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# Womanist Theology

*Diana L. Hayes*

Womanist theology is a theology derived from the context, voice, action, and agency of Black women of the African Diaspora. It is grounded in – but also is a critique of – the failings of Black (overtly male) and feminist (overtly white female) liberation theologies that preceded it. Womanist theology allows for a new epistemology that provides a new lens through which to review the historical experience of Black (African descended) women. Alice Walker was first to coin the term Womanist, but it has since expanded in many diverse ways that give insight into the lives and perspectives of Black (African descended) women.

Dr Katie Cannon was the first to use the term theologically and was quickly followed by others who sought to break open – and away from – the masculine by raising issues of concern to Black (African Diasporan) women. It has since evolved through several generations/waves. (In this article, generations/waves are used interchangeably, as there is still discussion as to which is preferable.) Each generation/wave has allowed and enabled Black women's issues and concerns to be heard and listened to, clarified, and understood. Emerging from within both the Black community and the Black church, Womanist theology is one that sustains and nurtures Black women and the men, women, and children who make up their lives and histories. It provides a new way of talking, living, and acting that promises new ways of being in the world at a time of great need.

**Keywords:** Class, Ethics, Feminist theology, Gender, Intersectionality, Liberation, Race, Sexism, Slavery, Womanism

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# 1 Introduction

Womanist theology is a source of faith seeking reason and understanding through the lens of the encounter of women, particularly African American (Black) women, with the holy. It evolves out of their quest to be seen, heard, and received as gift, bearing the imprimatur of the *imago Dei* (the image of God). It is theology through an epistemology inclusive of the history, vernacular, cultural, and spiritual encounters of Black American women. The quest of living out the scripture '[w]here the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' (2 Cor 3:17) is a foundational aspect of Womanist theology. It is a theology that is enfleshed with their sufferings, travails, trauma; faith, hope, and love; and forgiveness and mercy and joy. It is in the Christian context that Womanist theology originated. Over the course of time, it has emerged to include women of interreligious faiths across the African Diaspora. Today it is represented by women who are Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and followers of varying religions and/or spiritual practices.

Womanist theology began as a response to (and critique of) two existing liberation theologies, Black liberation theology and feminist liberation theology. Black liberation theology emphasized dialogue through a lens and social location of race from a Black male perspective. Feminist liberation theology's emphasis was on gender, from a predominantly white female perspective. Both theological discourses either ignored or minimized the voice action agency (presence) of Black women in the dialogue. There was little or no concern for or interest in the inclusion of the needs and concerns of Black women. Black women responded by developing their own understanding of their needs, desires, and experiences, using a lens of hermeneutical suspicion to discern the faults and failings of the contemporary world and its impact on them.

Womanist theology, in its genesis, is a theology where liberation, justice, and inclusion are foundational to the Christ event. It engages the context of sexism and particularly misogynoir (Bailey 2008), racism, and white supremacy as factors that deny the voice and presence of Black women in the theological discourse.

## 2 Laying the foundations

Womanist theology is a theology that is derived from the context, voice, action, and agency of Black women of the African Diaspora. Most are descendants of enslaved African matriarchs. It is a theology rooted in the concerns of Black women, influenced by their social location. This perspective and lens of theology is a critical response to two existing liberation theologies, Black Liberation Theology, which emphasized a race perspective, and feminist theology that emphasized gender from a predominantly white perspective. Both were and are limited in their scope. They lacked orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy as it related to the circumstances of the mind-body-spirit continuum of

Black women. Their efforts focused solely on the experiences of Black men and the social context of white women. There was little concern, interest, or regard (right feeling – orthopathy) for the needs and concerns of Black women. There were no established writings, dialogues, or actions of determination for addressing the constructs of religion or society that disenfranchised or marginalized women of the African Diasporic experience (no right action – orthopraxy). There existed no vernacular or common language to provide insight and understanding of the Black woman’s perspective or liberation in mind, body, spirit. There was no contextual epistemology inclusive of the lived reality of Black women in America and throughout the African Diaspora (right speaking, teaching, thought-orthodoxy).

## **2.1 Black liberation theology (BLT)**

Black liberation theology (BLT) provides the seminal (historical) groundwork upon which Womanist theology takes root. BLT evolved out of a need to provide a construct for the oppressed (historically disenfranchised Black folk) to see themselves within the salvation story. It came to the fore as both a rejection and correction of European/white theologies and doctrinal statements (see Allen 2021). The Black Theology Movement, which emerged in the 1960s, was a response to the signs of the times. The social uprisings and civil disobedience, the assassination of a number of civil rights leaders, and the rise of the Black Power Movement were the catalysts and backdrop for the evolving theological reflection within the Black American sphere.

James H. Cone brought to the foreground, for the first time, the voices, and concerns of Black Americans to the halls of academia (theological arenas). However, most Black theologians were Black men, and the voices of Black women were rarely affirmed or even acknowledged. Prior to the womanist theological praxis, BLT was only reflective of Black men (a cis-gendered Black male-centred liberation theology, Allen 2021). The presence and actions, as well as the voices and historical contributions of Black women were ignored, overlooked, and disregarded, or at the very least simply tolerated. The necessity for a Black theology discourse arises from the need of a people to see themselves as in relationship with God.

Liberation is freedom to be in relationship to God. Fellowship with God is the beginning and the end of human liberation. The liberated person is the one who encounters God in faith, that is, in conviction and trust that one’s true humanity is actualized in God. This vertical dimension of faith is the essential response to the gospel and is thus the heart of liberation’s meaning from the human side. (Cone 1997: 130)

## **2.2 Feminist theology of liberation**

Just as the 1960s ushered in a movement and discourse in theological circles on Black theology, the voice of women (particularly white women) was being heard in the feminist movement. Theology/academia was not divorced from this burgeoning new ground of discourse. Hence the advent of the feminist movement, fostered by a group of predominantly white college educated women, entered the national landscape. Their major concerns dealt with the restrictive traditional roles and lack of agency or voice of white women in the societal structures of the United States of America. This also included the churches and their hierarchical structures. The exclusion and mistreatment of women, and their inequitable status, transcended the sacred and the secular. The feminist movement sought to empower women (that is, some women), yet they initially gave little time or thought to the roles of women of colour, working-class women, or working-class women of colour. Issues of race or class took a back seat, as opposed to gender. The concerns of Black women or poor women were seen as a sideline rather than a critical issue. The concerns of women of colour were rarely addressed or listened to. Even those who named themselves Black feminists, such as Pauli Murray (co-founder of the National Organization of Women), bell hooks, and Barbara Smith realized the problems and issues raised by Black and poor women were being ignored by white feminists.

### **3 The vernacular of Womanism**

Womanist vernacular in its origins allows for a new epistemology in the field of liberation theology. It provides for a lens (*de novo*, looking with a new eyes) of critical suspicion, revealing how Black women and their spirituality and social justice context formulate a theology (faith seeking an understanding of liberation and an embrace of wholeness).

