosophy is an emerging field of religious, cultural, theological, and ethical reflection in which “the historic and present-day insights of African-American women are brought into critical conversation” with Muslim traditions and the teachings of Islam.<sup>8</sup> This interpretive framework challenges Muslim women, scholars, and others to speak holistically about Islam and the diverse experiences of its female adherents, and to distinguish one’s faithfulness to the Qur’an—both as divine discourse and as text interpreted in time and space.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the chief concern of Muslim womanist philosophy is to accomplish for Muslim women what Katie Cannon and other womanists have endeavored to achieve for their Christian sisters: the documentation of the agency and moral formulas African American Muslim women construct and pass on to succeeding generations from within the social conditions of membership in both a racial class and a religious group that are marginalized in the United States. Muslim

<sup>7</sup> Protestantism has been the type of Christianity most often privileged. Exceptions can be found in the contributions of my former dissertation advisor, Toinette Eugene; M. Shawn Copeland; and Jamie Phelps, among others. See for example, Toinette Eugene, “Dealing with Diversity: Confessions, Convictions, and Commitments,” *Open Hands* 11, no. 3 (Winter 1996); M. Shawn Copeland and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, eds., *Feminist Theology in Different Contexts* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996); and Jamie Phelps, *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk: Contributions of African American Experience and Thought to Catholic Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> This rationale for the inclusion of African American women’s experience is quoted from a description of the pioneering womanist scholarship of Emilie Townes, “Scholar of Womanist Theology and Expert on Preaching to Join Divinity Faculty,” *Yale Bulletin and Calendar*, May 6, 2005, 1, <http://www.yale.edu/opa/v33.n28/story7.html>.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. and ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

womanist philosophy situates itself under the banner of *global* womanism rather than the narrower one of *Western* womanism. Inherent in the development of Muslim womanist philosophy is the awareness that those who choose it as a tool are not necessarily bound by other determined territorialities. That is, for this scholar, global womanism provides the “symbolic capital” for the construction of what others might characterize as “contradictory rhetorical space.”<sup>10</sup>

To me, the broader womanist agenda is a natural root for the emergence of a distinct trunk dedicated to the study of African American Muslim women. For, since its emergence in North America in the 1980s, womanist thought has produced an interdisciplinary array of literature focused on multiple forms and dimensions of the lived realities of African American women. Those who have identified themselves as womanists as well as those upon whose work the label has been imposed have often thought transnationally while living locally, fully aware that the agency to name and position themselves was their own to exercise.

This response began with the question, Is Coleman alone in wondering whether the Christology of the Western womanist agenda has rendered other religious traditions so invisible that non-Christian women may live more authentically outside of—and perhaps far away from—the womanist camp? Surprisingly, her twenty-first-century concerns make an interesting contrast to the arguments of Cheryl Saunders, who in 1990 doubted the utility of the term *womanist* for her Christian sisters, given its “secular” roots.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, theorizing about the territory of the womanist agenda continues, as does the drawing of new borders and fundamental categories. In this regard, Coleman *is not* alone; she has much esteemed company, as long as that company views womanism in its broadest terms. Moreover, when Toinette Eugene boldly cautioned white feminists against “description and prescription” in 1992, it is likely that her fellow womanists took note as well.<sup>12</sup> Rather than feeling dismayed, I celebrate with Coleman the fact that we have much room to maneuver in determining our own position and naming whether we choose to remain within or without the womanist agenda. In that, I believe, our Western womanist ancestors have bequeathed us a legacy whose full power and reach have yet to be experienced and yet to be witnessed.

<sup>10</sup> cooke, “Multiple Critique.”

<sup>11</sup> See Cheryl Saunders’s contribution to the roundtable discussion “Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 83–112.

<sup>12</sup> Toinette Eugene, “On ‘Difference’ and the Dream of Pluralist Feminism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8 (Fall 1992), cited in Gloria L. Schabb, “Feminist Theological Methodology: Towards a Kaleidoscopic Model,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001).

## RESPONSE

*Lee Miena Skye*

This is an Australian Indigenous Christian womanist theological reply to Coleman's soul-searching concerning the "womanist" scholastic label. The data I cite are found in my master's and PhD theses, where Australian Indigenous women's Christian theologies/spiritualities are documented for the first time in academic history.<sup>1</sup> I am a Tasmanian Aboriginal (a Palawa), descended from the last "full blood" before the genocide. The annihilation of my people was one of the swiftest acts of genocide in the history of humankind, and I seemed destined to write against what I call quadridimensional oppression, that is, racism, classism, sexism, and naturism (abuse of nature). Of my people there are approximately five thousand descendants, who keep the culture and language alive in spirit. Palawa womanist theology/spirituality is part of the data used in the theses, along with data from the Murri, Nunga, and Koori peoples, who are from mainland Australia. Even though Palawas are a unique Indigenous race (its racial linkage is uncertain), our country recognizes all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Indigenous peoples of Australia. It is important to understand that our mainland Indigenous race is in genocide, and the same fate my people have met is facing all Australian Aboriginals. My work is urgently needed to aid in healing and reconciliation.

