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## "Coming for to carry me home": Lessons for White Christians on the Integral Role of Christian Faith in the Fight for Racial Justice in America from Slavery to #BlackLivesMatter

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“COMING FOR TO CARRY ME HOME”:  
LESSONS FOR WHITE CHRISTIANS ON THE INTEGRAL ROLE OF  
CHRISTIAN FAITH IN THE FIGHT FOR RACIAL JUSTICE IN AMERICA  
FROM SLAVERY TO #BLACKLIVESMATTER

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April 23, 2021

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## ABSTRACT

In July 2020, the *New York Times* reported an increase of 15-26 million people across the United States engaging in Black Lives Matter protests. Blackout Tuesday, a social media movement aimed at showcasing solidarity with the movement for racial justice in America, amassed a total of 24 million posts on Instagram, making it easily one of the top hashtags of 2020. There is no doubt that 2020 was the year the Black Lives Matter movement witnessed the most engagement of white Americans since its inception in 2013. Despite this fact, there remains an inability for many white Christians to engage in the movement for Black lives in America. This investigation considers what white Christians can learn from Black social mysticism, Womanist theology, and Queer and Indecent theologies about the integral role that Christian faith plays in the fight for racial justice. The writings of Howard Thurman, Katie Geneva Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, Keri Day and Marcella Althaus-Reid will illustrate the importance of Christian thought in solidarity protest movements and the pursuit of freedom from the days of chattel slavery to the Civil Rights Movement to #BlackLivesMatter. From their guidance, lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> century white Christian concerning the necessity for embodied social action in the #BlackLivesMatter movement are laid forth.

## INTRODUCTION

On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman and citizen of Louisville, Kentucky, was shot and killed by police. Taylor worked as an emergency room technician at the University of Louisville hospital and, according to her family and friends, held aspirations to become a nurse. She was an individual of question in a narcotics investigation involving an ex-boyfriend, Jamarcus Glover, who was suspected of selling controlled substances. Taylor shared her apartment with her sister, however on the night of her death, Taylor and her current partner, Kenneth Walker, were the only ones in the apartment.

Louisville Metro Police were tasked with carrying out a knock and announce warrant upon arrival at Taylor's apartment. However, according to numerous accounts by neighbors in the apartment complex, in addition to information gathered by the judicial proceedings that followed in the months after, the police officers conducting the raid did not announce themselves. After forty-five seconds of banging on the door, evidently unaware of Walker and Taylor screaming "Who is it?" over and over during that time, the police broke down the door of the apartment. Walker, a licensed gun owner, was unable to see that it was police who had broken down the door. He fired once down the hallway and hit one officer in the leg. The other officers at the scene met Walker's single shot by firing thirty-two bullets into the apartment, hitting Taylor five times, and killing her.<sup>1</sup>

Another thirty minutes passed before Taylor received EMT attention; only after Walker called 9-1-1 to request medical attention. After calling 9-1-1, Walker was arrested. A recording taken at the scene gives a sense of his confusion and the callous disregard for Black life taken too

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<sup>1</sup> See "How the Police Killed Breonna Taylor," *The New York Times* (December 28, 2020). Accessed online at <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000007348445/breonna-taylor-death-cops.html>.

soon. “What is this about? My girlfriend’s dead,” Walker says to a police officer. “There is somebody dead? ... I don’t give a – keep walking,” you hear a police officer respond.<sup>2</sup>

Neighbors who also called 9-1-1 reported that they did not know who started the shooting spree, stating in investigation that they certainly did not think it was the police.

The murder of Breonna Taylor has highlighted to a greater scale the movement for Black lives and against white supremacy across the United States, specifically through its coverage by white media platforms. The demonstrations born out of Breonna Taylor’s homicide have gone on for 200+ days in the city of Louisville with other ongoing protests across the country. Her death joins the host of countless publicized murders of Black life at the hands of police spanning the past decade: Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice in 2014; Freddie Gray and Walter Scott in 2015; Alton Sterling and Philando Castile in 2016; Stephon Clark and Antwon Rose Jr. in 2018; George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020; Daunte Wright in 2021. This historical moment in which we currently find ourselves necessitates that all United States citizens acknowledge two immutable facts: 1) these names do not represent the only individuals affected by systemic social, political, and economic racism and violence and 2) the movement for Black lives is not new nor simply an episodic phenomenon covered intermittently by the white media. It is first necessary to trace the centuries long struggle for racial justice back to its beginnings, to the days of colonialization.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## **Racial Oppression Pulsing through the Veins of the Body Politic**

In the first chapter of her book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander details the history of Black oppression in the United States. This began with the institution of slavery and has evolved through various iterations as history has progressed. Originally, faced with a great demand for cheap labor that didn't put up a fight, white landowners in the mid-1600s quickly cast aside the people of native tribes and European settlers to fill this need; they could get the greatest utility from importation of African peoples, soon to be known as slaves. Following Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, this distinction between poor European white settlers and African enslaved peoples was made further pronounced and a racial hierarchy was officially born. From then on, the success and economic progress of the United States became contingent on the existence of this hierarchy. Alexander argues, "The structure and content of the original constitution was based largely on the effort to preserve a racial caste system – slavery – while at the same time affording political and economic rights to whites, especially propertied whites."<sup>3</sup> Since then, people of color, most especially Black and brown individuals, have faced an upward climb to achieving prosperity and wealth in society. This upward climb is disproportionately more difficult than that of even the poorest classes of white people.

Following the Emancipation Proclamation post-Civil War, Alexander states things for Black and brown folk did not improve. The culture of racism in communities of landowners and poor whites in the South became increasingly stringent and the Black Codes soon emerged. This gave rise to Jim Crow south and the Ku Klux Klan. Amidst this struggle, key figures in the early movement for racial equality devoted their lives to an active resistance. Ida B. Wells led her

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<sup>3</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 25.

famous anti-lynching campaign and made her mark on housing injustices. The Reconstruction Era saw the passing of legislative feats with the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, along with the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865.<sup>4</sup> W.E.B. Dubois founded the Niagara Movement in 1905 and later the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) with white figures William English Walling and Mary White Ovington in 1909. Dubois continued to be a key scholar and figurehead in the burgeoning movement for civil rights.

The righteous fight carried on by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X, Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, and countless others, known as the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1986), aimed at ending institutionalized racial discrimination and segregation. The culminating legislation, earned after decades of sit-ins, boycotts, and marches was the Equal Rights Act of 1964, constitutionally prohibiting segregation on the basis of race, religion, and national origin in public places. However, there is no doubt, reading *The New Jim Crow* and other recent publications, that racism is still alive and permeating every realm of our fragile American system of "equality" today.

Amidst all this history, one social agent remains the same throughout and one only. That is, the deep-seated *faith* United States citizens held in their convictions of white superiority.

Alexander observes:

White supremacy, over time, became a religion of sorts. Faith in the idea that people of the African race were bestial, that whites were inherently superior, and that slavery was for the black's own good, served to alleviate the white conscience and reconcile the tensions between slavery and the democratic ideals espoused by whites in the so-called New World.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 26.

This faith has been the agent that continues to sustain racism and discrimination in today's modern hour and can also be called a different name: American exceptionalism.

Kelly Brown Douglas traces the historical weaving of the myth of American exceptionalism in *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (2015). Douglas connects American exceptionalism to a religious and racial ideology of white superiority. Born out of Tacitus's ancient work *Germania*, the idea that a superior race was divinely destined to rule the world was a central part of Anglo-Saxonism and permeated the early colonists' intentions to settle America. Brown writes that Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were two of the most avid followers of this ideology, referring to America as the New Israel in their writings and correspondences, not in reference to Christianity but in reverence of Anglo-Saxonism. This is evidenced in Franklin's writing that details the need to protect the "purity of the nation" as well as "the language, customs, and complexion of 'pure white people.'"<sup>6</sup> In this way, it is blatant that a religious faith in white superiority has been at work since America's conception. What is today a misconstrued definition of a level and harmless Anglo-Saxon myth of equality and freedom has at its core a faith in racial superiority.

The evidence of this intentional, racial oppression that literally pulses through the veins of the body politic of the United States is further seen in Charles Mills' famous book *The Racial Contract* (1997). Mills argues that the very concept of social contract, beloved by American founding fathers and classical liberalism, is built upon and exemplary of the base assumption of white superiority and other races' inferiority. He asserts:

The Racial Contract is that set of formal or informal agreements or meta-agreements... between the members of one subset of humans, henceforth designated by (shifting)

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<sup>6</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), 27.

‘racial’ (phenotypical/genealogical/culture) criteria...as “white”...to categorize the remaining subset of humans as ‘nonwhite’ and of a different and inferior moral status, so that they have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities...the general purpose of the Contract is always the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them. All whites are *beneficiaries* of the Contract, though some whites are not *signatories* to it.<sup>7</sup>

The racial contract is what has always underlain the assumptions of American democracy, lived out in the narratives of American exceptionalism and Anglo-Saxonism. While it might be jarring to white readers that America’s systemic racism is not an accident, or a mistake, but an intentional platform forming the foundation of all of this country’s ideals and beliefs of freedom, there is no other truth but this one.

Alexander’s argument positions the United States’ current system of mass incarceration as the contemporary manifestation of the oppressive racial assumptions that have formed the basis of this country. The Jim Crow alive and thriving since the Civil Rights Movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has been called the new caste system. There are disproportionately more people of color arrested and charged for low-bearing drug crimes than white people. Mass incarceration is perpetuated through corrupt systems of police built upon systemic racism and prejudice, leading to the incessant murders of men and women of color in our modern time. Overall, the criminal justice system is where systemic racism continues to be perpetuated and lived out, despite the progress made by previous movements for social change.

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 11.

## Faith as a Tool for Resistance

Faith is one of the most powerful influencers of human actions. As it has been shown, there is not a force greater than this in the perpetuation of Anglo-Saxonism, American exceptionalism, and the racial contract as foundational bases of United States democracy. In fact, it is often said that Sunday morning church is the most segregated hour of the week. However, at the same time, faith is a powerful tool for the oppressed to utilize in resisting systemic racism. This investigation centers around the ways the Christian faith is and has always been a key resource in the resistance of movements fighting for racial justice in America, from colonial beginnings to our current contemporary landscape.

One of the first eras one's mind might recall the Christian faith centering itself prominently as a tool of resistance in the history of racial oppression in America is during the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s and 70s. Howard Thurman was a theologian and spiritual guide for the Civil Rights Movement. His work *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) was carried in the pockets and purses of Freedom Riders and inspired their work. Thurman raised a critical question that is just as relevant for us as it was in that time: What does the religion of Jesus have to say to people with their "backs against the wall"? In Vincent Harding's foreword to *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he observes that those in Thurman's time who were oppressed, with their "backs against the wall", situated themselves firmly in spaces saturated with religious thought and the story of Jesus. Black churches witnessed to justice and grounded themselves in the prophetic teachings of the Gospel to build up a resistance that wasn't just physical, but divinely instilled in the soul of each Black individual putting their life on the line for racial justice.

## A Faith for White Allies

However, the same is not the case for the modern day disinherited. The young people of color so oppressed in today's democracy purportedly "find no space for their presence in the places where the official followers are comfortably at worship."<sup>8</sup> Simply, there have been fewer and fewer young people flocking to churches as spaces of inclusivity to ignite their activist calls for racial justice in recent decades. According to the Pew Research Center, decreasing numbers of young people are claiming to base their moral or social convictions in faith due to its inability to address inclusive sexuality, and mental health concerns.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, there is a growing number of Black and brown folk in older generations who are leaving their churches due to continued silence within pastoral hierarchies over matters of racial justice and the implications of COVID-19 on racially marginalized communities, as of 2020.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout our journey through academia, young white college students in liberal arts education like myself are often made aware of the systemic racism that flows through the veins of this country and is perpetuated through police violence. However, living in a country with that reality is different than discussing those truths in an academic setting. The question many of us white people need to be asking is "How can I be an ally, actively resist, and renounce white supremacy, including my own privileged position?". As a white woman, I must reckon my studies with the realities of the present historical moment. How do my own actions (or inaction)

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<sup>8</sup> Vincent Harding, "Foreword," *Jesus and the Disinherited*, by Howard Thurman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996; reprint of .1949 edition), xiv.

<sup>9</sup> Rahiel Tesfamariam, "Are black millennials being pushed out of the church?," *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/local/wp/2013/08/27/are-black-millennials-being-pushed-out-of-the-church/>.

<sup>10</sup> Dara T. Mathis, "The Church's Black Exodus," *The Atlantic*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/10/why-black-parishioners-are-leaving-churches/616588/>.

support racism and how can I challenge myself to learn from key theological voices of color to engage to the greatest degree in the fight for racial justice alongside brothers and sisters of color?

In this thesis, I explore the ways the Christian faith can be understood by white people as a tool of resistance, directly speaking to the plight of Black lives throughout American history. To do this, I analyze the works and ideas of key theological thinkers active from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries in the United States and Latin America. Through study of theological voices of color in Black social mysticism, womanist theology, and queer and indecent theologies, I seek to derive stories and circumstances that are navigational and relevant for white Christians to understand not only the role the faith has played in sustaining Black lives throughout American history but with what call this realization leaves in the minds of white people.