Alice Walker's coining of the term Womanist came at a critical time in the development of liberation theologies. The vernacular of Womanist is reflective of those historically oppressed and discriminated against. Black women sought a descriptive term of their own language that did not come from a movement already defined to their exclusion. Terminology was needed that was inclusive not exclusive of their needs and concerns. Black women needed a term that emerged from their own lived experiences in the world. It could not be a word that was simply the addition of colour but one that was fully expressive of their social location, cultural context, and historical legacy, anthropological depth, and spirituality of substance and survival. Vernacular was needed that spoke to the multi-generational and intergenerational ties of their womanhood. A tongue of the people, that intertwined with the oppression and suppression of their voices, actions, and agency and their perspectives and respective context of gender was needed. It was vital that they formulate an expression of who and whose they were as Black women of the African Diaspora: descendants of bridled ancestors, those who were not able to speak in their own self-determination and whose mouths were mechanically stitched if they spoke out

for freedom or justice. The description of their legacy had to be that of an unbridled tongue and unbridled personality (Lewis-Mosely 2023).

Just as BLT was the response to theological contexts that excluded the Black experience, Womanist theology was the response to both cis-gendered male perspectives on theology and Black male-centred liberation theology and feminist theology discourse. Womanism 'is a theological framework that centres Black women and their experiences, affirms their love of themselves and one another, and their mutual interdependence with men and all of creation' (Allen 2021: 158). The foundation of womanist vernacular first presents itself in the short story 'Coming Apart' in Walker's anthology, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981).

The language of Womanism was the catalyst for action. Alice Walker published *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* in 1983. This work, a collection of essays on the lives and struggles of Black women, voiced what they had been experiencing throughout their lives. Walker coined the term 'Womanist' to describe the women she was writing about and wrote a four-part definition of the term. Black women recognized themselves and their lives in it and began to use Womanist to describe themselves and the work that they were doing. Although Walker's text is most noted for the language, it is not the first time Womanism appeared in the public square (see 'Coming Apart' in Walker 1980). Walker first used 'Womanist' in a 1978 short story, 'Advancing Luna and Ida B. Wells', eventually published in the 1980 anthology and the subsequent 1982 *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. The four-part catalytic definition of Womanist is in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983):

- (1) From *womanish*. (Opp. of 'girlish', i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of colour. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'you act womanish', i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or *wifful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: 'You trying to be grown'. Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
- (2) Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: 'Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?' Ans. 'Well, you know the coloured race is just like a flower garden, with every colour flower represented'. Traditionally

capable, as in: 'Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me'. Reply: 'It wouldn't be the first time'.

- (3) Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves the Spirit*. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves the Folk*. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
- (4) Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

'Womanist' encompasses 'feminist' as it is defined in Webster's, but also means instinctively pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it was a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous, or outspoken behaviour when we were children: 'You're acting *womanish!*' An advantage of using 'womanist' is that, because it is from our own culture, it need not be prefaced with the word 'Black' since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface 'feminist' with the word 'white', since the word 'feminist' is accepted as coming out of white women's culture.

The earlier usage of Womanism did not create the spark that later enlightened the discourse when the four-part definition evolved. The four-part definition provided concrete legitimacy. This nomenclature transcended into the field of theological academia.

## **4 Emergence of Womanist theology**

The first efforts of Womanist theologians (as with all theologies) sought to distinguish it from those that already existed and to set forth its origins: what does the theology teach, what are its major sources and emphases? As with all constructive (systematic) theologies, it set out to explore what its significance was for those doing the theology and those seeking to understand it, Black women.

Womanist theology (as a constructive theology) seeks to develop specific paths of inquiry that enable theologians to explore and lay out its meanings. These include the broader fields of ethics (moral theology) and biblical interpretation (hermeneutics), as well as ecclesiology, Christology, and others. The flooring must be constructed on a foundation upon which these specific theologies can be articulated and defined. Walker had begun the process by providing a name, but it was up to other Black women to broaden, develop, and further build upon this base.

Womanist Thought first emerged in the 1980s and branched out into the many voices that exist today including theology. Most significant is Womanist thought (often called Africana Womanism), which is not equivalent to Womanist theology. The concerns of Africana Womanism are concerns as well of Womanist theology although Womanist theology has a broader discourse. Africana Womanism has a long and illustrious history of its own. The specificity of Africana Womanism is its attentiveness and focus on the realities and injustices in society with race as the focal point. Scholars such as Layli Maparyan Phillips

and Clenora Hudson-Weems were also impacted by Walker and began to articulate Africana Womanist thought. It can be found in many academic areas such as history, law, sociology, and other fields (see Phillips 2006; 2012; and Hudson-Weems 2004; 1995).

Womanist theology is holistic in the sense of embodying all aspects of life that inform and actualize the cosmographic (the circle of life in African spirituality) encounter of Black women with the God-experience. The emergence of the feminist movement of the 1970s produced such literature as *Our Bodies Our Selves* (The Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1970). Yet the dichotomy of the focus solely on the body and not the entire paradigm of mind-body-spirit is an example of how the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of Womanism is not included in the representations of that time and even of the present, when the experiences and concerns from a womanist perspective are engaged. An updated context for the twenty-first century is reflective in this paradigm emerging in a fourth generation/wave. This new epistemology provides new ways of theologizing and new ways of exploring theology and its connections with the spirit, health, and the future. It is evolving out of the foundations of the legacy of those women who coined the vernacular (first generation/wave).

#### **4.1 Historical foundations**

Early representatives of the breadth and depth of Black women's participation in developing new and enriched understandings of their lives include: Sojourner Truth, who challenged a white minister who questioned her right to speak publicly (speaking with an unbridled tongue); Harriet Tubman, considered the 'Moses' of her people, whose action of escaping enslavement and freeing others is the embodiment of the Exodus of Hebrew scripture on liberation theology (acting mannish); it also included Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who documented, published, and proclaimed the historical atrocities of the genocidal lynching of Black peoples (being bodacious). They were not Womanists by title, as the term did not then exist, yet their voice, action, and agency were the prototype of a Womanist. They laid the path for those who later appropriated Walker's terms and constructed a new world of possibility on it.

The voices of Black women were rarely affirmed or even acknowledged in their or others' writings. They were certainly not initially taught in the seminaries and divinity schools. Black women's theology is deeply indebted to Black history, but that history was mainly seen as that of Black men and boys. The presence and actions of Black women, let alone their voices and historical contributions, were silenced. The irony is that, nearly a century prior to the BLT and feminist movement, Anna Julia Hayward Cooper, a Black woman and a voice from the American South, was a young girl of ten years of age when she challenged the restrictions placed on Black girls in academic settings (at St. Augustine

Normal School). Years later, at Oberlin University, Cooper challenged the restriction against admitting women to theological studies (1892).

Cooper's voice, action, and agency could as well be thought of as one of those foremothers of the Womanist movement. She wrote:

Only the Black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence, and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me'. (Cooper 1892: 27)

Cooper's quote provides a historical prototype of womanist language and mindset even prior to the vernacular being implemented in the current context (Lemert and Bhan 1998: 63). The presence and actions of Black women, let alone their voices and historical contributions, are the fertile seed bed upon which the matrix of the Womanist movement and rise of Womanist theology sprouts.

## **4.2 Katie Cannon, Womanist theologian**

Katie Geneva Cannon was among the first to embrace the vernacular and context of Walker's Womanism within the field of theology and ethics, developing a paradigm shift that was Cannon's intent:

Our objective is to use Walker's four-part definition as a critical, methodological framework for challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy as well as a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion. (Cannon 2003: 23)

Cannon explains the function and meaning of Womanism, seeing it as not just a replacement for a set of elitist hegemonic texts with a set of historically-ignored Afrocentric texts. Rather, Walker's definition serves for Cannon as a framework for challenging inherited patriarchal traditions. She sees it as a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion.