**Who We Are as Womanists**

In choosing the right language to educate others about who we are, to use the name "black feminist" insinuates that feminism is the central oppression in our existence. This is certainly not the case; racism is our central concern. Therefore, the name "womanist" is more appropriate, because it indicates there is more to our life reality than the issues of feminism. Also, as theologians we are *tiddas* (sisters) who are in solidarity with our black, colored, and white sisters around the world. To state merely that we are black does not indicate clearly that we embrace the diverse suffering of our sisters from other races.

In addition, a certain number of our women, especially those more closely connected to traditional culture, are afraid of the name "feminist." For them it undermines culture. They have a relationship with their men based on partner-

<sup>1</sup> Lee Miena Skye, "Kerygmatics of the New Millennium: A Study of Australian Aboriginal Women's Christology" (master's thesis, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1999; also forthcoming from ISPCK [Delhi]); Lee Miena Skye, "*Yiminga* (Spirit) Calling: A Study of Australian Aboriginal Christian Women's Creation Theology" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2004). Specific chapters from these theses are cited in subsequent notes.

ship, which one could call their own type of feminism.<sup>2</sup> Men and women both have their sacred, secret women's and men's businesses. Each is vital to keeping the universe in balance. The women do not feel oppression to the degree that white Western feminists do, because they have their own sacred space.

There are those of our urban women who are afraid of the name "feminist" because, to them, it seems to imply being in competition with and critical of their men. They find this too difficult when their men suffer racism. To be in competition with them would perpetuate white Western male behavior. They are second-rate men in a hegemonic white male society, and the women are sympathetic, preferring to uplift and encourage their men.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the women gravitate more to the name "womanist," because it embraces the oppressions of racism and imperialism.

Racism can be seen as Australian Indigenous women's greatest suffering, because they share this pain with their men, children, and community. Sexism, by contrast, is a more private pain, gender-oriented and not directly shared by *all* the community. Australian Indigenous women are the least in our society; therefore, classism is both personal and social suffering.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the closer the women are connected to traditional culture, to nature, the more they are devastated by naturism; it is indeed a community suffering.

The name "black feminist" does not convey the depth of our pain as a people. The name "womanist" allows us to embrace more deeply the multidimensional suffering of Indigenous women and peoples around the world who stand against the oppressions that are the product of colonialism and neocolonialism. This is why, as an Australian Aboriginal womanist, I would define as womanist any Indigenous, black, or colored woman who fights the oppressions of colonialism and neocolonialism.<sup>5</sup> From my extended reading of scholastic womanist theological and nontheological writings, I can say that all womanists are engaged directly or indirectly in standing against the effects of colonialism and neocolonialism.

As womanist theologians, *tiddas* theologians, we accuse the state *and* the church of quadridimensional oppression, racism, sexism (heterosexism is implicit), classism, and naturism. From my readings, I perceive that this activity is in harmony with the universal womanist theological academic tradition, in its critique of both church and state of the tridimensional oppression of racism,

<sup>2</sup> See "Discovering Our Wonder: The Distinctiveness of Australian Aboriginal Women's Christologies," chap. 3 in "Kerygmatics," 42; and "The Invaluable Contribution Australian Aboriginal Christian Women Make to Creation Theology," chap. 6 in "*Yiminga*," 319.

<sup>3</sup> "Discovering Our Wonder," 46; "The Recognition of Australian Aboriginal Christian Women as Spiritual and (Eco)Womanist *Tiddas* Theologians," chap. 4 in "*Yiminga*," 225.

<sup>4</sup> "The Pursuing Paradox: How Christology Came to Australian Aboriginal Women," chap. 1 in "Kerygmatics," 2; "Invaluable Contribution," 300–309.

<sup>5</sup> "Discovering Our Wonder." Anne Pattel-Gray, an Australian Aboriginal liberation theologian, shares in this perspective throughout her writings; see Skye, "Recognition."

sexism, and classism. For many of us so closely connected to the land, naturism is an additional, immediate suffering.<sup>6</sup> To contain and express this suffering only within the academic area of ecowomanist theology would be to compartmentalize and to put us in a place that limits the full expression of our everyday reality.

### **Third-Wave Womanism Must Bring About Full Healing**

One could say that, within the universal context of womanist theology, Australian Indigenous women are between first- and second-wave womanism. We have had the nurturing of international womanist and womanist theological writers to encourage us to articulate our pain, but we are really only just beginning to do this. There are some Australian Indigenous women, however, especially in the younger generation, who can accept Aboriginal spirituality/theology but not Christianity. Therefore, womanist theology, as an academic area, does not allow them to pursue their search for religious freedom and identity. These women have to be catered to, and their human rights of religious freedom and the pursuit of wholeness must be respected. Thus, *third-wave womanism must bring about healing for all our women*. We have begun our first stage, but, as it seems the healing of all our women is in two stages, our second stage must be through third-wave womanism to be complete.