### **Guiding Questions and Chapter Outline**

How has the Christian faith sustained the fight for Black lives throughout American history and what key concepts prove navigational for the modern-day white Christian? How does an understanding of the role the Christian faith has played in movements for racial justice throughout history supplement and propel the activism of white Christians fighting for racial justice in 2021 and beyond? I ask these questions as the world looks toward embodied solutions for the present-day racial crisis. The endeavor to answer these questions will be grounded in the analysis of writings by key theologians of color in areas of theological scholarship aimed at navigating towards a more inclusive, liberative theology for people of color. The work of each thinker stood to inform both active and scholarly movements for racial justice from the days of chattel slavery through the Civil Rights Movement, into contemporary discussions and

#BlackLivesMatter. The lives and writings of the theologians introduced here share something in common— they hold on to the fact that true essence of Christian faith lies in embodiment; the act of protest itself. Christianity in its most raw form speaks simply for those who are oppressed, with “their backs against the wall”. Modern popularized Christian teachings continue to make accommodations that make it seem as though the religion itself lives on for the white, affluent individual. By articulating the components of each thinker’s interpretation of Christian teaching, the main goal is to acknowledge explicitly the ways faith may guide the individual who is fighting the same centuries-old battle for racial justice.

Chapter One, Black Social Mysticism and Igniting the Inward Journey, outlines the social mysticism of Howard Thurman, a Black spiritual leader whose writings profoundly influenced those at the head of the Civil Rights Movement. His upbringing was deeply influenced by his mother and grandmother who were his first spiritual guides. He graduated Morehouse College in 1923 and was ordained as a minister in 1925, later attending the Rochester Theological Seminary. He was a tenured professor at Howard University Divinity School and later the first Black dean of Boston University’s Marshal Chapel. He traveled to meet with Gandhi and became a key advocate in the nonviolent resistance theory that provided the foundation of Martin Luther King Jr. and others’ trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

Thurman’s candidacy for this investigation lies in his identity as a man whose descendants were slaves themselves and his prominence in being the mystical guide of the Civil Rights Movement in America. Who he was and what he wrote about stood to truly inform and influence the movement of which he was an integral part. His writing was an act of rebellion and revolution in and of itself. Further, Thurman’s work to be analyzed is not just an iteration of a liberation theology.

In the 1996 foreword to the republication of Thurman's seminal work *Jesus and the Disinherited* (originally published in 1949), Vincent Harding writes that though Thurman could be read as another thinker understanding the oppressed position of Black folk in America, the focus was not solely on that fact. It truly is regarded as a work of *liberating* theology, rather than liberationist theology: "a way of exploring and experiencing those crucial life points where personal and societal transformation are creatively joined. It is the centerpiece of the Black prophet-mystic's lifelong attempt to bring the harrowing beauty of the African American experience into deep engagement with what he called 'the religion of Jesus.'" <sup>11</sup> The personal empowerment that comes from Thurman's writing is what makes it unique and worthy of study. His argument is not rooted in the fact that Black individuals continually are oppressed, but rather centers on liberating an individual from the chains of society that hold them back. Only then, he argues, all citizens can pursue a successful fight against injustice. This theological understanding of liberating vs. liberation is something modern movements for lives of color could likely adopt and thus makes studying Thurman in a modern context a meaningful endeavor.

Chapter Two, Womanist Storytelling for Survival, Resiliency, and Flourishing, derives its wisdom from womanist theology. The term womanist was first coined by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983) as a concept that broadens the mainstream feminist movement to include the realities of Black women. It refers to a woman who loves other women and seeks racial equality through love in all that she does. *Womanism* is a social resistance theory grounded in Walker's definition of a womanist, and in the experience and lived resistance of Black women, a group historically silenced and ignored by members of both Black and white communities alike. Womanism provides white Christians with a perfect canon to

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<sup>11</sup> Harding, "Foreword", *Jesus and the Disinherited*, vii-viii.

introduce them to the concept of embodiment when it comes to social resistance. Womanist theologians serving as spiritual guides in this analysis are Katie Geneva Cannon and Jacquelyn Grant.

Katie Geneva Cannon was born in North Carolina in 1950, the daughter of two elders in the Presbyterian church. She earned a BS undergraduate degree at Barber-Scotia College and a Master of Divinity from Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary, later going on to earn a PhD from Union Theological Seminary in New York. She was ordained in 1974, making her the first Black woman to be ordained in the United Presbyterian Church. She was known for much of her career as a theological liberation ethicist and Womanist. Her work *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (1995) is to be analyzed in this investigation as it provides a look at this concept of "canon formation", highlighting the necessary task of weaving a Christian theology distinctly for Black women, something that had never been undertaken by Black women scholars previously.

Jacquelyn Grant was born in 1948 in South Carolina. She graduated Bennet College and attended seminary, later becoming the first Black woman to receive a doctorate in systematic theological at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Her scholarly focus has been centered around engagement of Black women's voices in spaces of theological research, specifically approaching this from a feminist lens. As of 2020, she is currently the Callaway Professor of Systematic Theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. Grant's work of focus for this analysis is the book *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (1989). This work specifically stands to supplement the presented understanding of a distinction between historically white, exclusionary theology and faith and that of Black women, and has been highly influential in furthering Womanist scholarship.

Chapter Three, Queer and Indecent Reclaiming of the Sexual for Identity and Resistance, derives its takeaways for white Christians from Queer and Indecent theologies. Queer theology is part of the liberationist vein of theological scholarship that seeks to broaden Christian narratives and liturgy to encompass and welcome the lived experience of those historically rejected by Christianity, in this case because of their identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Scholars drawn upon to inform the Queer theology examined in this investigation are Keri Day and Thelathia Nikki Young. Keri Day is a contemporary scholar in constructive theology and African American religion, currently based at Princeton Theology Seminary in New Jersey. Her research interests include womanist theology, social critical theory, economics, and Afro-Pentecostalism. Nikki Young is a queer Black theological ethicist currently working at Bucknell University. Her scholarly interests are gender studies, sexual politics, social justice, and religion.

Indecent theology seeks to problematize the way Christianity has historically shamed and othered sexuality of women. Indecent theology was coined by Marcella Althaus-Reid, a post-modern theologian. Born in Rosario, Argentina in 1952, she went on to receive a Bachelor's degree in Theology at the Instituto Superior Evangelic de Estudios Teologicos (ISEDET) seminary in Buenos Aires. She went on to train for a ministry at the Methodist Church of Argentina. Here she was first introduced to the concept of "conscientization", a term coined by Paulo Freire, referring to the process through which individuals may go about making others aware of social injustices and oppression.

With this background, Althaus-Reid went on to earn her PhD at the University of St. Andrews in 1993. She died in 2009 at the age of 56. Her legacy is in her works *The Queer God* (2003) and *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (2000),

both to be analyzed here for their role in shaping a new Christian interpretation in light of racial and social conflicts in the late 20<sup>th</sup> to early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Conclusions from studying these veins of theological scholarship are drawn for the purpose of deriving my own interpretative lessons that, through emphasizing the integral role of the Christian faith in the history of racial justice, will aid the white Christian in joining in active engagement with the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2021. Readers should walk away understanding the key call to action that recognizing this connection between Christianity and social justice brings to the forefront; a need to embody the life of Jesus and its implications for stopping the murder of Black lives in America by the hands of police.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BLACK SOCIAL MYSTICISM AND IGNITING THE INWARD JOURNEY

“In the mystical experience one has the experience of being totally held, secure, and without regard to one’s virtues or one’s force... in the depths of experience the individual’s life is made bear... open without defense, completely exposed and absolutely secure. This is what love is.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the most widely acknowledged characteristics of Howard Thurman, remembered by students and scholars alike, is his relentless belief in the mystery and power of one’s inner life. From our inner spirit, he argues, we gain a unique strength that is unmatched by any obstacles standing against us in our lives. His social mysticism spoke to Black audiences, seeking to provide them a theology that acknowledged their inner selves and grounded them in the life of Jesus, the ultimate ally for personal and social resistance. Thurman’s work greatly influenced the activism of Civil Rights giants Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, Vernon Jordan, and countless others, sustaining them in their fight for equality and against systemic racism and violence wracking the United States in the 1950s-70s.

Thurman’s social mysticism aims at providing a sense hope for the disinherited, or those in any society experiencing oppression. This framework seeks to bring forth a liberation of the soul and inner life of an individual, rather than emphasizing liberation from the oppressor. Inner liberation is necessary not only for the spiritual wellbeing of modern-day disinherited people of color in America but also because this kind of liberation was taught and lived out by Jesus himself. He writes “[Jesus] recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them.”<sup>2</sup> That is, the greatest source of resistance and

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, “Grounds of Optimism: Hope”, October 15, 1975, sermon, 45:32, <http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=359097>.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996; reprint of 1949 edition), 11.

power a person of color fighting for their life in American society is the well of spiritual identity and strength that has the potential to be alive within them.

Thurman writes for those pushed down by society, the dehumanized, the stigmatized, and the powerless. He writes for the Black man and woman who fear not only their own lives but those of their children and grandchildren. Thurman's writing has the characteristic urgency of any Black writer aware of the realities of social struggle and violence subjected to his brothers and sisters. While his legacy and writings most directly remain with the Black Americans his message helped to sustain in the Civil Rights Movement fight, wisdom from his sermons, books, and autobiography also offer a way forward for white American Christians. From Thurman's life work a journey towards social transformation that begins within us is ignited.

Thurman's message urges white Christians to turn inward and question our assumptions of the Christian faith for the purpose of becoming active allies for racial justice. In what follows, the three components that make up this journey towards social transformation for white Christians are articulated and analyzed. First, the *doctrinal path* challenges our understanding of who Jesus was in relation to oppression and advocacy on the behalf of the disinherited, thus evolving our perception of the Christian mission. Second, the *mystical path* leads us on our own necessary route of introspection and derivation of strength. And, finally, the *action-centric path*, which centers around Thurman's arguments for racial resistance being *nonviolent* resistance and its implications for white bodies is laid bare. Through engaging these derived paths, Thurman's wisdom becomes a lens through which white Christians can ignite their quest to break down the problematic and racist assumptions of the white church and begin their journey into social action.

## The Doctrinal Path to Social Transformation

Throughout United States' history, the Christianity of white America has been a tool for racial oppression and violence against Black and brown folk. Thurman was keenly aware of this reality and had experienced it from an early age. When he was seven years old, his father died of pneumonia as he and his mother stood on either side of the bed looking on. When it came to burying him, it took the convincing of local white deacons, spearheaded by his grandmother, to procure a funeral service. Because his father was unbaptized, the deacon took the opportunity to condemn Thurman's father, espousing all the sin he had accrued in his life.

This stringent, judgmental, and racist Christianity was averse to how Thurman believed the faith to exist. He felt a uniquely strong relationship with Jesus throughout his youth; one where Jesus would listen to his worries and provide support and comfort. As he continued to grow up and pursue faith as his career, he was able to articulate the type of Christianity America was built upon: "a religion born of a people acquainted with persecutions and suffering, [that has] become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples."<sup>3</sup> Much of Thurman's career as an academic and spiritual leader was spent wrestling with how Jesus is alternatively a voice and ally to Black Americans who, like him, grew up in a world where power was mysteriously never on their side. His famous work *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) stands as the culmination of his ponderings and argument concerning this, concluding that at its foundation Christianity is a religion whose teachings speak directly to those in any society with "their backs against the wall". Thurman pursues this remarkable argument by establishing

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 2.

that Jesus was not only an aid and healer to those oppressed in his day, but a disinherited individual himself. This simple awareness of Jesus's social standing as oppressed, and the implications of it, form the basis of the doctrinal path to social transformation.

Jesus is oppressed, one of the disinherited himself, first because he was a Jew. Thurman argues that "The Christian Church has tended to overlook its Judaic origins, but the fact is that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew of Palestine when he went about his Father's business."<sup>4</sup> Paula Fredrickson, a Jewish scholar, highlights Jesus' vernacular language was Aramaic, a language that was the close cousin to Hebrew, and "his audience would have been for the most part Aramaic-speaking Jews living in Jewish territory."<sup>5</sup> Though Roman power was not evident in everyday life in Judea, this territory where Jesus resided was controlled by Herod, whose throne was intensely backed and manipulated by none other than the Roman empire. While Judea was experiencing economic growth rates during the time of Jesus's birth, religious tensions were rising steadily, in addition to a growing problem of banditry that served to further worsen divides.

Not only was Jesus a Palestinian Jew amid the dominance of Roman power, but he was socioeconomically disadvantaged. Thurman cites a passage in Luke that details the economic predicament of those who were solely able to offer a pigeon or dove for sacrifice. Jesus's mother was never able to provide a sacrifice of a lamb and instead always sacrificed pigeons. This is evidence that Jesus was not just ethnically disadvantaged but economically struggling. To

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1999), 19.

Thurman there is within this the sense that being a poor Jew makes Jesus even more deserving of his popularized church title “son of man”, as “The masses of the people are poor.”<sup>6</sup>

The third reason Jesus is arguably disadvantaged is that he was a member of a marginalized group, subordinate to the power and rule of a dominant social class.<sup>7</sup> This was a time of political shifts in power and a continued desecration of the Holy Land of Israel. As is famously understood from the nativity story, Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem, though originally from Nazareth, when Jesus was born. According to Frederickson, this was due to both the census and the “antagonizing power of Herod.”<sup>8</sup> As previously noted, political and economic tensions against Romans and Israelites only grew as Jesus matured.