She presents four definitions of Womanist, which reveal its richness and variety. They are: theological (Williams), sociological (Townsend-Gilkes), ethical (Townes), and religious (Hayes) perspectives. Dr Williams, she notes, 'succinctly summarizes' Walker's definition:

a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color. She emphasized black mother-daughter communication, women's thirst for knowledge, their responsible behavior, and their seriousness. Affirming women's culture, their right to sexual preference, their emotional flexibility, their love of art, nature, spirit, and self. Walker portrays a womanist as also committed to the survival of an entire people, male and female. (Cannon 1996)

Dr Townsend-Gilkes affirms Walker's 'theoretical politics' but seeks to 'connect its relevancy to the down-to-earth realities that invade the human spirit' (Cannon 1996: 2). 'Womanist' is a way of seeing that affirms the ability of the black experience in spite of centuries of white supremacist negation (Townsend-Gilkes 1991: 5–6).

Dr Townes also speaks of Womanism, stating that:

Womanist religious reflections provide descriptive foundations that lead to analytical constructs for the eradication of oppression in the lives of African Americans and, by extension, the rest of human creation. The confessional element of 'womanist, means that it is a term that cannot be imposed but must be claimed by the Black woman who is engaged in the eradication of oppression for her own faith perspectives and academic disciplines. Hence, the use of the term 'womanist' to describe a theorist or practitioner's work is one of avowal rather than a denotation. (Townes 1994: 1–2)

Finally, while Irene Monroe sees Womanism encompassing the variety of ways that Black American women provide support to each other as they relate to the world (Monroe 2006), Dr Hayes seeks to record Womanism into the 'religious register' by stating:

Womanist theology emerged as women of African descent in the United States engaged in the study of theology realized that their presence was taken for granted, It seeks to affirm their roles as women who have been full and active participants in the history of black Americans and the United States itself Both feminist and (black) male liberation theologians have erred historically in claiming to speak inclusively, while basing their theologies primarily on the respective experiences of white women or black men. Womanists assert that full liberation can be achieved only when all forms of oppression are equally addressed. (Hayes 2000: 221–222)

The biblical component and Womanist context is further engaged through the scholarship of Renita Weems, the first Womanist biblical scholar. Thus, Womanist theology is a revelation of the activity around the term Womanist, as Black women discussed, debated, and argued over its definition and usage. The encounter with the term was labouring, birthing, in a new understanding, a new way of knowing the woman-self in the context of liberation and theological discourse from their own Black religious and lived expression. These trailblazers mined their lived realities to define the term in ways that gave them the freedom to explore, learn, challenge, grow, and develop their own understanding of what being a Womanist meant for them. It was a name that they all agreed must be claimed by the person, naming herself rather than placed upon her by someone else. It was an understanding rooted in self-determination, defining for oneself, self-affirming, self-anointing, and self-naming as Womanist. As noted earlier, the language of Anna Julia Cooper rings clear in this aspect: 'Only the Black woman can say "when and where I enter, in the quiet [...] undisputed dignity of my womanhood [...]"' (1892: 27).

Cannon's theology was specifically grounded in the writing of Black women like Zora Neale Hurston who, in her stories, laid out the realities of Black women, especially in the south, depicting the restrictions and limitations placed upon them by society because of their race and gender, and further by their economic class.

Katie Cannon, as well as Jaqueline Grant and Dolores Williams, sought a deeper expression of their presence and their self-determination to speak of themselves with an unbridled tongue, are the matriarchs – also often named foremothers – of Womanist theology. Lewis-Mosley notes that to speak with an unbridled tongue means 'to speak in a voice that does not stammer at the truth of how the church has harmed Black and Brown peoples' (Lewis-Mosely 2023: 137).

Lewis-Mosley engages this dialogue from a perspective that recognizes Black women's perpetual struggle with 'identity, ownership, and empowerment and leadership [...]' (Lewis-Mosely 2023: 139) because of many factors that impede our visibility and voice within theological circles. This exclusionary action Lewis-Mosley describes as being undaughtered: 'Unseen as a Black woman in the sacred spaces of the church and unheard in its homilies, I felt undaughtered' by the church (Lewis-Mosely 2023: 139).

These Womanist theologians etched in stone a wisdom that derived from the mother-wit 'out of their mother's garden', so to speak. 'Doing womanist canon-building work', Katie Cannon and those who embraced her work forged that path as the first generation/wave of Womanist theologians (Moore 2023: xx).

As stated above, Cannon's theology was specifically grounded in the writing of Black women like Zora Neale Hurston who, in her stories, laid out the realities of Black women, especially in the south, depicting the restrictions and limitations placed upon them by society solely because of their race and gender and further by their economic class. A result of that reality was the development of a mythology, which continues to the present day, that alienates Black and white women as well as Black women and Black men: the myth of 'white womanhood'. This presents polarized depictions of Black and white women in which the latter retain all the allegedly positive feminine characteristics: gentle, nurturing, sensitive, intuitive, helpless, dependent. These serve to place white women on a pedestal, while the Black woman is given the allegedly negative feminine attributes: temptress, promiscuous, independent, unnatural mother, and inhuman. A Black woman was all that a white woman should not be. She was seen as the 'mule' of American society by all (Hurston), oftentimes even by herself, forced to bear burdens the lowest animal was not required to bear, and denounced for the very degradation forced upon her. This has led, especially among educated Black women, to an alienation from and distrust of white women and thus the feminist movement, as noted earlier.

Black women feel the need to empower themselves and to engage in their own efforts at consciousness-raising. Patricia Hill Collins affirms this necessity in presenting the context for her work on Black feminist consciousness. She privileges the ideas of African American women in the social and political realm, just as Womanist theologians are doing in theological circles. By doing so, Black feminist and Womanist theologians urge white feminists, African American men, and all others to investigate the similarities and differences they share. More women of colour now critique early feminism and are establishing their own movements of theological development, such as Ada Isasi-Diaz's Mujerista theology and Maria Pilar Aquino's Latina feminist theology (Isasi-Diaz 1996; Aquino, Machado and Rodríguez 2002).

There is also growing use of the term 'intersectionality', coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, that has provided areas of cross-dialogue and communication among women of varying racial, ethnic, class, and gender/sexuality groups. Womanist theology insists that full human liberation can only be achieved by the elimination, not of only one form of oppression, but of all forms; intersectionality brings all the issues that Black women face, such as race, class, and gender issues, into dialogue, and addresses them together so as to show how they relate to each other and as such impact upon a woman.

A Womanist sees herself both individually and in community, but that individuality, in keeping with her wholistic African heritage, arises from the community in which she is born, shaped, and formed. The Black community plays a critical role in her growth and development. She is truly the backbone of that community and often also of the church, although not always recognized as such, the one to whom others turn for assistance, development, growth, and nurturance. Her goal of liberation, therefore, which is both spiritual and physical, is not simply for herself but for all her people, and beyond that, for all who are also oppressed by reason of race, sex/gender, and/or class. Sexism is not the only issue; rarely is it the most important issue. Rather, it is the intertwined evils emanating from and the multiplicative effect of all of these which act to restrict her and her community that are the cause for her concern. Thus, Womanism, in an inclusive sense, can be seen as encompassing a more limited feminism in its openness to all who are oppressed for whatever reason. Although most Womanist theologians today do not see themselves as Black feminists, there are many secular Black feminists with whom they work, especially on socio-political issues. This understanding has been taken up by Black women theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, and others who have attempted to broaden that definition and invest it with a theological and spiritual interpretation which is proving to be emancipatory for many.