### **Non-Christian Womanist Theology as a New Academic Tradition**

We Indigenous Christian womanist theologians, writing within the universal academic tradition of womanist theology against abuses of both church and state, are doing so out of our own experience, which, from my reading of feminist and womanist theological and nontheological works, seems to me is fundamental. *We cannot write from the experience of others; we can only be in sympathy with their experience* and encourage the articulation of their pain and healing. Also fundamental to the universal womanist theological academic tradition is the search for wholeness. This is always contextual. Therefore, we cannot write for the wholeness of others whose context is different from ours, be it a cultural, spiritual, social, political, sexual, economic, or gendered context. We can only respect, sympathize, and support them; to do otherwise would be arrogant.

In light of both of these intrinsic functions of womanist theology, there is

<sup>6</sup> "We Need to Be Whole: Is There Room for New Christologies?" chap. 4 in "Kerygmatics," 58–66; "Visiting Kumarangk: The Legacy of Christian and Secular Colonialist Imperialism Epitomized; A Case Study," chap. 5 in "*Yiminga*," 268–99. The latter is a case study of the effects of racism, classism, sexism, and, in particular, naturism on the Ngarrindjeri women in South Australia.

a call for a new academic womanist theological tradition that is *non-Christian*, to embrace the spiritual healing needs of third-wave womanists. For Australian Indigenous women, this tradition will develop, initially and most importantly, by embracing traditional Aboriginal religions and spiritualities that are non-Christian. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized, as culture arises from such traditions, and the practice of their beliefs cements identity. Vital to the healing of our people is the establishment of racial identity. As I stress in both of my theses, racial ontology (one's racial way of being in the world) is carried in the genes.<sup>7</sup> Because of this, the road to wholeness cannot possibly begin until racial identity is established.

There is also a need for our women to tackle the hegemonic presence of heterosexism in church and state and in womanist theological discourse, to create space within the academic and social worlds for the articulation of pain and the healing of lesbian women. Like womanists, we uphold our men and children in the healing process so that they will be embraced in their struggles with homosexuality.

The field research for my PhD thesis shows that heterosexism is a white Western phenomenon; our people in traditional cultures do not make an issue of homosexuality.<sup>8</sup> If any of our people are understood to be homosexual, they are not ostracized from the community or made to feel inferior. They are treated as precious like any other community member. There is a lack of discussion of homosexuality among our people, simply because it is not an issue.

As I have pointed out, embracing culture is imperative to the healing of our women. This is also important in dealing with the other two aspects of quadridimensional oppression. Classism is another white Western creation that divides and ostracizes people. Once Australian Indigenous women embrace their culture, they will engage in an egalitarian social structure that is devoid of class hierarchy.<sup>9</sup> Naturism is also a phenomenon that, for our people, is distinctly white Western. Our cultures have a relationship with the land that is intimate and immediate: our people claim that the land owns them.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, to embrace culture is to embrace guardianship of nature.

Australian Indigenous non-Christian womanist theologians, our third-wave womanists, will find and direct healing for themselves and others through the embracing of culture and the creation of space within academic and social institutions for the expression and healing of suffering. Coleman is correct in highlighting the necessity for the healing of *all* black and colored women. I hope my

<sup>7</sup> "Pursuing Paradox," 16–17; "Set the Spirit Free: The Need for an Australian Aboriginal Christian Womanist Research Methodology," chap. 2 in *Yimiga*," 79–82.

<sup>8</sup> "Invaluable Contribution," 314.

<sup>9</sup> "Pursuing Paradox," 16, 42; "Witnessing the Inculturation: Data Report and Analysis," chap. 3 in *Yimiga*," 161.

<sup>10</sup> "We Need to Be Whole," 58–59; "Recognition," 217–18; "Visiting Kumarangk"; "Invaluable Contribution," 332.

suggestions for the formation of a new academic tradition will help third-wave womanists find the freedom and wholeness they so desire. It is essential that this be so, with non-Christian womanist theology established as a legitimate body of thought. Although they will still have the same struggles we have had as second-wave womanists, they can be assured that, just as we were supported, encouraged, and nurtured by our forebears—our feminist and womanist mothers and sisters in spirit—so it will be for them.

### Conclusion

Coleman's thoughts have challenged me to consider in more depth the healing needs of all Australian Aboriginal women, something I have been meaning to do for some time. Third-wave womanism can be the next stage in their healing process, and such womanists and womanist theologians are called to create healing space within academic and nonacademic society to meet their needs and human rights. Supporting second-wave womanists—uplifting our sisters into wholeness—is inherent in their endeavors. The search for wholeness is intrinsic to womanism, and this next wave of womanists must continue the search for themselves and the generations that are to come.