Thurman emphasizes Jesus’s specific social position as a minority by juxtaposing him against Paul, his heralded historian. While Paul, like Jesus, was a Jew, he was given privileges as he was a free Jew. “He was a citizen of Rome... a minority with majority privileges.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus was “faced with so narrow a margin of civil guarantees, [that he] had to find some other basic upon which to establish a sense of well-being.”<sup>10</sup> He had to adopt a middle stance, with one foot in the door of society of the other outside. This is emblematic of the position of Black men in American society, something Thurman notes. He states in the life of the modern American of color, the status of their citizenship has “never been clearly defined.”<sup>11</sup>

It is unique and relevant that within these three simple facts, Thurman highlights the humanity and oppressed status of Jesus. This narrative he weaves of Jesus’s lived experience

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<sup>6</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

encourages us to think how Christianity would be different if the word made flesh was of any other lived experience. This initial questioning is part of the thinking that must ensue when engaging with the doctrinal path. Specifically, how does our understanding of Christian doctrine and mission change when we recognize Jesus as a man facing oppression? Thurman states “...God could have expressed himself as easily and effectively as a Roman. True, but the fact is he did not.”<sup>12</sup> Recognizing that Jesus was himself a member of the disinherited supplies white Christians much to ponder about the nature of the Christian faith. What does it mean for Jesus to not only be an ally to the oppressed, but an oppressed individual himself? And how can we now read the Bible and engage in liturgy that begins from a place of recognizing Jesus as a member of a minority struggling for survival?

Thurman’s analysis treats Jesus as a significant human being, showcasing both the deep faith Thurman held that Jesus is real and the extent to which he believes Jesus is subject to the trials we experience in life every day. Jesus is not immune to anything happening with his people. In fact, he experiences their pain himself. When modern white Christians are made aware of that, the pain of Black lives being shot down and killed is not some distant cry into the void of humanity. Rather, that pain is Jesus’s pain, his lived experience of suffering at the hands of a dominant culture of ignorance and hatred. We live his pain each Good Friday, yes, but we are not connecting that pain to its mirror image on the streets of Louisville, Kentucky, Ferguson, Missouri, and countless other cities across America where God’s children are being beaten, shot, and suffocated to death by the hands of police.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 6.

Our responsibility as white Christians after confronting Thurman's positing of Jesus as disinherited is to make these connections. Jesus is God made man. It is imperative that we move forward with the difficult truth that Jesus is alive in the bodies of Black and brown people with their backs against the wall. He lives within the bodies of those murdered and persists in the realities of those who fear for their children's future as Black Americans every day. Making this connection is essential to bridging one's activism with their faith in Christianity. As the doctrinal path and its implications wash over us, we are next guided to consider the ways Thurman (and Jesus) advocate we find the inner power to proceed. Our minds have been made awake, and now we must seek the strength. This is found through mystical communion with God.

### **The Mystical Path to Social Transformation**

As mentioned before, Thurman grew up as an incredibly spiritual child. He found his solace and communion with Jesus predominantly in nature. In a sermon recorded in January 1959, he illustrates a scene that would occur often in the evenings of his youth. He would sit on the beach, watching the waves of the Atlantic Ocean crash into the shore. He remarks if anyone would have come upon him, they would have been perplexed to see a small child openly in conversation with an invisible partner; to Thurman, these were his daily conversations with Jesus. As Thurman continues to become a spiritual giant throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, he popularly posits himself to be more of a mystic than a theologian. His beliefs held that the true path to God was rooted within. I believe Thurman credits this strong sense of self, rooted in belief in Jesus, to his success in all aspects of his life as a Black man.

Throughout Thurman's publications and lectures, there are multiple instances where he highlights the intense distractions that we face in our daily existence, no matter our race or creed. The ungroundedness that results from these distractions takes us away from our true selves, making us foreign to the things that are real in the world. This void between our outward selves and our inner spiritual lives has broad consequences. For Black men and women, this void weakens their spiritual resolve to continue the fight for racial justice in the face of growing adversity and violence. For white folk, being detached from the inner life greatly exacerbates to the violent dynamic between oppressed and oppressor. If a member of the dominant group is detached from their "inner altar", there is an inherent lack of understanding or empathy allowed to the member of the oppressed group. A dehumanized stance towards "the other" develops. Or, as James Baldwin proclaims in the film "I am Not Your Negro":

You never had to look at me. I had to look at you. I know more about you than you know about me... You don't know what's happening on the other side of the wall, because you don't want to know.<sup>13</sup>

White people who are not in tune with their inner life are that much more likely to ignore the humanity (and human implications of their actions) alive all around them. It is easy to ignore the calls for justice crying forth in America if you have the privilege to stand above or beyond the wall. However, connecting with our inner spiritual selves is necessary as white Christians if we seek to show up alive and strong to fight the just fight alongside our brothers and sisters of color. We can combat these dynamics and find the strength to ground our activism if we can successfully return to communion and understanding with our inner selves, seeking a meaningful

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<sup>13</sup> *I Am Not Your Negro*, directed by Raoul Peck (2017: Magnolia Pictures), DVD.

connection to the divine in that process. This endeavor is the crux of the mystical path of social transformation.

Thurman's prescription for Black folk in light of this ungroundedness we all feel in modern society is articulated clearly in his essay "Mysticism and Social Action" (1978). In this essay he writes

There must be found ever creative ways that can ventilate the private soul without floating it away, that can confirm and affirm the integrity of the person within the midst of the collective necessities of existence...it is the insistence of mysticism. That there is within reach of every man a defense against the grand invasion.<sup>14</sup>

His main argument here is that by turning inward, Black folk not only find a strength of spirit that cannot be offered by anything else, but a deeper connection to their resilient will to carry on the fight for racial justice. This has equal implications for white folks seeking to be allies to the Black struggle. His works over the years detail various ways to connect to this inner source of resiliency and power. Several crucial concepts stand as central to fostering a flourishing inward life that strengthen one to engage in meaningful resistance. These are placing oneself in nature, being in silence with oneself, and engaging in regular prayer. Each of these proves equally valuable to the white Christian, as will be shown.

### *Nature*

In his autobiography, Thurman illustrates the relationship he always had with the quiet of the night. The trees and broader nature as a whole, all constants, allow him to return to his inward self in the midst of chaos around him. He states, even in his adult life, there are times

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<sup>14</sup>Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Action", *The A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review*, (1980): 4.

when the night calms him, surrounding him like a cradle.<sup>15</sup> There was a specific oak tree that he felt especially connected to as a child. He describes:

I discovered that the oak tree and I had a unique relationship. I could sit, my back against its trunk and feel the same peace that would come to me in my bed at night. I could reach down to the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and my joys, unfold them, and talk about them. It, too, was a part of my reality, like the woods, the night, and the pounding surf, my earliest companions, giving me space.<sup>16</sup>

These experiences with nature from an early age, viewing it completely as a realm of escape, is an illustration of the quiet Thurman touts as necessary for inward transformation for every human being.

### *Silence*

Specifically, silence gave Thurman a comfort. He did not have to be anything when he was off by himself, alone. The unique thing is that Thurman never felt that he was alone, however. In silence, he could be away from people existing in a material sense, but closer to Jesus, a figure in his spirit that provided a forever companion. His belief in silence in nature accentuates this point. It was necessary for him to be in a space entirely touched by the spirit with which he found he could access in these moments. By being in the presence of the natural, in silence, Thurman became in touch with himself, allowing him to access the divine and speak with Jesus. His life and practice are profound illustrations of the peace that comes with being with oneself for long periods. By spending time devoted to himself, he naturally accessed the divine and was guided along in life. These experiences of grounding are contingent on practicing silence and situating oneself in nature.

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<sup>15</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt & Brace Company, 1979), 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

## *Prayer*

When alone, practicing silence in nature, prayer was close to follow. Both in his youth and adult life, Thurman defines prayer uniquely. He never speaks of prayer solely as a conversation, preferring to describe it simply as a mediation. He defines meditation as an act a freeing of oneself: “to hold steadily in one’s focus that the central ink of the spirit is God and he will make his presence such in the things I think, feel, and do.”<sup>17</sup> Prayer is the time for an individual to connect to their spirit within and reach a new dimension where inward strength may be felt. Prayer is a time to lay one’s burdens down at the feet of God, who is always there and listening.

Thurman stunningly spoke about the nearness of God in an individual’s life. He knew for certain, through an awareness of the life of Jesus, that God was always around. In a sermon, he quietly proclaims:

[God] is not way up in the heavens on a throne somewhere... not hidden in the archives of some ancient testimony... God is in the lilies that grow by the roadside, not even a little sparrow falls without His awareness of the movement... you do not have to go anywhere to find him... raise the stone and there he is... and to such there can never be a lonely moment ever again.<sup>18</sup>

He derives guidance and inspiration surrounding prayer from Meister Eckhart, the famous ancient German theologian who advocates prayer as a way to confront our own

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<sup>17</sup> Howard Thurman, “A faith to live by #3: Jesus Christ”, September 28, 1952, sermon, 34:28, <http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=343766>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

creatureliness. In a sermon titled “Mysticism and the Experience of Love”, delivered on October 15, 1975, Thurman argues it is in solitude and quietude that prayer may awaken us to “God’s all-pervasive aliveness”. It is here, if we can focus, that we may touch God, the true foundation of all of existence.

What prayer offers the disinherited and white Christian alike is a grounding in oneself that is necessary when proceeding in the world, against the social system. If we can find a love for ourselves by feeling vulnerable yet comforted, open yet cradled, by the spirit of God, we thereby carry with us a sense of power that truly is beyond anything that could ever be humanly brought to bear against us. That, to Thurman, is the power of mysticism.

### **Action-centric Path to Transformation**

With it established that the religion of Jesus is one that speaks so integrally to the nature of the oppressed lived experience, and that power to push against the forces of oppression is rooted in an individual’s mystical practices of silence and prayer, we can now detail the praxis Thurman sets forth to put these insights into action for the white Christian. Thurman explains there are three attitudes a member of the disinherited, both in the time of Jesus and in the historical moment through which he lived, could take up against the dominant ruling group under which they are oppressed. They are simply nonresistance, resistance, and nonviolent resistance. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman details each of these, finally promoting nonviolent resistance as the ideal mode.

Thurman writes “Under the general plan of nonresistance... the aim...is to assimilate to the culture and behavior-pattern of the dominant group.”<sup>19</sup> What he references is the seemingly quick and painless act of making oneself appear to be the same and thus of non-threat to the group exhibiting social norms and holding the power. This endeavor is inadequate for Thurman because it would be acting in dissent of the soul. It would, according to Jesus be one reviling “because it is the evil of the soul itself.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, it is going against the natural state of being of a human being.

Nonresistance was the path that Herod took in Jesus’s time. Seeking to derive economic security and social acceptance from the upper class, he made quick peace with authority by accepting Roman control and dominance with open arms. Herod’s actions were of a larger social movement where this assimilation and acceptance occurred with the Sadducees. They chose to calmly follow the path that they saw as inevitable – “they were astute enough to see that their own position could be perpetuated if they stood firmly against all revolutionaries and radicals.”<sup>21</sup> The path of nonresistance is a popular stance embodied by white people in the face of racial injustice and violence. Faced with an overwhelming desire to “calm” the storm or remain in their bubble of privilege, many white folk would rather rest in sheer denial of racial injustice and violence than confront it.

The other alternative within the nonresistance path is to carry out more covert operation of appearing indifferent to the struggles of the disinherited; that is, remaining silent. We are all familiar with the sentiment of Bishop Desmond Tutu that articulates plainly this very point: “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” Thurman’s

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<sup>19</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

remarks fall along the same vein, that sometimes the most harmful source of oppression does not spawn directly from “guarantors of the status quo” but rather those whose “hold on security is sure only as long as the status quo remains intact.”<sup>22</sup> This stance is embodied by white Christians who might think that the murders we see flashing across our newsfeeds every day are “a shame” or “horrific incidents”, but whose thoughts rarely culminate into action taken to call out injustice and work for a solution. The overall harm taking a nonresistance path does to an individual of color is a holistic loss of self-respect and integrity. As highlighted in the previous section on mysticism, if an individual loses their sense of self and personal experience, they are very nearly doomed to subsist as a passive recipient of oppression, subject to a complete loss of identity. In this way the nonresistance path is not ideal for Thurman.

If we are not to take a fully passive approach, what then about a path of resistance?

Thurman defines this route in *Jesus and the Disinherited* as “the physical, overt expression of an inner attitude.”<sup>23</sup> This path of action is attractive to many, no matter the race or social position. There is something innate to human nature that when faced with tension and growing emotion seeks an actionable release of energy. Particularly in instances of armed resistance, there exists an underlying assumption that the amount of force supplied implies something about the degree of moral rightness or certitude held by a group of people. The Zealots in Jesus’s time carried out active resistance. I cannot help but see this exact concept reflected in hours of iPhone video footage over the past decade capturing the ease with which police inflict pain and suffering on innocent Black men and women – often increasing in violence with the more officers that arrive at the scene to back up their actions. This too is not an adequate path of action to Thurman, and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15.

he goes on to taut that the final, most successful route of action against oppression is nonviolence.