## **5 Building on the foundations**

### **5.1 Foremothers**

The foremothers of Womanist theology – Katie G. Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Delores Williams – were the first to articulate and develop an emerging Womanist theology. Although Dr Cannon has been discussed above, it is necessary to look at her again in keeping with the other foremothers.

Cannon first discusses Womanist theology in an article that explores what she initially calls Black Womanist ethics (1985) She then, in her dissertation *Black Womanist Ethics* (2006), expands on this understanding of 'Womanist'. Using Zora Neale Hurston's writings to examine the virtues emerging from the Black community, she analyses the moral situation of Black women in the twentieth century that arises from their struggle to survive in both the white, privileged, and oppressive world, as well as the Black one, where they are exploited and oppressed.

She follows the paths of her foremothers in the Black community to define the meaning of Black women's lives and to expand the boundaries of those lives, women like Fannie Lou Hamer, Sojourner Truth, and countless others unknown or little-known today. In addition, her sources go beyond the ordinary to include the 'stuff' of women's lives, their historical experience, and their literature to reveal their odyssey. She relies on the literary writings of women such as Zora Neale Hurston for their insights and ability to reveal the inner workings of Black women's minds. As she notes,

there is no better source for comprehending the real-lived texture of Black experience and the meaning of the moral life in the Black context than the Black woman's literary tradition. Black women's literature offers the sharpest available view of the Black community's soul. (Burrows 1999: 6)

Dolores Williams is also a foremother. In her seminal article 'Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices' (1987) she articulated a Womanist perspective by setting forth the parameters for a Womanist theological methodology, consisting of (a) a multidialogical intent, (b) a liturgical intent, (c) a didactic event, and (d) a commitment both to reason and to the validity of female imagery and metaphorical language in the construction of theological statements (Williams 1987: 67). These intents work together to yield language that brings Black women's history, culture, and religious experience into the interpretive circle of Christian theology and the liturgical life of the church. Womanist theological language, for Williams, must in this sense be an instrument for social and theological change in church and society.

In a later work, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk* (1993), Williams critiques Anselm's doctrine of salvation via atonement: does the image of a surrogate God (that is, one who died for humanity's sins, whether coerced or voluntarily) have salvific power for Black women (and, logically, any who are oppressed), or does

this image support and reinforce the exploitation that has accompanied their experience of surrogacy, both during and after slavery? Her answer is an unequivocal 'no'. Just as Anselm and others used the language of the sociopolitical thought of their time to render Christian ideas and principles understandable, so Womanist theologians can do the same, using the thought and actions of the African American woman's world to show Black women that surrogacy does not ensure their salvation. Women's liberation is not the only issue. What is more important is survival and quality of life. Being free is important but not if it is a freedom simply to die because you lack the necessities of life.

Jacquelyn Grant raises a christological question: can a male be the saviour of women? In *White Woman's Christ, Black Woman's Jesus* (1989), she responds 'yes'. She sees the feminist and male theological critique as inadequate for its failure to critique its limited foundation in the Euro-American worldview and to raise issues of racism, sexism, and classism.

Grant presents a twofold source for an understanding of God, that of God's direct revelation to them as Black women and God's revelation as witnessed in the Bible and received in the context of their lived-out experience. God is revealed as Creator, Sustainer of life, Comforter, and Liberator. Jesus, therefore, is seen as the 'divine co-sufferer' who empowers Blacks in situations of oppression. Because of Black women's connection with all who are oppressed, Jesus Christ is seen as identifying with the 'least among us', affirming their basic humanity and inspiring active hope.

Grant raises three challenges to Womanists:

- (1) If Christ is the saviour of all, not just men, then is not all of Christ's humanity significant, that is, the wholeness of Christ? That significance lies not in his maleness but in his humanness, found in the experiences of Black women. Therefore, Jesus the Christ is a Black woman.
- (2) Womanist theologians need to explore Christ's meaning in a society in which class distinctions are increasing. Black people and women should share leadership of the church, rather than the continuation of a privileged class.
- (3) Womanist theologians need to develop a constructive Christology, liberating both the Black women's community and the larger Black community.

## **5.2 The first generation/wave**

Other Black women theologians next began to explore the varying subject areas within Womanist theology. They developed an epistemology, or way of knowing, which saw Black women's experiences as normative (Floyd-Thomas 2006: 3) This understanding empowered them to write and speak in ways that helped them to dismantle existing white and patriarchal powers that compromised their integrity and self-determination.

The foremothers were a critical part of this first generation/wave but also preceded it. There were also others in that grouping, including Emilie Townes, Kelly Brown Douglas, Shawn Copeland, Renita Weems, Marcia Riggs, and Diana L. Hayes.

Contemporary Womanist epistemology has gone far past Walker's original definition, although that is still a critically important part of its foundation. Now heavily engaged in the academy as well as the pulpit, Womanist religious scholars have moved well beyond that original definition, broadening its application and meaning in many ways while also rejecting some aspects seen as no longer viable, based on the scholar's concerns and interests. Among their ranks are church historians, sociologists of religion, constructive/systematic theologians, moral ethicists, scripture scholars, and others.

Members of the first wave who have helped to develop and expand the understanding of Womanist theology include Emilie Townes, an ethicist, who seeks to develop an ethics reflective of Black women's lives, loves, and suffering. She considers herself a Christian social ethicist who uses social history, traditional social ethics categories, and other Christian categories in an integrated way to seek out how we should respond to God's call. Theology and ethics must be done contextually with both responding to or correlating with each other; neither can be abstracted.

Kelly Brown Douglas has extended the challenge of a Womanist perspective on Christ by introducing the historical and religious significance of the Black Christ for African Americans. Tracing the Black understanding of Jesus Christ from the time of slavery to the present day, she sees that understanding as being centred on Christ's liberating role as a stand against white racism and for Black freedom, which has empowered Black Christians and Black churches to be prophetic in relation to issues of race in America. At the same time, she critiques the apparent inability of that same church of liberation to empower and nurture more than one half of its constituency: Black women. She wonders if the Black Christ can adequately point to Christ's significance and presence within the contemporary Black community? Her response is 'yes', recognizing that it is the totality of Jesus the Christ that is of critical importance to Black women, not simply his maleness.

There is a difference between the Christology of Grant and Brown. Grant presents a tridimensional analysis encompassing race, gender, and class, while Douglas' analysis is both multidimensional and bifocal, confronting all that oppresses the Black community (*The Black Christ*, 1994). They both however see Christ as a Black woman. Douglas also later explores the 'Stand Your Ground' laws of Southern states, and how they too often lead to the deaths of Black men as well as the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement and its importance in later works.

Marcia Riggs is a Christian ethicist who explores the Black Women's Club Movement. She sees the 'social stratification' of Black communities as a moral dilemma and calls for a

Womanist moral response. She recognizes that the civil rights movement had a positive but also very negative impact as it resulted in class division. She calls for a 'functional separatism' and a 'mediating ethic' which rejects assumed solidarity. In her later works she especially addresses the role of Black women and the church, looking at the negative aspects and demanding change while also recognizing the critical roles women have played in these churches, despite the lack of support and encouragement (Riggs 1994; 2008).