### RESPONSE

*Stephanie Y. Mitchem*

I am grateful to Monica Coleman for her article, because she raises the lingering questions of black women's academic and intellectual identities. Her questions bring me to moments of reflection and analysis, including a closer look at myself, my professional path, and the "state" of academe. What follows is a theological reflection inspired by Coleman's question, "Must I be womanist?"

I did not come to academe by way of my initial undergraduate experiences. In fact, in the 1970s I dropped out of a public college in Michigan that had improved racism to a fine art. I moved away from the academic and was committed to leading an activist life, sometimes in church settings, sometimes not. At different times, I was involved in providing counseling and community education. Slowly, I moved to the administrative side, such as managing grants and performing political advocacy.

The time came, however, when I went back to academe. It was, now that I think about it, a natural progression. How could I integrate different areas of my life while continuing to grow? What had I learned from my activist life? How could I lend a greater weight of authority to my words?

Yet, I did not return to the academy expecting a perfect world, one without

conflict. Further, with my activist mind-set, my eyes were open to see areas of contention and weakness and to act as an agent of change when possible. So I am baffled when I read Coleman's words, as a representative of third-wave feminists, with questions about the status quo and the efficiency of their predecessors. What did she and third wavers expect to find in the academic world? But I get ahead of myself here.

There were points throughout my returning undergraduate and later master's-level studies, in the 1980s, when I encountered professors who did not know of *any* black women who wrote in *any* religious field. But they knew of many white American women writing about everything. I read many of these white women's books with dismay when the words did not wrap around my black, working-class woman's experiences, often resonating with the question attributed to Sojourner Truth: "Ain't I a woman?" The professors' ignorance shaped my future studies, lending a new passion to my desire to end, specifically, the silencing of black women on too many levels of academe and, generally, the rejection of black scholarship's legitimacy.

During my doctoral work, I was able to blend religious studies with anthropology, ethnography, American history, and ethics in order to explore the religiosity of black women. Womanist thought was the arena to which I gravitated with my disciplinary base in theology. Womanist thought was also the arena in which my activist mind could identify continuing ways to engage other black women. Yet when I work with black women in other disciplines—particularly history, sociology, or anthropology—I use the term "black feminist" to describe my approach. This is strategic, as the black women scholars in these disciplines understand their work under the name black feminism. These black feminists are the ones from whom I learn.

I do not find such usage of different terms a form of doublethink; I do not experience any kind of cognitive dissonance. Instead, I understand womanist and black feminist thought to fall along a continuum following the ideas of cultural theorist and black feminist Joy James: "To some degree then, we can distinguish between a conventional feminism embraceable by all progressive women, including those who happen to be black, and a black feminism or womanism, one particular to women of African descent."<sup>1</sup> James's view defines feminism, black feminism, and womanism in nonconflictual terms. It is not necessary, with such an understanding, to anguish over whether one is black feminist or womanist or generic feminist. Frankly, ranges of intellectual stances are found within each grouping. This diversity of women's voices is welcome to me; I am afraid of any group of people parroting the same phrases with the same inflections. (The idea that such a firm unanimity can exist reminds me of my African American undergraduate students' futile search for mythical black community "unity")

<sup>1</sup> Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 11–12.



across ages, regions, education, status, or political views.) Every scholar drags past and future baggage into the academy; why should black women be exempt from this aspect of humanity?

I view each of these groups—womanist, feminist, black feminist—as related, cousins rather than strangers. The possibilities that derive from recognizing the relationships between the types demand that we start to act like a functional, responsible family instead of a dysfunctional group that immolates itself in the name of politics. We are interrelated in organic ways, growing from each other's struggles, being birthed again and again as we encounter new ideas and respond to actions from others in the family.

But is not this fictive kinship really larger than those few of us in the academy? Aren't we involved in our work for objectives larger than inflating our own egos? The African American women with whom I speak outside the academic world generally have no interest in black feminism. It is not that they have no interest in justice. These women often hold highly sophisticated analyses of injustice from the grassroots level. Their intellectual acuity is celebrated in the works of a range of noted authors, including Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. The type of womanist work with black women's religious wisdom that honors and addresses their realities is exemplified by ethicist Toinette Eugene's exploration of the value-laden, homegrown "mama said's"; biblical scholar Renita Weems's exploration of biblical themes from a womanist view; and Emilie Townes's exploration of the richness of black women's spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

Further, black women religious scholars are not constrained to publish only about womanist thought and ideas, even when they have previously written about or been involved in womanist work. Some recently published texts provide examples of the broad scope of such scholars: Darnise C. Martin's *Beyond Christianity: African Americans in a New Thought Church* (2005), Kelly Brown Douglas's *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (2005), and Barbara Holmes's *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (2004).<sup>3</sup> The possibilities may be wider than Coleman can see at this time.