Jesus spoke of nonviolent resistance as being rooted in the relationship one has with themselves. To be specific, Jesus expressed the only “balm for humiliation is humility”<sup>24</sup>, a fine way of articulating that only the practice of intentional opposite action was going to bring lasting, sustaining change. This path keeps the resistor in communion with their emotions, responses, and lived experience while still providing a workable framework for achieving resistance of some kind. Strength must be drawn from within to be able to carry forth nonviolent resistance, and this is the exact challenge of it. In advocating for nonviolent resistance, Thurman places it as the summative goal for the American Civil Rights activist, as without a reframing of the doctrine of Jesus and a firm relationship established with one’s inner self, it is not possible to succeed in removing oneself from the wall. It is profound the progression Thurman establishes, summarized here, for how the disinherited may proceed in enacting social change, against the pressures and pain of dominant white society. His overall reverence for Jesus as the pinnacle of guidance for social change is quoted here, from his sermon on Sunday September 28, 1952: “Jesus took the world of voiceless pain as his kingdom and made of himself its external mouthpiece...even those who do not bow at the altar of Jesus somehow find that the ugliness of their sin is taken away and the beauty of their sorrow is revealed to them.”<sup>25</sup>

For white Christians, we must ask ourselves what it means to carry out Thurman’s nonviolent resistance with our bodies. At a Black Lives Matter demonstration, where police form a barricaded wall around individuals calling for systemic change and racial justice, it is the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>25</sup> Howard Thurman, “A faith to live by #3: Jesus Christ”, September 28, 1952, sermon, 34:28, <http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=343766>.

responsibility of white bodies to form our own wall between police and Black and brown bodies. It is our responsibility that our privilege protects Black bodies that are not seen by police as human, but rather as objects and threats. Jesus and one's relationship with him lies at the heart of all acts of social resistance; with Jesus as a guide we can begin embodying his intentional life of justice-seeking for ourselves and others in our society. For me, I have always valued the inward journey for its own merit on a spiritual level. However, Thurman shows me that this inner work to understand and implement a gospel of Jesus that centers on alleviating the pain of the disinherited is invaluable to the ways I can show up as an ally for racial justice.

Another way of framing the struggle of Black lives throughout American history roots itself in the shared narratives and traditions of Black women to bring about a more comprehensive theological framework for inclusivity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WOMANIST STORYTELLING FOR SURVIVAL, RESILIENCY, AND FLOURISHING

“Women were expected to sit in the pews, receiving messages from men in the pulpit. Their role was to recognize God in their pastor, not to expect or demand that he recognize God in them.”<sup>1</sup>

The stories of white people in America are everywhere. From news, to movies, to the types of sermons we hear on Sundays, the narratives of the white American experience have dominated this nation’s storytelling and collective cultural identity for nearly two and a half centuries. When it comes to reckoning with white Christians as crucial allies in the Black Lives Matter movement, it is necessary to outline the development and scope of narratives that have historically been ignored and erased. Womanist scholarship represents the lives of women of color, confronting white people with the challenge of expanding our normative narratives by embracing the immanent lives and realities of Black women throughout our nation’s history.

The narratives of Black women document much more than the survival of Black people; they speak out of the resiliency and collective spirit of Black women themselves, who experienced the oppression not only of being Black but also that associated with being a woman. Womanist storytelling forms the crux of its theological scope – stories of upbringing, survival, resiliency, and flourishing from the days of slavery to today. One such occasion begins on a stormy evening in North Carolina. A Black family is seated around a single lamp in the middle of the living room, while a sturdy, kind presence belonging to a Black woman stands over them. A matriarchal figure, her role is multi-faceted: caregiver, moral agent, religious guide, hope-keeper, secret-holder, mother, grandmother, godmother, aunt, wife. This evening she takes on

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 227.

another necessary and heralded role for the family seated around her – storyteller. As the storm continues outside, she wraps her family in stories of the resiliency of ancestors who lived through the horrors of U.S chattel slavery. One story may recount the deep aching pain of an ancestor being separated from their children when sold with nothing but a moment to say goodbye, while another expresses the overwhelming joy of a maternal great-grandmother who, after emancipation, searched unceasingly across miles of southern plantations to successfully reunite her family.<sup>2</sup>

Such is the image womanist Katie Cannon weaves to explain the unique character of her upbringing as a Black woman raised in America. The role of the Black matriarch as storyteller is just one of the many roles women take on as descendants of enslaved African peoples. The story of Black women today could be seen to be as unique and diverse as all the individuals which comprise it. However, there remains the truth that the lives of Black women tell a narrative of deep struggle, violence, cruelty, and exclusion, combined with unparalleled spirit, courage, and deep resolve. There is a consciousness that unites their stories and experiences, one rooted in the trauma, faith, and survival of enslaved ancestors. In her work, *In Search of our Mother's Gardens* (1983), Alice Walker coins the term womanist in an effort to designate this unique viewpoint and experience of Black women in America. The definition is provided below.

Womanist:

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish”, i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color, From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. 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*.

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<sup>2</sup> Katie Cannon, *Katie's Cannon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 27-28.

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 to 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 universalist... Traditionally capable...
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.<sup>3</sup>

Womanist scholar Jacquelyn Grant provides further insight into the term womanist. She posits “A womanist is one who has developed survival strategies in spite of the oppression of her race and sex in order to save her family and her people. Walker’s womanist notion suggests not ‘the feminist’, but the active struggle of Black women that makes them who they are”<sup>4</sup>. An organization known as the Womanist Working Collective summarizes the impact of Walker’s definition on the formation of womanism as a social movement in the United States. Their website states “Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension.”<sup>5</sup>

Womanism draws from a diverse and multidisciplinary canon – from works of literature detailing the black woman’s experience, like Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, to spirituals, prayer, and folklore dating back to the days of slavery. Throughout the womanist canon rests the core belief in the power of faith. The spirit of Jesus as the redeemer

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<sup>3</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Publishing, 1967), xi-xii.

<sup>4</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 205.

<sup>5</sup> “Alice Walker’s 1983 definition of a Womanist”, The Womanist Working Collective, 2021, <https://www.womanistworkingcollective.org/womanist>.

and holder of sorrow sustain both the generations of African Americans in their enslavement in early United States history and modern day generations of Black and brown folk continuing the fight for justice in the Black Lives Matter movement. Through exploring womanism, we gain a clearer sense of the richness of Black history and Black experience in the United States, centered on the realities of Black women. Womanist theology seeks to make visible the experience and shared history of Black women for the purpose of claiming a theological place for them. A place just for Black women had not been created before, until the work of Black women feminists and womanists made it so. The Christian faith uplifted by womanist scholars, as it will be seen, is unique. It stands firm as its own discipline, informed by the Christian gospels, Bible stories, and slave religion, but distinct with its foundation in the realities of Black women's experience.

This chapter first outlines the sources of knowledge that comprise and inform the womanist canon. These are: a shared history of chattel slavery in the United States, spirituals, prayer, and folklore. Next, the scholarly processes of two leading womanist theologians, Katie Cannon and Jacquelyn Grant, are traced. This chapter also outline the differences between womanism, feminism, and Black feminism. Key features of womanism, derived from Cannon, Grant, and these personal canons, lead us finally to distinctive tenets for white Christians that are navigational for understanding their place in the Black Lives Matter movement.

### **Sources of knowledge for the Womanist Canon**

#### *1. A shared history of chattel slavery and the power of "the invisible institution"*

Despite education and awareness of the realities and horror of the trade and enslavement of African peoples spanning four centuries in the United States, white Americans still fail

miserably in their comprehension of what enslaved peoples endured at the hands of their ancestors. Centuries of African people suffered the constant degradation, abuse, torture, and dehumanization at the hand of white slaveholders without any promise of relief or freedom their whole life.

This historical reality faced by Black Americans in their recent ancestry forms one of the prominent sources of knowledge for the womanist canon. As Cannon outlines in her work *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, enslaved peoples were almost always split from their family units upon arrival in the United States. From there, they were kept separated, unable to see spouses and children without a pass, and could be beaten, tortured, and killed at will. This treatment of slaves solidified their utility for white owners as mere property. There was at work a calculated intent to “crush the spirit and will” of the enslaved for the purpose of “transform[ing] an entire race of people, their lives and their labor, into basic commodities of production and reproduction.”<sup>6</sup> Not surprising to descendants of the enslaved, yet seemingly horrific to white Americans, is the blatant fact that it was America, and America alone, that defined slaves “completely as sources of capital accumulation and commodities.”<sup>7</sup> Faced with the inhumanity, degradation, and inevitable mistreatment of generational “chattelhood,” African American people turn to the one thing they kept of themselves considering their social reality from slavery to the current hour in history. That is, faith in a higher power as reality amidst their suffering.

What stands as a remarkable fact, to those of us not well-versed in the realities of African American history and experience, is the faith in God that was sustained throughout these

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<sup>6</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

generations of systemically dehumanized circumstances and oppressed by slave owners. In his famous work *Slave Religion*, African American religion scholar Albert Raboteau posits that this religion of slaves, what came to be referred to as “the invisible institution”, though informed by Christianity, was not the Christian religion itself. It was, rather, a unique creation that aggregated together practices and beliefs from the African spiritual tradition, Islam, and Christianity.

For most slaves, it was mandatory to attend church services on Sundays with the master and his family. At these gatherings, sermons were preached that professed a gospel of division. Christianity was, since the very beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, “viewed by emerging nations of Western Christendom as a justification for enslavement of Africans”<sup>8</sup>. Slaves were taught that the only way to achieve salvation was to fulfill their duties obediently and unquestioningly. Even the enslaved preachers that some masters provided their slaves were held to this praxis of preaching a gospel of obedience. Slaves were given an edited Bible with the inclusion of only certain books; usually only those professing the moral obligation for a slave to be dutiful and know their place as servant to the master<sup>9</sup>.

When slave religion, “the invisible institution”, was at its peak in the post-Civil War years, a different Christian gospel was taught among slaves, and differing ways of practicing faith were capitalized upon. Slave religion was comprised of spirituals, prayer, and folklore, the impact of which is still felt in Black churches and is examined in the section to follow. The most important thing to note about these gatherings during the height of “the invisible institution’s” prevalence was their covertness. There are accounts of slaves professing the various punishments

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 96.

<sup>9</sup> *The Black Church*, episode 1, directed by Stacey Holman, aired February 8, 2021, on PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/video/the-black-church-episode1/>.

that would await any slave caught worshipping outside of the regimented White church hours. The usual punishment for this offence was up to 500 lashes. Because of this, slaves would gather for worship under the cover of night in spaces known as “hush harbors.”<sup>10</sup> Hush harbors were located outdoors, usually in woods, gullies, ravines, or thickets,<sup>11</sup> and could be attended by slaves from multiple plantations. However, some slave gatherings occurred in slave cabins<sup>12</sup> and were comprised of just the slaves from a single property.

Raboteau includes a number of excerpts of slave testimonies pertaining to the nature of slave religion in this time. One recorded is from a man named Moses Hursey, and is exemplary of the spirit and feel of hush harbor gatherings:

On Sundays they had meetin, sometimes at our house, sometimes at ‘nother house... they’d preach and pray and sing – shout too. I heard them git up with a powerful force of the spirit, clappin’ they hands and walkin’ round the place. They’d shout, ‘I got the glory. I got that old time ‘ligion in my heart.’ I seen some powerful figurations of the spirit in them days.<sup>13</sup>

Frankly, this image of jubilation and movement of the spirit is so contrary to the violence to which slaves were being subjected. God is present and alive amidst the suffering, and this is a considerable testament to the resiliency of the Black community, even today.

In conjunction with these secret gatherings to practice slave religion, Cannon argues there develops a cultural cohesion among slaves across the United States, “an expressive system of coded messages to communicate what they considered good, worthy, and meaningful.”<sup>14</sup> This

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<sup>10</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, 212.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>14</sup> Cannon, *Katie’s Cannon*, 33.

culture of resistance and spiritedness sustained enslaved peoples and it too was deeply rooted in faith:

In spite of every form of institutional constraint, Afro-American slaves were able to create another world, a counterculture within the White-defined world, complete with their own folklore, spirituals, and religious practices...Even with cultural expression outlawed, my ancestors never surrendered their humanity or lost sight of a vision of freedom and justice they believed to be their due.<sup>15</sup>

As has been seen, throughout this history, a definite culture of black faith evolved and flourished. This history is given to white audiences through modern films like *12 Years a Slave* and Antebellum and novels *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Copper Sun*. However difficult it is to watch or read about this history, it is necessary to do so. The faith that arose out of deep, life-threatening pain and abuse is a unique faith that actively resists oppression and degradation. This is the same faith Alice Walker references in part three of the womanist definition, when she states the drive awake in Black women to “lov[e] the Spirit”. This is the faith that must be understood by white Christians, to further lead us along the journey of reframing our understanding of faith to be one necessitating social action and allyship for racial justice. The following three sources of knowledge for the womanist canon follow, each of them foundationally born out of the experience of slavery and the formation of slave religion.