Cheryl Sanders has played a critically key role in expanding the definition and understanding of womanist. In her 1989 article 'Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspectives', which became part of a Womanist roundtable discussion, she was initially very critical and indeed negative towards the use of the term, seeing Walker's discussion of gender as not in keeping with that of the Black church. She asks what is the necessary and sufficient condition for doing Womanist scholarship: to be a Black woman? A Black feminist? A Black lesbian? (Sanders 1989: 85). Other panellists (Gilkes, Cannon, Copeland, Townes, and bell hooks) argued for a broader and more open understanding, not limited to particular Black women but open to all of them as they so understand and participate in it. In a later work, Sanders discusses the roles and relationships of Womanist theology and Afrocentrism (1995). The Roundtable discussion was an important milestone in the early development of Womanist theology, as it allowed proponents of the movement to openly discuss and debate its significance and meanings.

Catholic Womanists have also taken part in laying this foundation. Although still a small number, they are deeply engaged in the effort to raise awareness of Black women's voices and roles in both the church and society. Diana L. Hayes writes broadly on Womanist theology, seeking to reveal and develop its methodology from within a Roman Catholic framework. She wrote the first introductory text on Black theology, *And Still We Rise: An Introduction to Black Liberation Theology* (1996), which included a chapter on Womanist theology. In her writings she has sought to present the parameters within which Womanists work, and calls upon Black women to stop defining themselves by societal stereotypes. Her more recent works have discussed the development of Womanist theology and spirituality and the role it plays as we embark upon the twenty-first century. Shawn Copeland seeks to develop a Black Catholic Theology grounded in Womanist theology. In her most recent work, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (2010), she explores the importance of the African American woman's experience in the US. She writes from the perspective of their experience of oppression.

### **5.3 The second generation/wave**

The number of Womanist theologians grew in the second generation/wave as more women in theologates and divinity schools became exposed to the writings of those

who had gone before them. Their writings were often being used in their classrooms and they were able to experience them personally at American Academy of Religion/ Society of Biblical Religion conferences and other academic meetings. The first Womanist Approaches to Theology session took place in 1989.

Karen Baker Fletcher explored the topic of eco-feminism from a Womanist perspective. Using her own life's journey as a source to provide insights into environmental racism, she explored the tie between Black and Indigenous people and the land. She also explores a 'justice-oriented spirituality of creation' to reveal God in nature (see Fletcher 1998). Cheryl Kirk-Duggan writes on several themes including theology and violence, the spirituals, and women and their roles in the church. She has also developed books suited for women (and others) to use as prayer books, sources for overcoming grief, and other issues. Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, sociologist of religion, explores the worlds of Black women in the Sanctified Churches as well as their lives, roles, needs, and concerns throughout the Black church. In *If It Wasn't for the Women*, she addresses the critical role of African American women in building up and maintaining their churches through thick and thin. A collection of previously published essays, they present an in-depth view of the importance of women in the Black Church. Linda Thompson, who works in the fields of social and cultural anthropology, urges the inclusion of ethnography in womanist thought. Doing so provides, she believes, a narrative for the present and the future ([www.crosscurrents.org/thomas.htm](http://www.crosscurrents.org/thomas.htm)).

What should be acknowledged from the above, and what comes below, is that Womanist theology is universal. There is not only one way to discuss, develop, or speak about it. As Townes affirms, there is not one single voice but a 'symphony' that speaks on varying topics and issues from varying perspectives. Each relates to Walker's definition in different ways, some dealing specifically with one or another point, while others attempt to address all four in different ways. Each scholar writes from her own unique perspective, sharing what has shaped and formed her life and how that has impacted her theologizing. Womanism, as Dr Floyd-Thomas affirms, is a movement with multiple voices, cultures, and experiences. It is not a school or canon that prefers one voice, culture, or experience of 'woman' or of the 'Black woman' over others.

## **5.4 The third generation/wave**

The emergence of the third wave of Womanism involves a host of women working in different fields, bringing new and challenging understandings of where Womanist theology is going and how they and others are enlivening it for those in the future. It is no longer seen as a passing phase but is recognized by contemporary religious scholars as a strong and viable voice in theology. This generation consists of 'those who incorporated the words and work of waves 1 and 2' (Moore 2023: xx) and then began to evolve into popular

culture, technology, Afro-futurism, and other channels. They include Stacey Floyd Thomas, Alison P. Gise, Monica Coleman, and Angela D. Sims as well as those in the Caribbean and West and South Africa.

The contemporary third generation/wave of Black women follows in the paths of those who went before, but delves even more deeply and consciously into that epistemology. There is still some discussion over who belongs where and why, but the important thing to note is that these womanist scholars exist and are challenging the until-now-sacrosanct halls of academia by presenting new ideas, understandings, and voices. Having begun in the United States, they now come from Africa, the Caribbean, the United Kingdom, and other parts of the African Diaspora. They also come from contested areas in both academia and the church, as LGBTQ+ persons who have earned doctorates in theology and are demanding that their voices also be heard. They are questioning, critiquing, and working in solidarity with other Womanists as they continue to grapple with the persistent racism, classism, and genderism found still in the academy, the churches, and society itself. Their impact is growing as many are being named to leadership positions in leading seminaries, Black and white, throughout the nation.

A significant action was the publication of another roundtable in 2013. It raised the critical question: 'Must I Be Womanist?' Raising and debating it helped to resolve several issues, including: 'Who is a Womanist? What criteria are there for discerning who is a Womanist? Is a Womanist self-proclaimed or are all Black women Womanists? The responses clarified that all Black women are not necessarily Womanists because a Womanist is self-proclaimed. She works in many fields but must acknowledge and affirm to others that she considers herself a Womanist, others cannot so name her. Monica Coleman first raised the question and respondents included voices from all levels of Womanism and across religious lines: Katie Cannon, Arisika Razak, Irene Monroe, Debra Mubasheer Majeed, Stephanie Mitchem, and Traci West.

One of the most prolific of Womanist scholars, Stacey Floyd Thomas, sees herself and her sisters as 'intellectual revolutionaries' who seek liberation from the framing and values of those who perpetuate Black women's marginalization. Womanists are now engaged in the production of knowledge appropriate for their flourishing, and in the development of a Womanist epistemology dealing specifically with moral, spiritual, and political issues. No longer surrogates, they are developing terms and understandings that speak directly to their own circumstances. Floyd-Thomas reveals the growth and development of womanist theology by sharing the work of first, second, and third wave scholars in her writings and has also included the writings of non-Christian Womanists to reveal the breadth and depth of Womanist theology.

In her writings, especially *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (Floyd-Thomas 2006: 2), she reveals the growth and development of Womanist theology, using the basic four-part definition of Alice Walker as a platform on which to stand and fly. Womanists have developed an epistemology, she notes, grounded in their and other Black women's experiences in the world:

Womanist ways of knowing has the audacity to proclaim that truth has been reified thus far within the confines of certain ideological formulations, certain cultural complexities, and certain languages of existence that have kept white supremacist heteropatriarchy intact and omnipresent. (Floyd-Thomas 2006: 3)

In this third wave are not only women from the United States and the Caribbean, but others who are engaged in dialogue with African American Muslims, Buddhists, Humanists, and other women of the African Diaspora. Floyd-Thomas recognizes this and organizes her work along the four tenets of Womanism: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement, based on Walker's four-part definition but going beyond that definition to add appropriation and reciprocity.