Nonetheless, black feminism generally continues to represent an elitist world speaking a foreign language for many black women outside the academy. The resistance to and lack of comprehension regarding black feminism

<sup>2</sup> Toinette M. Eugene, "Regardless: An Attitude of Being for Women under Fire," *Update: Newsletter of the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus* 14, no. 3 (Winter 1990/91): 24; Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988); Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Darnise C. Martin, *Beyond Christianity: African Americans in a New Thought Church* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005); and Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

are based not on overly academic wording (which is its own turnoff) but on a general perception of the inability of black feminism to identify with these women's own day-to-day, average experiences of work and family and struggle. This is not to say that black feminists have lived exclusively in the rarified air of academe: women such as Angela Davis are seen as *with* the people, speaking their language, working with their issues. But Angela Davis is very much part of another generation, as are Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and June Jordan, none of whom worked in religion or theology. None of these earlier black feminists needed, as do younger scholars, to deal with intellectual terms that argue against standpoint or identity theory; that stress postmodernism to the point of making race a mere abstraction; that advocate postidentity, post-Christianity, and the posthuman; and that view soccer-momdom as a viable expression of feminism. The earlier generations of black feminists had a much more clearly defined world of racism and sexism in which to interact, even as they had to battle intransigent or misogynist comrades within their own and other liberation movements. These are major differences today: racism is not boldly in-your-face; sexism is a Christianized favor offered to women; and "good" feminists are rewarded with promotions. How much more difficult are the analytical tasks ahead? What do we need to do to prepare?

These discussions need a bit more context. Black feminism has a much longer history than womanist thought. Womanist religious thought, to some degree, developed from the shortcomings of black feminism, black male theology, and general feminism. Knowing this disjuncture between black feminism and black communities is of special note to those of us who work in fields of religion, for we bridge into a pastoral world, often remaining grounded in various religious communities. The challenge for black women religious scholars is to speak to and with black women in the pews or on the prayer mats. The word *womanist* bridges far more intellectual and social barriers for African American women religion scholars than does *black feminist*.

These ideas bring me to the point where I most disagree with Coleman's assessment of the black feminist/womanist discussion, drawing from my own activist history. Coleman states, "[W]omanist religious scholarship has taken few strong political stances." I know what is involved in making significant changes, yet there is a state of mind current throughout American society that denies the insidious resilience of racist and sexist thought. There is no golden land of academic opportunity that readily welcomes women and our ideas with open arms. There is still struggle, even as we find a few safe harbors. The day-to-day academic politics for black women and men teaching at white institutions often includes finding themselves the representative person of color on too many committees; the poster child for PR campaigns; the representative to black community groups; the adviser to students doing any kind of race studies; and the informal mentor for black students. The black scholar's research suffers (this is

itself a form of silencing), and achieving tenure is at risk. This kind of situation is not an exclusively black problem. Those people who use feminist frames as the base of their analyses often find themselves bypassed, unsupported, and ignored in favor of other scholars who are doing “important” research. These political realities are spelled out in Mary Hunt’s edited volume *A Guide for Women in Religion: Making Your Way from A to Z* (2004).<sup>4</sup>

One reason that Coleman and others in her scholarly generation may not “feel the pain” is that the elites that held power in the past have learned better and slicker ways to effectively silence dissent. Those methods of control include, but are not limited to, semantics infiltration that takes over justice language and applies it to everybody (thereby making the original idea impotent); defining away problems (while doing nothing about them); and using legislation (for church or government, via sacred text or constitution) to keep people in their places.

For African Americans, race-specific politics also shapes our views of life and the world. In black religious communities, there are culturally specific ways that political gaming is played. Some of these ways have severely negative impacts on black women members. For instance, some black churches are at the forefront of efforts to reinscribe sexism and, indirectly, racism by naming an authentic “black” position. They may have “virtuous woman” programs (biblically based, they claim) that show women how to get and keep men at the expense of themselves. This is part of the real world in which womanists and black feminists and any other feminists lend the weight of their minds in black religious studies. Therefore, to be a womanist involved in theological and ethical analyses is to be involved in political processes.

Political situations also continue to arise in several ways within colleges and churches as womanist scholars work to bring black women out of invisibility. In this, womanist scholars have made significant inroads, as evidenced by Coleman’s complaint that she felt pushed into a womanist category both in her studies and on the job market. It has taken no small effort to bring womanist perspectives to some legitimacy within academic and religious circles. The real problem is not that one scholar is pushed into a narrow frame but that the diversity of all liberationist scholars is seldom recognized or celebrated. Just as there are feminisms, so there are important comparative differences among black religion scholars, be they womanist, black theologian, black ethicist, or something else.