## 2. *Spirituals*

Cannon defines spirituals as “Black sacred music”, professing that they come in many different forms – from jubilees, to ballads, to veiled protest songs.<sup>16</sup> Spirituals were sung while slaves labored throughout the day and served as both a productivity tool and a distraction from

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 35.

their reality. Put plainly, “The primary propositions in the spirituals are that slaves desired freedom and escape from bondage; judgment and punishment for their enslavers; redemption and salvation for themselves.”<sup>17</sup>

There is an extensive amount of scholarship on the influence African culture had on the development and sound of African American spirituals; much of it informed by the work of Raboteau in *Slave Religion*. In one article, Charshee Lawrence-McIntyre, a New York activist and leader in the Black Liberation movement in the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, seeks to situate American slave spirituals in the context of African song and storytelling traditions. She writes “African American music reflects the African background of its creators, rather than an abortive imitation of European music.”<sup>18</sup> Central features of both musical forms include a call and response structure, polyrhythmic beat patterns, and the necessity for all people to sing in community with one another.<sup>19</sup> These three characteristics contribute to this unique effect listening to spirituals has on one. She writes “if heard separately, these singers might seem somewhat unmusical. But in concert, the individual contributions constituted a bewitching effect.”<sup>20</sup> This effect does seem apparent when listening to archived recordings of spirituals. Spirituals also usually featured physical movement of those partaking in the work and song. However, Lawrence-McIntyre makes it clear that these movements, such as swaying and clapping, are not necessarily for the purpose of keeping time or moving to a specific beat. Rather, a swaying head usually conveyed a

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<sup>17</sup> Charshee Charlotte Lawrence-McIntyre, “The Double Meaning of the Spirituals”, *Journal of Black Studies* 17, No. 4 (1987): 383.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

type of religious ecstasy, while hand clapping was the result of feeling pleasure, humor, love, or joy.<sup>21</sup>

The biblical nature of spirituals is another integral characteristic of them. As Cannon summarizes, “Operating on a sense of sacred time, [slaves] extended time backward so as to experience an immediate intimacy with biblical persons as faith relatives.”<sup>22</sup> Some biblical references in spirituals come from the Old Testament, like “Go Down Moses”, while others draw upon stories of the suffering of Jesus.

In the spiritual “Swing low, sweet chariot”, by which the title of this thesis is inspired, the lead singer sings a series of verses, each ending with everyone singing “coming for to carry me home.”<sup>23</sup> This exhibits the call and response pattern and the inclusion of multiple voices forming a unique melodic effect that entrances the listener, revealing the pain of what slaves were living through. There is also a sense of rich spirituality, given the exclamation for God to protect them, someday safely shuttling them to a redeemed, free afterlife, “home.”

The function of spirituals in the modern life of womanists is to declare and uplift the history of slavery and its lived religious experience in a Christian context. Cannon, and countless other Black women, were partially taught their history in the Black churches that situated the slave narratives within the context of religious struggle. The history and unique strength of the enslaved is documented in this sharing of spirituals.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Cannon, *Katie’s Cannon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, 36.

<sup>23</sup> “African American Spirituals”, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/>.

### 3. Prayer

Prayer is central to any faith tradition; however, it plays a unique role in the history of Black Christians, descendants of slaves. Cannon writes she “grew up understanding the Black prayer tradition to be the authentic living bridge between Black people’s stories, Black people’s music, and Black people’s source of faith.”<sup>24</sup> Prayer was a predominant feature in “the invisible institution”, taking place throughout and within the hush harbor gatherings. Forbidden to pray for liberation for fear of being beaten or killed, the prayers of slaves often centered around divine deliverance and were informed by Old Testament stories.<sup>25</sup> White Christians may find it odd to consider the use of prayer to be for deliverance post-mortem, rather than its popular usage to bring about goodness in one’s mortal life. This element of slave prayer enlightens us of not only the harsh realities of slave existence (where there was truly little to no hope of deliverance in this life) but also the high level of faith slaves carried with them of the certainty of God’s existence.

Due to the secrecy of slave religion gatherings, the sound of prayer was muffled, often by means of unique innovation and creative thinking. Slaves would sometimes pray while huddling under a water-soaked quilt or hang a kettle upside down from the ceiling of a cabin to drown out the sound. If they were outside praying, a pot of water featured in the gathering. When praying aloud, an individual would speak into the vessel of water in an attempt to remain quiet and unheard.<sup>26</sup> Christian prayer takes on a new meaning when understood in this context. White Christians may take for granted the ability to pray freely, about anything that troubles one’s heart. The way prayer had to be covered up and protected for slaves speaks to its necessity as a

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<sup>24</sup> Cannon, *Katie’s Cannon*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 219.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

tool of faith and resistance – something to be revered as an instrument of power and social transformation in its own right.

At times prayer in slave gatherings was led by a preacher, and, on occasion, others from the white community would be in attendance. Raboteau includes an excerpt from a slave Robert Anderson that describes a slave gathering featuring both occurrences:

We would gather out in the open on summer nights, gather around a big bonfire, to keep the mosquitoes away, and listen to our preachers preach sometimes half the night. There would be singing and testifying and shouting. Usually when we had these meetings there would be people there from other plantations, and sometimes there would be white visitors who would stand on the outside of the circle and listen to our services.<sup>27</sup>

Cannon writes that prayer features prominently in her experience of family gatherings. During thunderstorms, the matriarch will conclude storytelling and singing with a prayer of Thanksgiving and remembrance. She says, “Believing that a direct personal relationship with God exists, my mother... prays for the needs of both the immediate and extended family. She celebrates God’s goodness, majesty, and mercy.”<sup>28</sup> There is a sense of fullness that this experience seems to provide Cannon. She views it as a culminating act that combines and summates the African American tradition holistically – drawing upon music, slave experiences and emotions, and the oral tradition. Prayer, in the African American tradition, is much more than just the recitation of words, therefore. It is a cry of history, music, stories of resilience through suffering, and the deep faith in freedom after death. Prayer is not underestimated by the womanists in their canon because it holds such a great power. This facet of Black faith cannot be

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>28</sup> Cannon, *Katie’s Cannon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, 36.

underestimated by white Christians in their own journey towards allyship with the racial justice movement.

### 3. Folklore

On folklore, Cannon writes “Living in a dialectical relationship with white supremacy, folklore was the essential medium by which the themes of freedom, resistance, and self-determination were evoked, preserved, and passed by word of mouth from generation to generation.”<sup>29</sup> Looking into folklore, it is easy to see its root in resistance. Storytelling formed the cohesive layer between Black and white life during the days of chattel slavery. Cannon describes what ancient Black verse recounted as the “pro-active phenomenon” of folklore: “Got one mind for white folks to see / Nother for what I know is me; / He don’t know, he don’t know my mind.”<sup>30</sup>

It was while telling stories, like Cannon’s mother and grandmother do during family gatherings, that traditions and lessons are conveyed to younger generations. “Older slaves used folktales to reveal to their fellow slaves what they knew. As tradition bearers, they distilled this compendium of folk wisdom into instructional materials to teach younger slaves how to survive.”<sup>31</sup> One of the most prominent examples of lived folklore in American society post days of chattel slavery to womanist theologians is found in the work of Zora Neale Hurston. Cannon writes “The Black community’s folklore, which Hurston collected, is the corporate story that enshrines the interlocking complexities of the beliefs, etiology, and practices of Black folk. It

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 34.

constitutes the community's understanding of, and response to, its own humanity.”<sup>32</sup> Hurston is widely known for her book *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) but was also a philanthropist, filmmaker, and researcher. Her works center around life in the South for enslaved and freed African Americans and the trials experienced within that context. Cannon describes Hurston with a reverence both for her contribution to the womanist literary canon and for the fact that she herself embodies the womanist process of self-discovery as a moral agent in her creative art formation.

In Cannon's book, she traces Hurston's life as a Black woman growing up headstrong with a supportive mother and a questioning father. Losing her mother when she was only nine, she was confronted with the need to either conform to society (tone her personality and demeanor down) or forge a new path that would only lead to resistance. She chose the latter and the effect of this was the transformation of Hurston into a unique woman, fit as an example of the womanist methodology of discovery and learning by empowering and validating the individual's experience. “She maintained that Black life was more than defensive reactions to the oppressive circumstances of anguish and desperation perpetrated by a Western system of White male patriarchy. Hurston invested her energies in staying in touch with the rich, colorful creativity that emerged and reemerges in the Black quest for human dignity.”<sup>33</sup>

From Hurston's life as a storyteller, Cannon derives what she calls a constructive ethic. From both her life and the lives of her fictional characters, Cannon argues Hurston and her characters serve as the consciousness that calls Black women forth so that they can break away from the oppressive ideologies and belief systems that presume to define their reality.”<sup>34</sup> White

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 84.

folk in America are not foreign to a story creating meaning and for everyday people in their everyday lives. However, this storytelling about which Cannon writes provides more than just a happy ending or something to aspire towards. Through its chronicling of struggle, the lived failures and successes of a human being subjected to institutional and social barriers to freedom, stories act as handbooks for how modern day Black and brown women may also find deliverance, and their own personal identities along the way.

Cannon also writes of Hurston: “Testifying to a vision of a just society, Hurston made particular claims on the moral agency of her audiences...Her richness and chaos, her merits the faults witnessed to an ethic that can be lived out only in the community.”<sup>35</sup> In this way, folklore serves as a way for African American history to remain intact and untethered from its reality, and as an inspiration for Black women, who, like Hurston, use the history recounted to shape their own views of who they are in a society still battered by the same racism and discrimination.

### **The Womanist Process**

It is necessary to briefly detail the process womanist theologians undergo that derives takeaways from the diverse multidisciplinary canon for the purpose of constructing a liberative theology that is inclusive to Black women. Cannon articulates that womanist theological analysis “provides an interpretive framework that holds together the spiritual matrix of Black religious culture while exposing the complex, baffling contradictions inherent in androcentric language.”<sup>36</sup> Womanist theologians analyze texts, sermons, and teachings of the Christian tradition, combined

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 114.

with pieces of the canon, to form a framework inclusive to the lives and experiences of Black women.

This endeavor usually involves combining two interpretative areas of thought: the feminist liberationist perspective and the methodology underlying preaching within the Black church. The former of the two “does not rely solely on historical ‘facts’ nor invent its evidence. Instead, it engages in an imaginative reconstruction that rests upon observation and inference; it employs a critical analysis of whether scriptural texts in sermons mention women only as problems or as exceptions.”<sup>37</sup> This involves taking a critical eye to sermons of Black male preachers. Often, this analysis highlights that what is being taught does not reflect the experience of Black women or their contributions. The latter of the two modes illuminates historically “the ways in which oral religious thought is organized and conceptualized.”<sup>38</sup> By examining how not only the preacher formulates the sermon, but the relation of the congregation to the words, the progression of thought, to Cannon “invites us to a higher degree of critical consciousness about the invisible milieu in which we worship” in modern day.<sup>39</sup>

Jacquelyn Grant’s methodology is slightly different in scope. Her starting point is simply recognizing the tri-dimensional inequity faced by Black women: racism, classism, and sexism.<sup>40</sup> Once this is realized, one can situate the Black experience within a biblical context, beginning to see the connection between the experiences of Jesus and those of Black women. She writes “To do Womanist Theology...we must read and hear the Bible and engage it within the context of our own experience...Black women of the past did not hesitate in doing this and we must do no

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, 209.

less.”<sup>41</sup> Just like Thurman, Grant highlights the reality that, biblically speaking, God resides on the side of the oppressed. God is forever present within struggle and turmoil; “God is in solidarity with the struggles of those on the underside of humanity.”<sup>42</sup> Again, this is a key claim for white Christians to understand as navigational for their own activism. To endeavor to view Christianity as a religion *lived out* through active resistance against a corrupt and racist social system, white Christians cannot doubt that they themselves ought to aspire to do the same.

Also in line with Thurman, Grant emphasizes the place Jesus holds as the beacon of hope for Black women:

For Christian Black women in the past, Jesus was their central frame of reference. They identified with Jesus because they believed that Jesus identified with them. As Jesus was persecuted and made to suffer undeservedly, so were they.<sup>43</sup>

This connection has led womanist scholars to paint a non-traditional picture of modern-day Jesus. Scholarly research in past years has sought to situate Jesus’s powerless position in society during his time in the equivalent context of the modern day. They have found that the status equal to that of Jesus in his day is that of a Black woman. In this way, modern-day Jesus easily manifests as a Black woman. Whatever his race or gender, however, there remains the fact that Jesus represents freedom in anytime. He stands with (and embodies) the least valued members of humanity and accompanies them in their struggle, leading them to the faith that will provide eventual salvation.

In these ways, for Cannon and Grant, womanist theology is grounded in the combination of liberation theology, the methodology of Black preaching, the reality of Jesus, and the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 40.

experience of Black women. All of these, combined with the sources of knowledge detailed previously, culminate in womanist theological scholarship.

### **Situating Womanism as Distinct from Feminism and Black Feminism**

Because the womanist movement, both scholarly and socially, is usually unheard of or easily misunderstood by white people in the United States, I briefly outline the ways it differs from other movements similar to it and perhaps more widely known. The reasoning behind these distinctions also illuminates the ways white culture has excluded Black women even within movements purportedly aimed at equality and inclusion. Grant aids us in distinguishing womanism from feminism and Black feminism. In *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, she begins with the premise that feminist theology, and by extension feminism as a whole, is "inadequate for two reasons: it is *White*, and it is *racist*."<sup>44</sup> Feminism and feminist scholarship are inherently white-centric because they are rooted fully in the white female experience.

Whether or not the intent was present to make the feminism inclusive of the realities and experiences of "all women" from its inception is irrelevant. The historical fact remains that white and Black women have never had the same experience in the United States. Black women suffered at the hands of white mistresses at equal or often greater degrees as/to the white slave masters. Grant writes the narrative of "sisterhood" among Black and white women is at best a joke and at worst "the conciliatory rhetoric of an advantaged class and race."<sup>45</sup> The lives of Black women have never been at the forefront of the movement: as Grant shows, what white

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 196.

women are working to achieve is fulfillment while Black women are still fighting for survival. Feminism is therefore intrinsically white-centric, because it has only ever concerned the lives and realities of white women.