Monica Coleman has also aided in further clarifying the contemporary meaning of Womanist . By introducing process theology, as a way of exploring a Womanist understanding of God and Black women, she reveals new insights supported by her experience of living with bipolar depression. She seeks to provide insights hitherto unavailable, especially to Black women, on how to live and relate to God despite the restrictions imposed by her illness (Coleman 2008).

Melanie Harris has directed her attention to eco-Womanism as she explores the ways in which Black women contribute to the environmental justice movement (Harris 2017). Her writing presents a deeply lived understanding of the intricate relationships that can be found between the earth and those who live on it. In her later book, *Gifts of Virtue: Alice Walker and Womanist Ethics* (2010), she explores the non-fiction writings of Alice Walker, which most Womanists have ignored. She challenges the failure of Womanists to address Walker, concentrating instead on her coining of the term Womanist while ignoring for the most part her fiction and nonfiction works.

Harris goes into detail on the emergence and development of Womanism from which Womanist theology and other focuses emerged, advocating use of the term waves as more appropriate than generations as it covers not just a linear calendar development but the development of different aspects of Womanist thought. She argues, however, that Womanist religious scholars must not limit themselves to Walker's definition but also engage in study on Walker's work – non-fiction, fiction, prose, and poetry alike (Harris 2010: 25–26). This sets the definition into context, thus 'providing a wider and deeper

understanding of how “womanist” can be understood and used to shed light on African Diasporic women’s religious expressions’ (2010: 25–26).

Third wave Womanism is a profound and challenging step into the complexities of Womanist thought in a theological perspective, especially with its emphasis ‘on the global links within the body of womanism’ (Harris 2010: 130). Harris notes other aspects of third generation/wave Womanism, particularly the emergence and acknowledgement of the voices and experiences of ‘the religiously pluralistic perspectives’ of African Diasporan women (Harris 2010: 131), among others. These and other innovative perspectives show the development of Womanist theology as it continues to expand, and explore the varying ways in which Black women continue to develop lives and roles that are not simply about liberation but also about survival and the quality of their lives (Harris 2017).

## **5.5 Fourth generation/wave**

This generation/wave includes the forces of the previous three but also moves beyond them. Although there is the foundation of a ‘traditional scholarship’ as it continues to contribute to the canon, fourth generation/wave Womanist theologians do not see themselves restricted by the tradition or theological boundaries. They embody the component of Walker’s metaphorical definition of womanist, stating that the colour purple is to womanism as lavender is to feminism. The fourth generation/wave Womanist provides the freedom of engaging theology from outside the borders and boundaries to speak, colouring outside of the lines. Fourth generation/wave Womanist theologians have the privilege of creating large platforms beyond the traditional academic classrooms and beyond the dais, pulpit, or lectern. Many are not traditional academics but have moved out into the community, business, and other sites. Their work centres ‘spiritual and physical wellness’ as revolutionary contributions to movement making. This results in the understanding that the fourth generation/wave Womanist perspective actualizes the boundary-free zone. They are the unbridled tongues, not silenced by conventional restrictions, speaking with a self-determination that is active and participatory to preach and teach and to bless with wholeness and holistic embodiment. They have embraced the legacy of their womanist foremothers and taken up the radical context of not allowing the world to undaughter them. The fourth generation/wave embraces ‘spiritual and mental and physical wellness’ as revolutionary contributions to the movement (Lewis-Mosely 2023).

This fourth generation/wave, existing outside of the borders and boundaries, evokes an unbridled voice for seeking justice. They couple the social protest of Black Lives Matter as a theological discourse on the human dignity and sanctity of life. The #MeToo movement is seen as a pro-life concern, that addresses a theology of the body where the commodification of gender and sexuality is placed in the discourse and actions to dismantle misogyny from the pulpit to the pew.

There is a new generation of women who are also beginning to speak out, such as Tricia Harvey who notes that ‘rest is resistance’, and Shelah Marie who seeks to create safe spaces for Black women to play. The ongoing surge is a rising tide of Womanists, who are restructuring the work they are doing to provide Black women rest, respite, and peace. Tendering care – mind-body-spirit – is seen as wholeness and holistic self-care, a spirituality toward well-ness, a well filled with living water. Activism is legitimate, for them, only if it preserves who they are as strong, educated, blessed women of God. They have debunked the myth of the Superwoman complex. Self-sacrifice (rather self-martyrdom) is no longer a viable form of existence: ‘All the Black girls have a right to dream of a radical resistance that does not cost us our softness, our hope, our imaginations, or our dreams’ (see Moore 2023: 22–35).

EbonyJanice Moore calls for new ways of theologizing and new ways of exploring theology and its connections with the spirit, health, and the future. In *All the Black Girls Are Activists* (2023), Moore lays out what she sees as the highlights of this wave, which she sees as revolutionary. As Monica Coleman notes in her foreword: ‘What would a revolution that does not cost us our whole spirit, soul, and bodies look like?’ (Moore 2023: 10). Revolution is, however, still necessary. Coleman notes that ‘religious womanism’ centred Black women’s experiences, thereby changing ‘how we understand scripture, ethics, theology, pastoral care, religious education, preaching, worship [...] well, everything’ (Moore 2023: ix).

In this text, EbonyJanice lays out what she sees as the four waves of Womanist theologians, beginning with those who first named themselves Womanists, specifically Christian Womanists. The second wave built on the foundational structures laid out by those of the first, ‘doing womanist canon-building work’ (Moore 2023: xx).

The third wave consists of ‘those who incorporated the words and work of waves 1 and 2’ (Moore 2023: xx) and then began to evolve into popular culture, technology, Afro-futurism, and other channels. Generation/wave four includes the force of the previous three waves moving beyond them, not centring a traditional scholarship as it continues to contribute to the canon. It ‘has the privilege of creating large platforms due to the introduction of social media’ (Moore 2023: xxi). Fourth generation/wavers have moved outside of the traditional academic classrooms, beyond the ‘dais, pulpit, or lectern’. Many are not traditional academics but have moved out into the community, business, and other sites. Their work centres ‘spiritual and physical wellness’ as revolutionary contributions to movement making. Activism is legitimate for them, only if it preserves who they are as strong, educated, blessed women of God; self-sacrifice is no longer a viable form of existence.

The dialogue on fourth generation/wave Womanist theology needs to be understood within the context of Womanism and/or Womanist theology. It is more than the addition of the title Womanist to the ongoing fourth-wave feminist movement. According to current standards, established feminist movements within the United States fall into four different time periods: first, second, third, and fourth wave feminism. The chronological timeline is used to categorize the waves, yet the historical time of occurrence is not the sole defining measure. The waves (of the feminist movement) are mostly classified by the perspective and changes of perspective across different generations of women. Foundational to the philosophical stance of each wave is the question: what kind of equality does the movement of that particular timeframe seek?