My answer for Monica Coleman’s question, “Must I be womanist?” is covered by three other questions, which were the base of my own reflections: Why

<sup>4</sup> Mary Hunt, *A Guide for Women in Religion: Making Your Way from A to Z* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

am I in the academy? Where is my joy?<sup>1</sup> Which tools do I need to achieve, grow, succeed, and survive? I have learned that whatever path one chooses, one must be willing to grow with it, to change directions when necessary, and to keep analyzing one's actions. The painful honesty that a commitment to feminist thought demands requires a continual check-in. Coleman's question has helped me to question myself and to arrive at the following answer: womanist is more than a category or a name; it is a tool that can be used to intimately link praxis and theory.

#### RESPONSE

*Traci C. West*

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Womanist scholars of religion have helped to create a place at the table for black women scholars and black women's studies within the Eurocentric disciplinary traditions of a male-dominated religious academy. Any conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of womanist religious studies must acknowledge a debt of gratitude to womanist pioneers. There now exists a substantive body of religious scholarship about black women's lives and religious faith, in part because of how these groundbreaking efforts have helped to carve out this intellectual legacy. It must also be remembered that the broader academic context of any conversation about womanist religious studies is shaped by historically rooted challenges of white supremacy. The mere fact that there is a need for a discussion of whether religious studies of black women and by black women scholars in religious fields can be located within varying schools of thought is a consequence of constraining white supremacist assumptions. Can you imagine a discussion about the appropriateness of assigning one analytical category to identify the work of all white religious scholars? There is something absurd and sad about the necessity to fight for the space in scholarly discourse and the academic job and publishing markets for a black woman scholar to be permitted to have more than one analytical label for her work. Yet it is indeed reflective of current realities.

Monica Coleman's courageous article helps us to avoid the racist trap of obedience to black communal taboos on critical discussions of blacks "in front of whites." Critical discussions of womanist thought are healthy for the development of womanist religious studies. They signal freedom from bondage to the need to assert a singular, uniform voice of "the black community" in order to pierce the forms of racist disregard that blacks encounter in a white-dominated academy. I find myself in agreement with much of Coleman's insightful critique

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to M. Shawn Copeland for this question, which she asked of me when I was trying to locate myself within the academy.

of womanist religious studies, especially of its heteronormativity. Also, I resonate with Coleman's inquiries because I claim womanist religious scholarship as an essential resource and conversation partner but tend to identify myself as a black feminist.

As I have written elsewhere, my feminist consciousness was awakened as a young adult by direct exposure to black feminist pioneers such as Michele Wallace, Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Angela Davis, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith.<sup>2</sup> The radical black lesbian feminism exhibited in the writings and activism of several of these women is precisely what most excited me. It provided language for many of my political, intellectual, and emotional yearnings. This burgeoning black feminism of my young adulthood was also developed through my exposure to white lesbian feminist and Latina lesbian feminist scholars. I have not found a compelling reason to abandon this pivotal black feminist foundation, no matter how many people in the religious academy have decided that all black women are now to be identified as womanists. (I suppose I should also confess my personality flaw of a stubborn, knee-jerk reaction of resistance whenever there is pressure to do something simply because "everybody" says it is the thing to do.)

The distinction between black feminism and womanism has been blurred in several ways that militate against becoming too preoccupied with trying to capture it. As Coleman notes, the very first point in Alice Walker's definition of *womanism* describes a womanist as a black feminist.<sup>3</sup> If Walker's 1983 definition is still the primary arbiter of the meaning of the term *womanist* for religious scholars, the effort to create a sharply differentiated dichotomy between the definition of *black feminism* and *womanism* is somewhat bogus. In fact, womanist Christian ethics and theology have often incorporated black feminist terminology and scholarship. *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (1995) includes Katie Cannon's essay "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness" as one of the building blocks of Cannon's womanist method in Christian ethics that she lays out in that volume.<sup>4</sup> One of the hallmark essays of womanist Christian ethicist Emilie Townes, "Living in the New Jerusalem: The Rhetoric and Movement of Liberation in the House of Evil" (1993), is centrally informed by the ideas of black feminist Audre Lorde.<sup>5</sup> This

<sup>2</sup> See my essays "Visions of Womanhood: Beyond Idolizing Heteropatriarchy," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58, nos. 3–4 (2004): 128–39, and "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist? Marking the Distinctions and Defying Them," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.

<sup>4</sup> Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 78–91.

merger of black feminist and womanist thought in womanist religious studies has also been exemplified by scholarly practices such as the hosting of black feminist bell hooks by the womanist section of the American Academy of Religion, with responses from womanist panelists who all celebrated her work in their presentations.