Feminism is racist not simply because it is white-centric. Grant offers several definitions of racism that help frame this awareness of the harmful nature of feminism. One explanation comes from C. Eric Lincoln, American scholar of race and religion. He writes “The power of racism is the power conceded by those respectable citizens who by their actions or inaction communicate the consensus which directs and empowers the overt bigot to act on their behalf.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, racism is rooted in and perpetuated by the prejudices of those who, through remaining silent in the movement for racial justice, place the power with those who actively exert racist bigotry in society. Feminism, a movement that has never addressed the concerns and issues faced by Black women, is an example of this racism described by Lincoln. Grant writes:

In a racist society, the oppressor assumes the power of definition and control while the oppressed is objectified and perceived as a thing... To misname themselves ‘feminists’ who appeal to ‘women’s experience’ is to do what oppressors always do; it is to define the rules and then solicit others to play the game.<sup>47</sup>

Further, the scholarship in feminism has been historically carried out by white women and the sources drawn upon for these investigations have also been centered in the white experience. The main issue with the feminist movement is that it apparently works to further the equality of “all women.” But this is not the case, for it is exclusionary to all women who are not white. Overall, the advancement of Black women must be a tri-pronged endeavor, focuses on the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism.<sup>48</sup> The plain fact is that white women do not have these same three

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 198.

things standing against them and therefore should not be relied upon to tackle or falsely tout the experience of Black women within their feminism.

In Grant's work, she states clearly that some Black women reject the term Black feminism as contradictory, because of the way the very word "feminism" implies a white-centric, exclusionary historical view of equality. However, there are many who do identify as Black feminists. Famous people who identified in this way are researchers Barbara Smith, Sharon Harley, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, and Angela Davis, and bell hooks. These writers have made great contributions to Black scholarship and deeply inform and inspire the work of womanist scholars. Black feminism differs from womanism because, as emphasized by Walker in her definition at the beginning of this chapter, womanism is centered on the lived *experience* of Black women, historically, literarily, religiously, etc. Womanism is an active endeavor rooted in narratives, history, literature, and religion and presents a crucial lens for white people seeking a greater understanding of this nation's ideal path towards gender equality. This specific praxis for the way to achieve justice for Black women makes it unique, but also tangential in many ways, to Black feminism.

### **Summary: Womanist Takeaways for the White Christian in 2021**

As it has been shown, womanism is both unique to and derivative of Black feminism, liberationist theory, and historical Black theology. It is the complex and beautiful aggregation of experience and reality of Black women throughout history – from the days of chattel slavery, to modernity. It was my intent for this chapter to recognize and explain the components of womanism, in an effort to emphasize the uniqueness of its phenomenological foundation,

highlighting takeaways for white Christians along the way. However, the articulation of these main takeaways follows, in an effort to provide something for readers to look back on and be reminded of the richness of the study of womanism for the modern day activist and ally for the Black Lives Matter movement.

### *1. Understanding of the richness of Black history: struggle and power intertwined*

To me, through highlighting the Black women's experience, and taking it as its center vantage point for deriving conclusions about history, empowerment, and beyond, womanism supplies us with a richer perspective on the complexity of Black struggle and power in the United States. Through narratives preserved by generations of Black women through folklore, prayers, and spirituals, the deep reality of what occurred in the centuries of chattel slavery cannot be ignored. When white Christians read these accounts, through popular fiction stories or in the writing of Black women scholars, it is impossible to walk away with anything other than utter reverence for the strength and faith of a people brought to America against their will and worked to death for generations. However, as is plain for any non-white individual encountering womanism, this history should not be romanticized. Yes, there is sheer, divine power evidenced by the faith kept by African Americans during the centuries of slavery and its aftermath, but there is also deep trauma. The sharing of this deepens the understanding of the richness of the Black struggle in the United States and advances our desires to take an active part in the racial justice movement in 2021.

### *2. Respect for the resiliency of Black women*

Whether you're reading Alice Walker for the first time, discovering the plight of Jarena Lee, or watching a popular documentary on the life of Sojourner Truth, there is no doubt that you

will come away with the highest respect for the lives lived by Black women. Constantly pushed to the side, even in the movement for Black lives, Black women have not only risen time and time again but sustained the history and faith the Black community continues to draw upon for strength. For white people, recognizing this resilient power of Black women humbles us. Perhaps we see Jesus with new, modern eyes. Perhaps this image allows us to break our stereotyped bias towards Black women as crude, masculine, high-strung members of society. For people of color, I think Black women could be seen, as Cannon puts it “the soul of the Black community.” Where would the movement be, where would families be, if Black matriarchs were not there to share the history, keep the faith, and unceasingly seek to define for themselves what is the Black women’s experience. Generations to come in America of any race have Black women to thank for being the true embodiment of the ideals of justice, equality, and untapped potential America considers to be its foundation.

### *3. Awareness of shared humanity*

There is something to the stories shared in the womanist canon that speak to something deeper within us than could be accessed by simply reading about racial strife, slavery, and inequality in a history textbook. Womanism reminds us of the humanity that is all around us, but especially the humanity of Black Americans and Black women. American society continues to degrade, dehumanize, and murder people of color throughout the nation. This dehumanization is the foundation from which the murders of Black and brown individuals across the United States are justified by police and the federal government. In this way, womanism is the most necessary at this hour for us to be aware of, read about, and engage in. Though there be power amidst the struggle for life and humanity for African American individuals, there remains forever the reality that Black men and women are mortal in this life. Womanism provides white Christians with a

perfect canon to incite embodiment of social resistance, pushing us to strip ourselves of all complacency and work for a real change. It provides us with the weight of realizing the human lives that are lost every day, as American racism continues its course through history.

## CHAPTER THREE

### QUEER AND INDECENT RECLAIMING OF THE SEXUAL FOR IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE

“We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance.”<sup>1</sup>

The successful crafting of a liberative Christian theological approach to modern issues of racial justice necessitates the conducting of honest, real, true introspection and self-acceptance. As self-described Black, lesbian, writer, and warrior poet Audre Lorde details above, the realization of full personal power and agency as a Black queer woman in the United States cannot exclude her sexuality. A Black woman cannot let the experience of her sexuality and the power resting therein be hampered or denied by the society that has policed and dictated her reality as a Black woman. Both Black men and women must be willing to embrace the erotic and sexual nature of their beings wholeheartedly and unashamedly if they are to lean into their fullest potential and power as challengers of systems of oppression.

A specific intersection is of focus to this chapter, that of race and sexuality. By viewing race and sexuality in their intersection white Christians can learn to understand the sexual as a lens to better understand and question the ways Christianity has othered Black bodies throughout history. White Christians need to be aware of the sexual stigma that persists about Black bodies (and particularly bodies of Black women) so that we can actively combat it in the world around us, socially and theologically. The theological term used to denote intersections of this type is kyriarchy, referring to oppression derived from the extension of patriarchal power and ideology

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<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 57.

to connect other structures of oppression and privilege. As will be seen, Christianity has not only been a force that justified the perpetual dehumanization of Black women through either oversexualization or asexualization since the days of slavery, but also one that more recently seeks to demonize sexual realities through assertion of lofty standards of purity. To no one's surprise there yet again stands a contradictory and violent complex before Black women navigating their lives as Christians in the United States. One simply cannot win either way and thus in the spirit of Lorde must forge their own path of personal acceptance.

Two contemporary theological approaches – Queer Theology and Indecent theology – prove navigational in their own ways for constructing an action-centered praxis for racial justice inclusive to all sexualities and modes of being for Black queer women. By being made aware of these two branches of thought, white Christians gain an understanding of what it means to conduct *embodied* theology. This is a theology that emphasizes the physical body in its relationship to social action and resistance. Queer and Indecent theologies' scopes, conclusions, and key actionable ideas will be articulated and analyzed in what follows. But first it is necessary to give background of the ways sexuality has become one of the ultimate tools of the white oppressor in the United States against Black bodies.

### **Situating Sexuality in the American Christian context**

It is not uncommon in modernity to associate male domination and sexism with the sexual realm. For millennia, sex has served a distinctive purpose for colonizers and dominant hierarchical systems – to keep people, specifically women, under strict control through

submission. In Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" she articulates the constant perplexity of women considering this history:

We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibility of it within themselves. So women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters.<sup>2</sup>

While this power complexity is intimately felt in most women throughout their sexual lives, it is further augmented when applied to the experience of Black women in the United States. A stereotype that Black women were promiscuous, loose, and begging for sex formed before even the days of slavery in the United States. When European colonizers were in Africa, as early as the 1880s, they encountered native tribes where women and men wore less clothes than was culturally acceptable in Europe. African women did not cover their bosom and men were clad in just a cloth draped across their waist. There is a famous story of an African woman Sarah Bartmann, who due to her larger-than- "normal" buttocks, was toted around Europe and placed on display. When she later died at the age of twenty-five, she was further subjected to physiognomic scrutiny by scientists who studied her genitals, arguing that they keenly resembled that of an ape. As scholar Kelly Brown Douglas argues, "The treatment of Sarah Bartmann points to the manner in which white culture studiously demeaned Black sexuality in its efforts to dehumanize Black men and women."<sup>3</sup> What this should serve as evidence of for white Christian readers is the blatant and *intentional ways* white culture has used sexuality as a tool to kill, rape, and torture Black bodies, doing with them what they see fit.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, "Stereotypes, False Images, Terrorism: The White Assault upon Black Sexuality", *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 34.

Womanist, social critical theorist, and scholar Keri Day is one of many who outlines the progression of *slavery* in its relation to sexuality and white male power systems. Drawing upon the scholarship of another race scholar Anthea Butler, she summarizes “From American slaveocracy to Jim Crow, black women were constantly threatened with sexual assault and rape by white men, and these assaults were morally justified by appealing to gross stereotypes that typified black women as wanton and promiscuous.”<sup>4</sup> Again, mistreatment of Black women at the hands of slave owners was justified long before, when African women were seen to be what we would modernly (wrongfully) denote as “asking for it.” All slaves were stripped naked when being sold, however, slave women were often subjected to backroom observations where prospective buyers would appraise a woman’s genitals to see if she was fit for reproduction. I must ask white readers, would any of this ever be the case if the United States populace viewed Black bodies as human beings?

Post-slavery years, the stereotyping of Black women as promiscuous inevitably led to the stringent assertion of purity ideals within the Black church and community. Day’s work centers around what she calls the “Afro-Pentecostal problematic” within Afro-Pentecostalism, the largest Black religious movement in America, “known for its traditional conceptions of holiness.”<sup>5</sup> This movement policed Black women’s sexual behavior, making it the sole “litmus test of holiness itself.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, Black women were taught that their sanctity in the eyes of God resided solely in whether or not they engaged in sexual behavior. As she sets out to counter this problematic teaching of Christian Pentecostalism, Day presents the three inconsistencies within this theory that instill sexual shame in Black women. The first inconsistency is the church’s

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<sup>4</sup> Keri Day, “‘I am Dark and Lovely’: Let the Shulammitte Woman Speak”, *Black Theology* 16, no. 3 (2018): 208.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 209.

assumption that sexuality can only corrupt religious experience, instead of enhancing or supporting it. The second rests in the problematic options this kind of discouragement teaching leaves women to wrestle with. They have the options of being celibate, abstinent, or only having sex within marriage. Any of these options have detrimental effects including the instillation of fear surrounding one's body and ignorance about safe sex practices. Finally, this kind of church teaching inevitably leads to uneven distribution of expectations, a kind of "heterosexual posturing"<sup>7</sup> that places the responsibility of sexual encounters on women over and against the accountability of men (not to mention the imbedded assumption of only heterosexual partnerings). There is also scholarship that establishes the complexities at work with women's pleasure and church teachings. Women are not divinely permitted to experience pleasure from anything other than penetrative heterosexual sex.<sup>8</sup> This further complicates the relationship Black women have with their sexuality and their faith.

In Day's analysis, she counters this Afro-Pentecostal narrative by highlighting a biblical story that's scope lies in active opposition to these problematic teachings. She presents the story of the Shulammitte woman from the *Song of Songs* in the Hebrew Bible as basis for her argument. In it, the Shulammitte woman is described as "black and lovely", one who "initiates sexual encounters...roams the streets looking for her lover, [and] speaks openly about her sexual desires."<sup>9</sup> This woman is not presented as anything other than sound of mind and independent, not to mention (often interpreted to be) unmarried. This is a key feature to womanist scholars who study this famous text because within this knowledge of the woman's power rests the clarity that women remain carriers of sanctity and spiritual wisdom even in the full acceptance of their

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Beattie Jung, "Sanctifying Women's Pleasure", in *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions*, ed. Radhika Balakrishnan, Mary E. Hunt, Patricia Beattie Jung (Rutgers University, 2001), 81.

<sup>9</sup> Day, "I am Dark and Lovely": Let the Shulammitte Woman Speak", 209.

sexuality. This text also defies the heteronormative assumptions usually found in morally limiting Afro-Pentecostal arguments. Overall, Day summarizes the value of this text as navigational for dismantling the complexities of harmful, controlling teachings about women's sexuality in the Black church:

Among many things, this story is about a woman who does not fear her sexual desires or learning and growing from the messy entanglements of sexual pleasure and desire.... The Shulammitte woman embraces how sexual agency opens up her life, thus connecting her to herself, her ability to love, and ultimately to a celebration of ...her agency...Her actions insist on a more complex and spacious view of female desire.<sup>10</sup>

In a national landscape that utilizes sexuality as a tool to assert white heterosexual, normative control over women of color, stories like this give scholars and activists alike a narrative of guidance that disrupts the dominant, fear-based teachings of purity that can only come with detrimental consequences. Studying stories in the *Song of Songs*, such as the Shulammitte woman, can also help dismantle the assumptions of heteronormativity, opening the path to further inclusive discussions of non-normative sexual and gender identities in Christian spaces. It is these interpretations that white Christians must be willing to seek themselves, as well as read about in liberationist Christian literature. White Christian voices are some of the most powerful in rewriting this problematic and violent narrative that Black women are promiscuous within the church system as a whole. We need to use our privilege to actively advocate against these problematic assumptions.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 213.