The progression from one wave to another is not just a linear progression. The first wave of the feminist movement began at the end of the nineteenth century, with the rise of the women's suffrage movement and public protest for the women's right to vote (a limited quest, only focused on white women). This first wave, as noted in earlier references, was at the exclusion of suffragettes who were Black women, such as Ida B. Wells, Ellen Watkins, Sojourner Truth, etc. This first wave was also not supportive of the rights to vote granted to Black men (via the Fifteenth Amendment) above and at the exclusion of white women. There is well-documented animosity from the leaders of the suffrage movements, in their rejection of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments because white women were not a focal point in the language. Even with the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment, it was not until forty-five years later that the universal right to vote was established for all people, with the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Similarly, throughout the development of the feminist waves, the Womanist Theological context has evolved across the generational encounters. The significant element of third generation/wave Womanist Theology is the intersection of the life experiences of Womanists across a varied spectrum, and the integral influence of these events on the theological discourse and the lens with which Womanist Theologians see these emerging paradigms as a component of the Womanist theological discourse.

## **5.6 Sacred scripture**

The voices of Black women in scripture are growing in volume and complexity. Addressing them as one body rather than in waves helps to see this growth, as they have tackled the meaning and significance of the 'Talking Book' (the Bible) for Black women, the Black church, and the Black community. They comprise mainly the second and third generation/wave of Womanist theology.

Black biblical hermeneutics took time to develop. It was difficult for women, especially Black women, to obtain academic mentors who would not only support their studies in scripture but also support their use of a Womanist biblical hermeneutic, which most knew

nothing about. Renita Weems, the first African American woman to earn a doctorate in the Old Testament, was the first to raise questions about the inerrancy of scripture as proclaimed by most churches, Black or white. Questions arose about how that affects the lives of those historically oppressed, especially women, and how we look at these stories and unpack their full legacy, not just of liberation – as the Black male theologians were arguing – but of support for slavery, and the abuse, harassment, and mistreatment of women of every race/ethnicity. It took time, persistence, and the arrival in seminaries and universities of Black men and women able to serve as professors of scripture, to fully open the doors of scripture scholarship, in both the Old and New Testaments.

The task of Womanist biblical hermeneutics is to bring forth the liberative message found in the biblical text and to obliterate racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other 'isms'. It seeks to decentre the privileged status of dominant (European and Euro-American) readings and the dominant community.

Renita Weems (first generation/wave) and Clarice Martin (second generation/wave), writing in the first collection of writings of biblical scholars, *Stony the Road We Trod* (Felder 1991), spoke new words of Womanist wisdom. Weems looked at Black women's relationship to the Bible as sacred text: considering their marginalized status in the world, how do they read the text? This is important because the Bible – despite its many and varied readings, many of which could be read as negative or harmful – is of critical importance, not only to Black women but the entire Black community. Weems, in her first book, *Just a Sister Away* (1988), interprets women and their relationships as these affect their concerns and experiences. By including Black women's experiences, she provides a radically new understanding of scripture, one which challenges other readings.

Clarice Martin looked at the household codes found in the Pauline letters (see Martin 1991). She argued against the church's retention of those parts which subordinate women while rejecting the 'slaves obey your masters' section. Why, she asks, does the church not critique both understandings, as each is equally harmful to the Black and other communities?

Numbers increased for the second generation/wave of scripture scholars. They include the late Gay Byron, Cheryl Anderson, Valerie Bridgeman, and Raquel St. Clair, among others. All work in Old Testament, except for St. Clair. Their work is critical and incisive, covering areas from blackness and ethnic difference, looking especially at the Christianity of Ethiopia (Byron), Black women as prophetic preachers (Bridgeman; see also [African American Preaching](#)), and commentaries, including the first African American commentary on the Old Testament (Page et al. 2009). St. Clair discusses the role of suffering, evolving from following one's call to partner with Jesus in his ministry.

Third generation/wave scholars were fortunate finally to have significant support from their schools and mentors, yet they still could not fully engage in Womanist biblical hermeneutics until after publishing their first texts. Ironically, they could use feminist biblical interpretation, as it was now well accepted, but Womanist theology still lacked academic acceptance. Members of this cohort include Wil Gafney, Nyasha Junior, Mitzi Smith, and Love Secret. These women have been of critical importance in the compilation of the first Old Testament (Page et al. 2009) and New Testament biblical commentaries. One of the most prolific and challenging writers is Mitzi Smith, who has authored several books and a reader, *I Found God in Me* (2015). Smith has delved deeply into scriptural issues, especially around race, class, and gender, with writings that challenge the prior acceptedness of these readings from a solely masculine and white perspective, opening them up to fuller critique and further development from the perspective of Black diasporan women.

Finally, the most recent theologians are slowly emerging. Many are still not well known, while others are still working on completing their dissertation projects. They, like all Womanists, are writing and speaking from within their own context as Black women. Educated, and strongly connected to their families, communities, and church, they are expanding the field of Womanist theology in ways that provide new insights.

To fully understand Womanist theology and its theologians, it is important to know the contexts from which they emerged, especially the Black church and the Black community. These will be discussed below, showing the critical significance and roles that both the community and the churches have played and continue to play meaningfully in the ongoing development and growth of Womanist theology.

## **6 The Black community**

The Black community can be seen as a unity within great diversity. It consists of those who were first brought to the United States illegally and forced into slavery, as well as those who have come more recently as immigrants. It came into existence when the first African set foot on the shores of what is now the US and realized she was no longer free to live as she chose. All persons of African ancestry belong, whether they affirm it or not. The Black community carried its members through enslavement and Jim Crow, and continues to sustain and nurture them in the face of continuing prejudice and discrimination.

Black women have been a central and active part of the Black community since their arrival in the US in chains in the sixteenth century, speaking Spanish. Instead of speaking their own indigenous languages, they were forced to speak the languages of their captors, adapting quickly, whether Spanish, French, Dutch, or English. Yet they maintained their memories, their practices, their hopes, and dreams as best they could. They

were mothers, whether by birth or adoption, who fought and sought to keep the Black community, big or small, intact as best they could.

They raised the children, but also planted the crops, cleared the land, nursed white people's children and their own, fed the animals and the people, regardless, and survived. Liberation was the dream they hungered for but survival and a decent quality of life was the goal they worked for every day. As Delores Williams and other Womanists noted, liberation is good but it can't feed you. They understood there was more to life than that which they experienced, and that gave them the strength and courage to stand fast, work hard, and pray for a better day. Black Americans are a spiritual people, whose spirituality stands at the core of their being. That spirituality enabled them to survive, to hold on, and to continue fighting for freedom. There was a spirituality of resistance as well as community, joyfulness, and contemplativeness. It is a holistic spirituality.

There is a way of being among African people that can be said to apply to African-descended folk in the US. It is called *ubuntu*, a word which recognizes and promotes the understanding of community. 'I am because we are' is of critical importance to the understanding of who you are as a person within a community of persons. Individualism, a Western understanding, is seen not only as negative but also as dangerous for the ongoing quality of Black life. We thrive, we survive, because we work together, co-operate, fight for, and maintain relationships with each other. We have done so since our beginnings in the US when we were required to come together as one people regardless of languages spoken or historical enmities. Womanists understand this, noting that 'until all are free, no one is free' (for a definition of *ubuntu*, and its application for Christian mission, see [Missiology](#)).

This understanding and determination have enabled those enslaved and their descendants to survive liberation and the horrors that followed it – Jim Crow, the Ku Klux Klan, racism in all of its myriad forms, and so on. Through the church, schools, and the Negro Women's Club Movement, they learned to work together to bring about much needed programs, literacy classes (for children and adults), leaderships in church committees such as the Ushers and Deaconesses, and other roles that provided them with education, strength, and solidarity.