In a 1993 article that strongly criticizes discourse in theological education related to these categories, Delores Williams asserts that “too few black feminists and womanists touch the lives of the rank-and-file black women in the black community.”<sup>6</sup> Her candor about the deficiencies she finds in feminist intellectual methods is thought provoking and deserves a comprehensive response that I do not offer here. I reference this article to point out an early attempt at articulating a womanist scholarly self-definition in relation to feminism. Williams offers the rather harsh assertion that black feminists “have produced little more than imitations of white feminist intellectual agendas” and encourages both womanists and feminists to jointly interrogate whether feminist theory contributes to the advancement of white supremacy.<sup>7</sup> Williams challenges: “Are feminists and womanists prepared to experience the grave uncertainty and isolation that comes with giving up the master’s tools, especially his words, his categories and his mode of control called imperialism?”<sup>8</sup> Ironically, she utilizes the analytical “tools” of black feminist Audre Lorde to issue this challenge and of black feminist Barbara Christian to frame her criticism of feminist theorizing.

In the web of blurred feminist-womanist categories that exists in womanist religious scholarship, it seems that many womanists want to create a womanist voice that is distinctive from feminism most strongly in contrast to white feminism and much more weakly in relation to black feminism. But I am not convinced of the usefulness of sorting out these overlapping analytical relationships into discrete, differentiated categories. Perhaps the political implications of making such distinctions need to be examined. For instance, do the narrow parameters of this womanist versus black feminist versus white feminist conversation reinforce a black-white monopoly of social interests that undermines regard for related Asian American, Latina, or Native American scholarly voices and social interests? I would strongly argue on behalf of the necessity for those of us who contribute to black women’s studies in religion to learn from these related perspectives in order to expand and complicate our work.

If binary-oppositional categories are maintained as a kind of race-based intellectual straitjacket for black women scholars, problematic implications arise not only for the next wave of black women scholars Coleman refers to but also for potential academic mentors of those scholars. If one consents to the paro-

<sup>6</sup> Delores S. Williams, “Womanist/Feminist Dialogue: Problems and Possibilities,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9 (Spring–Fall 1993): 68.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

chial logic that all black women scholars of religion must be classified as “womanists,” it may also seem fitting to presume that only womanists can mentor black women students. Does that mean that faculty who are not black women need not read black women’s studies in religion and/or mentor black women entering fields of religious studies? The intellectual talents of black women scholars are harmfully restricted by such scholarly boundaries. Furthermore, if these boundaries are accepted, white scholars (who make up the majority of the religion academy in the United States) and other scholars of color (for example, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders) would be excused both from engaging with the ideas in black women’s studies in religion and from cultivating emerging black women scholars. Scholars of religion do not, of course, require permission from womanists to focus on theoretical ideas and studies authored by whites and Europeans, to teach their students to do the same, or to excuse themselves from an obligation to mentor scholars in their field who are not white.

The conversation about the distinction between womanism and feminism also has political implications beyond the academy. Daphne Wiggins demonstrates one approach to this question in her empirical study *Righteous Content: Black Women’s Perspectives of Church and Faith* (2005), an ethnographic study focusing on the religiosity of the black female membership of one Pentecostal and two Baptist black church congregations in Georgia.<sup>9</sup> Wiggins examines these women’s self-described beliefs and behaviors. She notes a few of the women’s brief or distasteful references to “feminism” and includes a careful discussion of whether the term *womanism* applies to the devout group of Christian women that she studied. Wiggins summarizes ideas from Christian womanist scholars and weighs their relevance to these churchwomen, at some points finding helpful connections and at other points rejecting the term’s applicability:

If one has to embrace all aspects of the definition to be womanist, then one particular part of the definition is problematic. The inclusion of positive regard for women who may love women sexually or nonsexually as a defining trait of a womanist also disqualifies these women as womanists. Admittedly, whether to label these women as “womanists” may be a misplaced preoccupation on my part.<sup>10</sup>

Wiggins’s cautiousness about imposing a womanist label on the women she studied shows respect for their right to self-definition, but I wished for more details on this issue of sexuality. Wiggins does not elaborate on what she means by her assertion of a lack of “positive regard for women who may love women sexually or nonsexually” among her interviewees. Does this mean that her subjects do

<sup>9</sup> Daphne C. Wiggins, *Righteous Content: Black Women’s Perspectives of Church and Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

not have a positive regard for themselves if they are lesbians or for their daughters, nieces, and cousins who may be lesbians? Is a heterosexual identity assumed here for all church members and their families? What concerns or fears prevent investigation of nonsexual love between women? As Wiggins creatively explores the definition of *womanism* within the scope of this research project, the constraints of heteronormativity and homophobia seem to show up.

Coleman's article reasons that it is because they tend to be empirical (of a "descriptive nature") that womanist studies of black women, unlike feminist ones, lack a "political edge." I do not agree with Coleman if she means by this that political issues are not present in empirical studies. It is not the nature of a study but the choices the author makes about which questions to explore that create "edginess" with regard to political issues that are present in the material. For instance, issues related to how expressions of lesbian sexuality are manifested in the power dynamics of black church life are present within contexts that womanist empirical studies cover, though such issues may be insufficiently examined. Political concerns (or power dynamics) merit "edgy" reflection because of their moral importance—their revelations about hierarchies of worth and status, even among women. In black women's studies in religion, the matters of moral import that most compellingly beg for attention reside not in discernment of who fits under which label—"feminist," "womanist," "black feminist," or "third-wave womanist-feminist"—but in questions about the subject matter, such as why and how scholarship about black communities and religious life attends to issues of sexuality and sexual orientation.