## Crafting a Queer Theology

To understand the integral role of Queer Theology in the formation of greater acceptance and progress in the lives of people of color in the United States, it is first necessary to define the term “queer”. As outlined by contemporary theologian and founding Queer Theology scholar Patrick Cheng, “queer” refers to any non-normative sexual or gender identification or category. Specifically, this encompasses lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, trans\*, and gender non-conforming identities.<sup>11</sup> The need for queer theology arises out of what has already been discussed: the persistent denial and erasure of non-white heterosexual divine narratives in the Christian tradition.

Of first focus in this section about the constructing of Queer Theology is Black queer scholar and ethicist Nikki Young. In Chapter 5 of her book *Black Queer Ethics, Family & Philosophical Imagination*, she argues that adding queer analysis to the conducting of theology produces what she calls “Black creative agency” that uplifts certain virtues within the Black experience. The virtues are survival, resilience, presence, and loyalty. Relying on interviews of Black queer women she conducted, she concludes that these virtues come about through the recovery Black queer individuals undergo on after often being rejected from their nuclear family units post “coming out”. Because many Black queer individuals of faith were raised with the binary biases of Christian teachings, and later shunned for their seemingly “sinful” sexual identity, they not only have to develop the creative toughness associated with building a new life for themselves, but that which also results from rebuilding their relationship with God.<sup>12</sup> This

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick S Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York, Seabury Books, 2011), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Thelathia Nikki Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family and Philosophical Imagination* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 2016), 123.

creativity that results from this unfortunately-common happening of having to re-establish a life outside of their nuclear family unit is both strengthening and powerful. Young writes “Inasmuch as the black queer values expressed [the interviews] speak to innovative ways that we have chosen to survive, they also call our attention to the legacy of survival in which blacks and queers have participated overtime.”<sup>13</sup> This weighty claim highlights the sheer benefit of conducting theological scholarship on the intersections of identity. It supports and uplifts the knowledge of struggle and resilience of minoritized individuals in United States society, fostering a greater sense of understanding for allies and activists alike fighting for equal justice and equality.

Young continues, “Our survival, and continued pursuit of survival strategies, resists the potential dehumanizing death that the normative schema serves to our bodies and selves.”<sup>14</sup> In this way, intersectional research and scholarship about Black queer experience is equally essential to the individuals afflicted with the heteronormative bias, rejection, dehumanization, and violence in American society. The opportunity to be fully confronted in holistic personal identities is a remarkable goal to bring about within broader Christianity, for it not only furthers the Christian mission of love and acceptance but instates the necessity to craft more inclusive definitions/concepts, continuing the evolution of Christianity towards greater divinity.

If theology can undergo the process of “queering”, Young states this would “force all theologians and ethicists to name the substantive inaccuracy and moral inadequacy of some of the normative apparatuses operative in theology and ethics.”<sup>15</sup> which would inevitably kick start

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Thelathia Nikki Young, “Queering ‘the Human Situation’”, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 1 (2012), 127.

a reevaluation and evolution towards greater inclusivity and advocacy. Overall, once we begin to consider the implications of Queer theology, we are led to pursue a completely new path/understanding of holiness. In her work *The Queer God*, Marcella Althaus Reid, founder of Indecent Theology (to be discussed next) perfectly summarizes the value of studying queer experience and centering queer theology in all conducting of theology moving forward: “Queer Theology acts as a mirror or as a scene which allows us to search for the Queer who is entombed in us, pointing us to a different praxis of the holy in our lives.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, no matter how an individual identifies sexually, there is merit and reward to centering theology on actual people’s lived realities. Even heterosexual individuals can feel seen and held by the presence of God, simply because of this immanent, inclusive focus of Queer theology.

For white Christians, it is useful to understand the value of creative resistance first and foremost in our own lives. We cannot think that we are unable to engage in a similar path towards self-actualization and spiritual belonging as individuals whose identities are highly intersectional. We can use Young’s positing of creative resistance as a lens to understand the things that other us in society, from living with mental or physical health complications, differing abilities, to experiencing socioeconomic or housing instability. Our creative resistance, rooted in our faith, is crucial to forming our own ways of engaging in resistance on behalf of our brothers and sisters of color. Additionally, by learning about queer theology, white Christians allow themselves to see it is okay to worship a God that is inclusive to all sexualities and genders. Overall, Queer theology shows us that the things that make us othered or unique in our society are the things that bring us closer to meaningful communion with God.

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<sup>16</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 154.

## Indecent Theologizing as a Form of Resistance

Indecent Theology is the theological project that stems from and, in a sense, furthers the message of Queer Theology. It was conceived of by contextual theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid who centers her works in the context of her home, Buenos Aires Argentina. As the name suggests, Indecent Theology is a study and praxis that highlights and dismantles the assumptions of sexuality as something dirty, ungodly, sinful, and indecent. Althaus-Reid defines Indecent Theology as:

A theology which problematises and undresses the mythical layers of multiple oppression, in Latin America, a theology which, finding its point at the crossroads of Liberation Theology and Queer Thinking, ...question[s] the traditional Latin American field of decency and order as it permeates and supports the multiple (ecclesiological, theological, political and amatory) structures in a culture.<sup>17</sup>

While her work is rooted in realities of people in Latin America, the scope and implications of Indecent Theology are highly applicable to the American context, and the lives of Black queer women.

As with Queer Theology, Indecent Theology holds as its foundation the lives, stories, and realities of individuals of faith facing oppressive structures. Althaus-Reid makes the point plainly that any theology focusing on alleviating the oppressive structures facing the poor, also must be a sexual theology. This is due partly to what was touched on before, about sex historically situating itself as one of the main tools of the oppressor, but also with the introduction of sexuality into theological conversations, a theology of economics, family and desires also enters the equation.<sup>18</sup> One of her main arguments in her works on Indecent Theology is a critique of Liberation Theology, as she thinks that this theological movement, through not focusing on

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<sup>17</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

sexuality and desire, has resulted in some populations still being ignored. She gives the example of this “selective process” occurring in Argentina, where Liberation Theology mainly centered around analyzing structures present for the rural poor, ignoring the urban poor altogether.<sup>19</sup> In this way, Indecent Theology seeks to further evolve conversations started by Liberation Theology by bringing out an element of sexual honesty.

Althaus-Reid, in drawing together this approach of Indecent Theology, famously crafts images that are meant to appear vulgar and surprising to readers of theology. The opening image of her work *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions of Sex, Gender and Politics* is of women lemon vendors who like to do theology without using underwear. She writes “Lemon vendors who do not use underwear are indecent. The Argentinian theologian without underwear writes Indecent Theology. They both challenge in different ways the creations of a factual sexual order of things, one that became entangled in an alliance of patriarchy between Europeans and natives.”<sup>20</sup> This image highlights the necessity to return to the individuals themselves who are theologizing, viewing them first and foremost as people existing in and plagued by a greater corrupt social order – whether this is capitalism, colonialism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, etc.

Indecent Theology also highlights how theology historically played a predominant role in the “othering” that took place of the world’s poor and marginalized. She beautifully writes “Over the dead bodies, the bodies of people who suffered and felt in their life to be sometimes intolerable, a theology was written.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, individuals who have historically been othered by theological traditions such as Christianity due to their non-normative identities, have

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 27.

not just been ignored economically and spiritually because of this, but used as offerings for what stands to be immoral in all societies. This is the ultimate dehumanization. It is not to be ignored that Indecent Theology is woven out of a place of anger and resistance, making it the perfect theological tool, in my opinion, for conducting activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In what follows, I outline the major ways of thinking that can be derived from the intersectional insights of Queer and Indecent Theologies to aid the racial justice movement in America.

## **Navigational Lessons for Activism, as Derived from Queer and Indecent Theologies**

### *1. Recognizing the Existence of Grand Narratives and Working to Dismantle Them*

In Althaus-Reid’s work on Indecent Theology, one of her main arguments encompasses what she calls “Grand Narratives”. A Grand Narrative exists in every colonized society and is simply “the surplus of praxis of patriarchal power, the matrix which is constituted by heterosexual thought.”<sup>22</sup> Grand Narratives govern the social order in covert and complex ways. An example of one of these narratives would be that women’s sexuality makes them dirty, immoral, and tainted, leading them to become distrusted and not fit for proper marriage. These narratives could be viewed in some way as what we normally conceive to be the system of societal morality and ethics. However, they are unique in their scope in that they reside and are perpetuated through authoritarian powers of society. So while a Latin American country might have faced new customs and senses of morality at play when colonized by Spain, for example, the Grand Narratives remain the same because they simply changed hands – from one patriarchal

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 13.

force to another. Within the living out of Grand Narratives, there is the consistency that no matter where power lies, it is patriarchal and heterosexual in its oppression.

The only positive of being aware of Grand Narratives comes when we learn how to recognize and act on their existence. Just like we can with ethical and moral platitudes that do not serve humanity well any longer, we can actively work to dismantle and overcome the forces of patriarchal oppression in our lives. This can be carried out, and with the help of Indecent and Queer Theologies is being conducted, beginning with Christianity. This entails beginning to question and pinpoint the existence of unequal systems of power in clergy, dioceses, and church communities.

For the white Christian, this entails conducting the kind of research presented earlier in this chapter. One of the greatest examples of a country succumbing to Grand Narratives is the United States, with its narratives surrounding the sexuality of Black women. Again, it is our responsibility as white people of faith to wrestle with the broad scope of implications this one snippet of a Grand Narrative of power in our society has perpetuated. By first becoming aware of Grand Narrative remnants at work in our own thinking, we evolve to be more primed to call them out in the world, directly challenging them.

## *2. Defining “The Real Theologian”*

As highlighted earlier, Marcella Althaus-Reid is not the traditional image of a theologian. She puts theology to work in the dismantling of sexual, patriarchal oppressive systems through writing in ways that highlight the realities of individuals greatly afflicted by their power. She uplifts what many would consider “vulgar” or “indecent” sexual practices, such as sadomasochism, and argues they are as divinely centered as the most vanilla, mediated, “pure”

sexualities condoned by the church in marriage. This active resistance through theologizing is what she touts to be the work of a “real theologian.” These are theologians willing to be sexually honest and vulnerable with their own selves.

She outlines:

Systematic theologians...are representative of the millions of Christian people who are struggling to remain in their own sexual closets and in their own preferential beds while building their identities without sharing their sexual stories and even condemning them in their writings. They keep pretending that friendship is not and cannot ever be a lustful business, and that the chaotic nature of sexuality does not belong to the sphere of interest of theology – except to condemn it...God cannot be Queered unless theologians have the courage to come out from their homosexual, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, transvestite or (ideal) heterosexual closets.”<sup>23</sup>

Her reference of the desire theologians have exhibited to equate friendship with the sexual in their interpretations of scripture is an example of one of her critiques of Liberationist scholars; one specifically being Rosemary Radford Reuther who argues that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead because he felt great friendship towards him, instead of the argument of Queer scholars that could have been a sexual relationship between Jesus and Lazarus. While no one can truly know what was going on in that story, there is an element of honesty and a willingness to incorporate the sexual, viewing Jesus in his humanness, with the latter interpretation. Honesty is the key for Althaus-Reid in the making of a “real theologian.”

She argues the value of having more “real theologians” out in the world interpreting scripture is that it would allow for “a person reading theology to be able to be interpellated by the text...saying ‘it is me; I recognize myself in this situation.’”<sup>24</sup> Most theologians would support this claim that any theology must speak to the personal realities and experiences of the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 89.

individuals who read them. This is just a further step in bringing about full honesty, and shameless exposure of the wide variety of sexual identities theologians might have to bring about a greater Christian message.

When it comes to the white church, there are so many more ways we could seek connection with one another through a greater willingness to be honest. White Christians should ideally take this honesty to heart, both in their own spiritual lives and in the church hierarchy. It is true that few Christian denominations value this honesty, without judgment or sinful ramifications of expressing one's truth. However, once we examine the ways we can actually become closer to God through what others us specifically, perhaps the mindsets of churches can evolve in our modern time.

### *3. Reading the Bible sexually: Reframing the Virgin Mary and other biblical figures*

Just as many theologians, like Howard Thurman, emphasize the necessity to view Jesus as a man in his humanity, Queer and Indecent Theologies endeavor to do the same with the Virgin Mary. Althaus-Reid remarks that the Virgin Mary as a concept in the Bible is scarcely a woman: "Mary is to start with an idea, a gas-like substance, a myth of a woman without a vagina which discloses in a hilarious way the fact that half of humanity has been constructed around ideas of ghostly simulacras."<sup>25</sup> This is obviously a complexity, as many theologians seek to situate Mary in her humanness, for the purpose of making her relatable.