Black women are the foundation stone for the Black community, ensuring that they are fed, housed, educated, and loved. They provide security, knowledge, and strength to all. The contemporary Black community is under stress but still persists. As Blacks look to other sources for assistance and development outside of the churches, many still return to where they know they will not be abandoned. The community seeks to respond to the contemporary issues – positive and negative – still confronting Black Americans and other communities of colour. Organizations such as Black Lives Matter no longer come from

within the church but are still a very important part of the community, working within to bring about changes that are desperately needed. The contemporary challenge is to work in solidarity with each other and in collaboration with allies also seeking freedom. From within the Black community, the Black church still plays a critical role in upholding and sustaining Black Americans. Womanists have a home in that community and from within it work to change the lives of all by bringing new perspectives of hope and faith.

## **7 The Black church**

The Black church is not a single entity or denomination. It consists of the historically Black churches that emerged from the time of enslavement, as well as those white churches with large numbers of persons of colour within them. It began when those enslaved gathered in the night around campfires or caves deep in the woods where they hoped not to be seen or heard. There they sang, prayed, and listened to those who preached to them. They became Christians, but their faith was very different from that of their owners: they preached a God of deliverance; they prayed to a God who saw them and knew them and had himself, experienced oppression, even death on a tree, as so many of them would. Theirs was a God of hope and promise, of love and commitment, a God who knew them as they were.

The Black church provided a foundation of love, hope, and safety. It was and remains a sanctuary in which they felt protected and affirmed. It has been a critical aspect of the emergence and development of Womanist and Black theologies. The historically Black churches have been critically important in the lives of African American communities, protecting and encouraging them even before slavery ended, founding new church homes that sustained and gave them renewed life during the post-Reconstruction era, and participating in the Civil Rights movement with Martin Luther King Jr. and others.

However, many of the women who first articulated these theologies had to struggle, often within their own denominations, to be allowed to enter the seminary, obtain doctorates, and then attempt to be of service to the church. They were often rejected or, if allowed some role, it was as assistant or associate pastors of usually very small and often failing churches; they were rarely given prestigious assignments. Some retreated to academia to find some sense of themselves and their work while continuing, through their writing and lectures, to have an impact on the church and the Black community. However, there are contemporary women serving in a variety of parishes in leadership positions. They have also been elected as bishops in the Protestant churches, so change is slowly taking place – in their opinion it needs to be quicker.

Black churches are and always have been a source of strength and empowerment for Black women. In the Black church, they have been educated, protected, loved, and have found welcoming arms of compassion. The Black church has been and continues to be a

home, sadly still too often negative, but a place where they have also been empowered, supported, and affirmed. However it has also been a site of oppression, discrimination, and pain for many women (see Riggs 2016).

The Black church has served and continues to serve as the heart and soul of the Black community. Membership is shrinking, as the seductions of the secular world such as sports events, social events, and other gatherings, seek to replace God with humanity. Like Black theology, Womanist theology is not often welcomed, partly because many in the pulpit and the pews have no clear idea what it is, but also because many male pastors feel threatened by women with doctorates, even if they have one themselves, and so do not care to introduce it to their congregations.

Yet, like the Black church, Womanists persevere. They knew the task was not easy, nor was the burden light. In the contemporary socio-politically divided world, with polarization on all sides, they realize the critical importance of what they are doing. It is, they believe, their responsibility as women of faith to continue to hold together that which seeks to come apart.

The Black church, a foundational entity in the Black community, continues to work for positive change in the Black community. Though their presence is diminished, especially in the inner cities, pastors and those active in their congregations continue to work for positive change in the Black community. This is where Black male theologians and Womanists must come together and combine their knowledge and resources for the empowerment and survival of the church. If not, its survival will be threatened, and if it dies, it is unclear what will happen to the Black community that is still so dependent upon it.

Historically, the meaning and mission of the contemporary Black church has been almost impossible to define. There are those who see its mission as saving souls, and others who see it as transforming the public order. Both answers can be correct, because, as a holistic rather than dualistic people, Black Christians seek the 'both-and' rather than the 'either-or' in their lives. Black and Womanist theologians need to discuss this issue, not just among themselves, but with the church and its pastors and congregations. Liberation theologians, Black, male and Womanist, must approach the church with new and critically-needed ideas and understandings that can revitalize it and its people. This is necessary because the Black churches are increasingly being decentred from the lives and activities of African Americans.

It must also be acknowledged that the church was historically, and is even today, the place of men, in leadership, committees, and ordained offices. Men, with their male power and sexism, have engaged in practices that isolate, negate, and condemn women in the church and society. These practices include misogyny and homophobia, the tokenizing of

women, sexist preaching, theological and sexual exploitation, and others. These practices must be recognized and condemned.

Space is also needed for women of religious practices other than Christianity to come together as women of faith. This enables Womanist theologians to meet, work with, and share experiences as Black women over denominational and religious lines, from the African Traditional Religions through Islam and Buddhism to others still being explored.

The Black church is inclusive of the historically Black Baptist, Methodist, and Holiness-Pentecostal churches. It also includes predominantly white churches such as the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic bodies with large, active communities of colour as members, and newly emerging non-denominational churches. Together, they must rethink their mission and work to develop a solidarity that enables persons of African descent to work with other persons of colour and whites to bring about a renewal of faith that challenges the negative secular world that seeks to overtake Christians. Christians are part of a global community and must act accordingly, working for liberation, survival, and a bountiful quality of life for all.

The Black church and the Black community can in many ways be seen as one and the same. The church helped the community to develop and grow, and the community was the foundation for the church. The contemporary church is still of critical importance, despite the tensions and divisions found within it. Womanist theology is present, and is both welcomed and promoted and disavowed at the same time. There are those who feel the church still disregards women, and they may be correct, but there are others who recognize the platform they have been given by the church. Michael Harriott notes:

(T)he Black church is not a *place*, nor does it exist in the physical realm. It is a school with no address and a meeting place with no location. It is a political machine and a human rights organization. It is why, in sermons, songs, of praise, and speaking among each other, Black people rarely refer to a church as a 'sanctuary'. The Black church is '*the* sanctuary'. (Harriott 2023: 139, original emphasis)

## 8 The future is Womanist

The Black community and church are and continue to be the seedbeds for Womanist theology. Because of their nurturing and protection as well as the challenges that they provide, Black women have been free to explore and proclaim who and whose they are. They are children of a patient, loving, and guiding God who has empowered them to break new and necessary ground, not just for women, but for their men and children as well.

Womanist theology serves as a critical challenge to the ways theology has historically been taught and practised. Within its ranks are women from every walk of life, lay, ordained, and religious, with perspectives that overlap but also differ. It is not – nor can

it or any theology be – monolithic, yet it attempts to present and reflect on the state of contemporary Black America and to raise questions that are in sync with the concerns of men and women who have been seen as marginal, and who have been too long silenced by the historical articulators of theological wisdom. They bring a much-needed voice that is being listened to and acted upon throughout the Christian churches, one which is changing not only the image of church and theology, but the very way of being church and doing theology.

Womanist theologians, though predominantly part of the Protestant churches, are also comprised of individuals from the Roman Catholic Church, Islam, and Buddhism, among others, who seek to explore many of the same issues first brought out by their Protestant sisters. Black Catholic women have also begun to develop a Womanist hermeneutic in their efforts to theologize from their experience as Black, Catholic, and female. Their efforts are an important part of the development of a Black Catholic theology.

## **Attributions**

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