This topic of sexuality and sexual orientation should be compelling because of instances of gay teenagers who, as a result of their parents' religious beliefs, are put out of their homes to fend for themselves on the streets. The stories of the black and Latino homeless youth served by the Green Chimneys programs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender children, youth, and families in New York City illustrate this problem.<sup>11</sup> For me, black women's studies in religion should interrogate heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia because of violent assaults that occur on the streets of poor black neighborhoods, such as the 2003 murder of black lesbian teenager Sakia Gunn in Newark, New Jersey. Such an interrogation is also needed because of the morally repugnant church rejection—based upon sex/gender prejudices and bigotry—of smart and skilled women for clerical leadership that I continue to learn about from black lesbian seminarians who describe their treatment when I teach and speak on seminary campuses.

I know that these reasons for including a focus on heterosexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia in black women's studies in religion are not as compelling to many heterosexual religious scholars who contribute to black women's studies as they are for me. But perhaps the influence of political opposition to

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.greenchimneys.org/>.



“gay marriage” by black Christian clergy will persuade more of them to see the urgency of addressing the politics of sex/gender issues in black churches and communities. Clergy in Atlanta, Boston, Washington, DC, and many other places have spoken out against marriage equality, especially prior to the 2004 elections. Arguing that they represent the moral values of blacks, clergy such as black evangelist T. D. Jakes and pastor Herbert Lusk urged blacks to support anti-gay-rights white politicians whose political strategies included targeting black communities to deny them their right to vote in Florida in 2000 (and again in Ohio in 2004), and whose political goals included the reduction of federal programs that support education, health care, clean air, housing, employment opportunities (except military service), and affirmative action—programs that provide services members of black communities disproportionately rely upon.<sup>12</sup> If blacks can be persuaded by their church leaders to vote in record numbers against every economic and social self-interest that they have because barring gays and lesbians from marriage is the only social value of importance for their lives and communities, how can Christian womanists, black feminists, or anyone else who could offer thoughtful leadership continue to ignore the need for black churches and communities to confront their homophobia?

Unexamined and unchallenged, heterosexism and homophobia also contribute to black community leaders and clergy parroting the rhetoric of right-wing political think tanks. They assert, as the editorial page of the black Washington, DC, newspaper the *Afro-American* declared at the end of 2005, a socio-economic claim that heterosexual marriage is not only what African Americans need but also “a blessing to the entire country.”<sup>13</sup> This new rhetoric and the \$1.5 billion marriage initiative that is part of President George W. Bush’s contribution to welfare reform are yet another assault on poor, single black mothers (of all sexual orientations). Such developments also create a new frontier of communal complicity in the battering, marital rape, emotional and spiritual anguish, intimidation, threats, and isolation that black women victim-survivors of intimate violence within heterosexual marriages and partnerships already experience. Is it a naive hope on my part that the demeaning and maybe even life-endangering consequences for so many black women of this worship of the superiority of heterosexuality will compel any contributor to black women’s studies in religion to include black heterosexism as a fundamental concern that must be interrogated?

The serious dangers posed by simplistic moral rhetoric about blacks repre-

<sup>12</sup> See Hanna Rosin, “Redeem the Vote Spreads the Election-Year Gospel,” *Washington Post*, October 29 2004; David D. Kirkpatrick, “Black Pastors Backing Bush Are Rarities, But Not Alone,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2004; Laurie Goodstein, “Minister, a Bush Ally, Gives Church as Site for Alito Rally,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2006; and Thomas Edsall, “Christian Right Mobilizes for Judge; Conservative Tilt Sought on Bench,” *Washington Post*, January 9, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Editorial, *Washington Afro-American*, December 3–9, 2005.

sent a familiar and perpetual struggle under the conditions of white supremacy. How does one resist the imposition of all types of narrow and constraining categories for blacks? How does one even resist conversations about sorting out categories and labels that are imposed by white manipulations and patronizing reductions of the authentic and complex realities of black folks? I want to resist a conversation about the term *womanist* if the purpose is merely to have an all-about-me-and-my-self-interests-as-a-black-woman session that endlessly celebrates black womanhood by choosing certain aspects of black women's history, practices, and struggles that can be construed as virtuous and neglecting others that cannot be. I also want to resist this conversation if it will be used as a means for pitting me against my black sisters in the religious academy with whom I have any intellectual differences. I *do* want to have this conversation in order to develop womanist and black feminist religious studies that dare to offer liberative thought in the repressive climate of our society.