Althaus-Reid's methodology for "queering" the Virgin Mary and other biblical figures, again centers around this endeavor towards honesty. The process known as "queering" is not just in reference to bringing out the honesty about sexual orientation or gender identity in biblical

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 39.

characters; it more greatly aligns with bringing forth their humanness: “we speak of ‘Queering’ or Indecenting as a process of coming back to the authentic, everyday life experiences described as odd by the ideology – and mythology – makers alike.”<sup>26</sup> She roots her own praxis in doing this with the Virgin Mary in some points outlined by Robert Goss, another theologian seeking a similar humanization of biblical figures. One of Goss’s insights draws forth the reality that many of the biblical characters can be seen as androgynous in their symbolic construction. Another tool Goss outlines that aids in this process of theological queering is viewing what Jesus died for in the realities and lives of those he took company with throughout his life. If we can understand Jesus died for the marginalized peoples, it shows the solidarity he had with all his companions and his mother Mary. He accepted all of them in their lived essences and realities and this is not to be ignored.

For the exact case of Mary, Althaus-Reid posits this:

Indecenting Mary: her virginity is the first thing that must go because poor women are seldom virgins. Theological virginity must go because it encourages hegemonic memories, false memories to be shared in the false environment of heterosexuality, while the real skeletons in the cupboard are excluded from sharing and learning as mature people in community.<sup>27</sup>

Once the virginity concept becomes less of a necessity to the story and more of a symbolic, divine feature of storytelling, we can say that “queering” has occurred. Theology has been made honest and representative of the realities of people that its analysis touches and enlightens.

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<sup>26</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 71.

<sup>27</sup> Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, 75.

#### *4. The Utility of the “Coming Out” Story as a Key Feature in Creative Resistance*

The final tool Queer and Indecent Theologies leave us with in carrying out white Christian engagement in Black Lives Matter advocacy efforts is rooted in the need for showcasing this honesty that both theologies ground themselves within. Althaus-Reid mentions the utility of actively engaging religious communities in the reading and reciting of testimonials. Testimonials have sometimes manifested as triggering tales of conversion after sinful, regretful experiences; stories that can only harbor shame and guilt for even the most devout Christians intently listening in the audience. In Latin America, testimonials are useful tools to Althaus-Reid who views them as powerful declarations of active creative resistance to theological norms. She writes “they are a form of coming out stories but from the experience of denial. People ‘come out’ in testimonials in order...to say that they are not anymore what they are supposed to be... The sexual stories of coming out, to the contrary, give a testimonial with an affirmation of what normativity has denied.”<sup>28</sup> This positive manifestation of testimonials as a form of active resistance against patriarchal, sexual norms of the church is powerful, both for the person making the declaration and the people listening in.

The active resistance and empowerment derived from a testimonial is representative of the creative resistance concept of which Young writes. Within any coming out narrative, there resides the backstory of the things an individual underwent to be able to arrive at a place where they proclaim their non-normative sexual or gender identity with confidence. Through this struggle comes the power and will to push forward embodying a creative resistance. In this way,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 147.

testimonials are a way for Christians to actively support and engage with these intersections, both for themselves and their church community.

From *Queer and Indecent Theologies* as a whole, white Christians confront a path forward that takes its foundation in truth as a tool for overcoming shame, violent stereotypes and harmful theological practice. From Lorde's powerful reclaiming of the sexual and Young's creative resistance to Althaus-Reid's definition of the real theologian, we are faced with the choice of how we wish to proceed. We can remain rooted in Christian practice that situates itself in a perpetual state of othering, completely contrary to the religion of a loving God that pushes us towards an ethic of liberation for Black and brown people in America. Or we can move forward with these liberative theologies in mind that allow us to worship, grow, and actively take up the call to resist systemic racism, taking up the call to join in active allyship with the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has covered the ways stories of struggle and violence are written on Black and brown bodies throughout American history in ways that white Christianity has capitalized upon to assert a dominant norm of oppression. However, it has also outlined the various ways the Christianity at work in the Black community since the days of slavery has sustained the active resistance of movements seeking racial justice and equality.

Thurman's social mysticism led us to consider Jesus in a new light; not as someone who aids the oppressed but is disinherited himself. Through this, we came to know the root of Christianity as a religion of resistance that necessitates social action. From Thurman, I develop a path white Christians can navigate on their own personal journey towards active, nonviolent resistance in the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

The Womanist scholars, through their multidisciplinary and phenomenological approach, illustrate the integral role of the Christian faith in sustaining those facing the utmost oppression in American society: Black women. Through their wisdom, white Christians walk away with a greater understanding of the humanness behind stories of racial violence and murder appearing on our notification screens daily. Womanist storytelling also invites us to consider seemingly "new" ways to envision Jesus that aid in situating the #BlackLivesMatter movement fight in the center of our faith conversations, instead of at the margins.

Finally, Queer and Indecent theologies provide white Christians with the liberative theological framework that is essential in the endeavor to broaden the classical definitions and concepts within Christianity that perpetually contribute to systemic racism and "othering" of marginalized groups. By considering Queer and Indecent theological modes of believing, such as

embracing the “real” theologian, and reading the Bible in a humanistic, sexual way, white Christians confront the challenge of correcting the effects of kyriarchy in their homes, parishes, and communities.

## **A Way Forward**

In an interview in October 2020, Black Lives Matter movement cofounder Alicia Garza remarks on the progress of the movement, since its inception in 2013. “Black Lives Matter has become a household name, a kitchen table term, but we also see Black Lives Matter swimming across demographics; Black Lives Matter now represents what I believe to be a majoritarian value in this country...this movement is now in the muscle memory of this country.”<sup>1</sup> As a white ally for the Black Lives Matter movement, I am heartened and inspired by Garza’s words. The #BlackoutTuesday social media demonstration on June 2, 2020 via Facebook and Instagram amassed incredible white support of over 14.8 million posts of the black square in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. However, there is still much work to be done as trials of police officers responsible for the death of Black men are being broadcast over mainstream white news media.

White engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement remains limited to virtual spaces of simply promotion and allyship with movement aims. It is true that we can continue funding bailout projects for jailed demonstrators, and donating to campaigns contributing to nonprofit, grassroots efforts of activism. We can continue posting, sharing, and spreading information for the movement to increase awareness of racial justice issues. But this work has

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<sup>1</sup> “Black Lives Matter Co-Founder Alicia Garza Explains How the Movement Has Evolved”, *The View*, October 20, 2020, 9:42, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU\\_SQS1OtwU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU_SQS1OtwU).

highlighted a unique duty Christian faith asks us to carry forth. That is, to actively engage in the resistance movement for Black lives, as white bodies of privilege. The path forward in active engagement for white Christians specifically necessitates an understanding of reparations, prudence and fortitude as leading virtues to uplift and embody as we move forward in 2021.

As contemporary theologians Shannon Craigo-Snell and Christopher Doucot outline in *No Innocent Bystanders: Becoming an Ally in the Struggle for Social Justice*, that there is a great misunderstanding at work, even among the most well-meaning white Christians, about the way to move forward once it is clear that racial inequity and violence needs to be remedied. It is characteristic of many white communities to openly denounce racism, yet not see a need to dismantle the systems that brought it about. The scholars reject this and posit a blatant difference between reconciliation and reparations. Reconciliation holds that all we must do to remedy racial oppression is learn to revere diversity and uplift it in our everyday lives. This is first not an actionable step of resistance and second not a sufficient factor that plays any role at all in reducing the oppressive forces that stand against a Black individual in contemporary American society. Instead, reparations are the acts taken to repair the harm done towards people of color in an attempt to “alter the structures in our common life so that the patterns of racism are not continued.”<sup>2</sup> Reparations supply a course of action that begins the comprehensive dismantling of oppressive systems in society.

White folk are familiar with the concept of reparations yet remain quick to feign a perplexing ignorance when it is brought up in the context of Black Lives Matter. Reparations are simply the repayment of what was stolen from marginalized peoples throughout history. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Shannon Craigo-Snell, Christopher J. Doucot, *No Innocent Bystanders: Becoming an Ally in the Struggle for Justice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 67.

case of Black communities in America, their labor as working bodies has been taken from them in the history of slavery that still looms unresolved over our country's history. To resist the necessity of reparations, it is argued, is inherently non-Christian because to cling tightly "to the benefits of white supremacy, rather than aiming for the goal of loving relationship with God and neighbor, is substituting human ideas of the good for Divine promises of abundance."<sup>3</sup> In this way, it is imperative for white Christians to fully realize how allyship is best lived out. It cannot be half-assed through advocating a reconciliation approach but rather must comprehensively and fully advocate for reparations.

A way that reparations is alluded to within discussions of Black Lives Matter has recently revolved around defunding the police. In a study cited by NPR in July 2020, researchers find that 73% of Americans are against the prospect of defunding the police, with 11% of those opposed believing that there should be greater funding of the police. While some white Christians may be on board with the abstract ideal of reparations over reconciliation outlined above, there is adamant resistance of this concept of defunding the police force. When asked about her ideas about the motive to defund the police, Garza stated plainly:

We are clear about what defunding means. In my community of Oakland California, my community has been being defunded for decades now...we are one of the only communities in the country that has a police department just for our school district and yet at the same time the students in my school district have to share books...it's important for us to understand what these systems are and how they function...systems are not about individuals...these systems are designed to function exactly how they function right now.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Black Lives Matter Co-Founder Alicia Garza Explains How the Movement Has Evolved", *The View*, October 20, 2020, 9:42, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU\\_SQS1OtwU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU_SQS1OtwU).

What her words highlight is the way the police are another institution rooted in the racist foundations of this nation and its unjust history. It seems absurd to white people to think that a force that “protects” the general populace should be defunded, but we must realize it is not promoting wellbeing of our communities. The fight for a more equitable, just society is not about individual realities but rooted in the sustainment and health of communities that have historically been subjected to violence, murder, and degradation.

White allies need to be active proponents of *divestment* from an economy of punishment in the effort to invest in communities. A legislative movement of which to be aware in this current historical moment is the proposal of the Breathe Act, presented by the Electoral Justice Project in 2020, and seeking to “divest taxpayer dollars from discriminatory policing and invests in a vision of public safety”<sup>5</sup> that better addresses the needs of communities themselves. Again, remedying oneself to become an ally is worth less than if we can use our privilege to advocate for movements already underway that seek to dismantle the oppressive structures of American society that are the biggest perpetrators of systemic racism.

Recognizing a need to act in greater ways of advocacy than those rooted in just a change of ideology or mindset is what Craigo-Snell and Doucot identify as the skill of prudence. Prudence necessitates having the wisdom to determine “which actions are appropriate in a given time and place” which in turn “encourages allies to discern carefully where the focus of their energies should be”<sup>6</sup>. As laid forth in Chapter Three, the need to ponder where your own sense of embodiment leads you on your path into active engagement is a crucial step for the white

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<sup>5</sup> “The Breathe Act”, M4BL, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://breatheact.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> Craigo-Snell, Doucot, *No Innocent Bystanders: Becoming an Ally in the Struggle for Justice*, 81.

Christian in this journey. Having prudence also uplifts the importance of defining true allyship.

In their book, these scholars define the role of allies as:

...not to teach, enlighten, speak for, or represent those who are oppressed. Instead our primary role is to go back to the spaces we already occupy within dominant cultures and advocate for justice there...<sup>7</sup>

I have found that fostering this sense of prudence in my own life and advocacy journey has allowed me the proper amount of time to sit with my own thoughts and reactions to things I read and learn. Often, white allies have the urge to jump right into solving the issues of racial injustice themselves, without stopping to think that this movement is much larger than any one individual or ideology. If white allies can first begin with themselves, asking the necessary questions about how they have previously shown up (or not) for racial justice (or as Althaus-Reid calls it, embodying “real” theology through one’s own truth) they are then primed to go prompt those same conversations with other white people. Craigo-Snell advocates going first to one’s cousins, one’s own family. Igniting the hard conversations in white spaces, guided with one’s own vulnerability is as helpful as taking to the streets in the early stages of white Christian allyship.

The final quality that is necessary to understand as a white ally to the Black Lives Matter movement is fortitude. This is essentially the willingness to be courageous and stay in the fight. As mentioned before, there were over 14.8 million black square posts in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement during the Blackout Tuesday social media demonstration on Instagram in June 2020. The virtue fortitude calls us to first combat the ways we initially respond to knowledge of oppression as white people. We must resist the urge to spiral into bouts of denial, despair, or defensiveness when confronted with the persistent realities of murders of Black life in

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

our communities and nation. It takes the courage brought by fortitude to have a more level reaction that can acknowledge these corrupt truths and move forward in an active way.

There is a call that is vibrant and awake for the white Christian throughout history, but especially now as Black men and women are asphyxiated by police, shot, beaten, and dehumanized by police in America. The Christian faith provides white people of faith the clear knowledge that to be the embodiment of Jesus Christ is to not only “side” with the oppressed but embody a message of social resistance. I have made you aware of the reverence we must have for Black women, who throughout history were the forces of documentation and sustainment of Black culture. We owe them for keeping the faith alive from the days of slave religion to the current narratives of resistance aggregated through the multidisciplinary womanist canon. It is imperative also that our advocacy be intersectional in scope, broadening the Christian narrative to encompass all of those who are the divine manifestations of honest virtue through their speaking of personal truths - from Black and brown folk, to women, to members of the LGBTQ+ community and all the intersections therein. Through recognizing the innate necessity as Christians to answer the meaningful call to embodied active resistance, guided by the spiritual wisdom of Black brothers and sisters in theology, white people understand that their place has been written in this fight for racial justice from the beginning. It is our duty now with this understanding to spur ourselves into meaningful action.

May peace be upon you in that endeavor.

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