

Black women's faith, black women's flourishing

Womanist theology proclaims a future beyond the strongholds of racism, sexism, and injustice.

by [Eboni Marshall Turman](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue



Worshippers dancing at an outdoor service during a festival in Brooklyn, New York.
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In 1985, while presenting her essay “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness” to a room filled almost entirely with white theologians at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Katie Geneva Cannon fainted. It’s little wonder she was nervous. Hers was the first paper ever presented on womanist theology at the AAR, and it was a daring and dangerous proposition at the time. In the theological academy until the 1980s, as black feminist Akasha Gloria Hull notes,

“all the women were white and all the blacks were men.”

Cannon, however, was brave. Together with four other black women inquirers, she advanced the fundamentals of a new form of discourse and emerged as a matriarch of theological womanism—a theology that affirms the significance of black women’s God-talk, survival, and flourishing for determining the substance of faithful Christian discourse and praxis.

Long before Cannon brought womanist God-talk into the realm of academic discussion, however, it was flourishing in the faithful lives of black Christian women. Womanism was born around black women’s kitchen tables, on front porches, in beauty shops, in women’s clubs, in the varieties of black women’s prayer closets, and in various “women’s spaces” within the black church. In these spaces, as black women came to know the love, mercy, and justice of God for themselves, they forged a theology that boldly affirms that black women’s lives are significant and valuable not only to God but also to the church and the world. In the social, political, and religious realms that so often erased black women’s experiences, black women of faith had the courage to believe and assert, “I am”: I am here, I am fully human, and I am “fearfully and wonderfully” made in the image of God.

Womanist theology grew organically and in many spaces at once. In all of its manifestations, it is deeply grounded in the long, fecund history of black women’s traditions of survival and flourishing, rituals of celebration, and resistance to white racism and patriarchy. Black women’s hope and courage in resisting race-, gender-, and class-based oppression stems from their rootedness in faith—a faith in God that has been passed down through generations of women of African descent throughout the diaspora.

At the heart of this faith is love: an unapologetic self-love in a world that has historically despised black women; love for the Spirit; and a deep love of creation, culture, joy, and laughter. Womanist theology loves out loud. And it loves widely. Womanism is deeply concerned about the well-being of the entire community, male and female. In a womanist garden, every person matters. Womanist theology is aimed at supporting all oppressed communities in the work of liberation while affirming black women’s capacities, wisdom, and independence.

When Cannon gave her courageous, groundbreaking academic talk, she knew this organic, communal, and deeply grounded womanism intimately. She had been living

it her entire life.

In the early 1980s, Cannon was a doctoral student at Union Theological Seminary in New York along with Jacquelyn Grant and Delores S. Williams. Cannon was studying with white feminist Christian ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison. Grant and Williams were students of James Hal Cone, the progenitor of 20th-century black theology. Grant's 1979 essay, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," first examined the invisibility of black women in black theology, arguing that black women cannot "continue to be treated as if they were invisible creatures who are on the outside looking into the . . . theological enterprise."

In addition to their theological studies, Cannon, Grant, and Williams were reading black feminist theory and literature. They were particularly influenced by Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Together in community, these three black women students began to articulate theologically the quandary of black women, adopting Walker's language of womanism. It seemed a fitting framework, since it complemented and accentuated a way of knowing and talking about God that was indigenous to the flesh-and-blood realities of black women in the United States.

Cannon, Grant, and Williams sought to articulate how black women's lived experiences are distinct from those of black men and those of white women. Following Cannon's infamous AAR presentation, in 1986 Grant published "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology with Special Reference to Christology." In 1987 Williams published "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices." This trinity of essays developed the first scholarly assertions of womanist theology.

Cannon, Grant, and Williams understood that a black man who is antiracist can also be committed to patriarchy, just as a white feminist who is antisexist can be staunchly committed to white supremacy. And they knew that the consequences for black women of living with multiple forms of oppression—based on race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability—can be brutal. Echoing Walker's Miss Sofia in *The Color Purple*, a black womanist talks back to this sort of existential rending with a resounding, "Hell no!"

As doctoral students, Cannon, Grant, and Williams found themselves welded between the masculinist erections of black liberation theology and the

overwhelmingly white middle-class vexations of feminist liberation theology, both of which ignored the experiences of poor black women in the United States. But they had inherited the wisdom of countless unlettered but “responsible, in charge, serious” black women who knew the words and worth of prayer.

With Harrison and Cone’s encouragement, Cannon and Grant began to think and speak theologically from the intersection of blackness and womanhood. Their approach was novel, but they weren’t alone in this radical new way of doing theology. As Emilie M. Townes asserts, “all forms of womanist thought in the theological academy” are inherently done in community. In the years following Cannon’s pivotal AAR paper and the womanist essays it provoked, several book-length treatments of womanist theology were published.

Cannon’s *Black Womanist Ethics*, published in 1988, addressed the moral character, traditions, and value of African American women’s communities. The same year, Renita J. Weems, the first black woman ever to earn a Ph.D. in Old Testament, published *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible*, which engaged biblical sisterhood and black women’s healing. The following year, Grant, the first black woman ever to earn a Ph.D. in systematic theology, published *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, wherein she unqualifiedly asserted that the white woman’s Christ is a racist, with no salvific worth for black women.

Womanist theology is “doing the work our souls must have.”

In 1993, Townes published *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*, which pressed womanist theologians and ethicists toward questions of activism by asking what womanist God-talk reveals about black women for community. That same year marked the publication of Williams’s groundbreaking *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, which condemned the patriarchal assumptions of black liberation theology, particularly its emphasis on the significance of Jesus’ suffering and death for the black community. Positioning black women’s suffering against white atonement theories, Williams argued that Jesus’ suffering does not save black women. To venerate the blood of the cross is to glorify surrogacy—the idea that the suffering of one allows for the redemption of many. Because black women have historically been surrogates, to glorify surrogacy is to regard black women’s subjection as sacred.

Black women have stood in the place of others, domestically and otherwise, for centuries. Whether by coercion (as in the role of Mammy) or voluntarily (as the Nanny), black women have suffered because of their status as surrogates. The idea of redemptive suffering that emerges from atonement theory, Williams noted, has not left space for church and society to critique the causes of black women's suffering but has led to deeper pathologizing of black women's lives. To glorify the cross of Jesus (as a redemptive tool) is to glorify suffering. Black women carry enough crosses to know that there is no glory in suffering. Instead Williams emphasized Jesus' "life and ministerial vision," calling followers of Christ into resistance that engenders and buoys black women's survival and quality of life.

Williams honed her arguments about the sin of surrogacy by examining the story of Hagar as told in Genesis 16 and 21. She identified Hagar as an African slave woman who was subject to racial, gender, class, and sexual oppressions. However, Williams noted, Hagar is also a single mother who resists her oppressors and, in the wilderness, names God for herself. This God does not liberate her but does provide her the means to survive in the wilderness.

These characteristics make Hagar a sister to the many black women who find themselves in the wilderness of multiple social, political, and economic jeopardies. They can readily identify with Hagar. They can find hope in her story. Hagar and her sisters in today's world provide bold answers to the question Williams frequently posed when reading scripture: "Whose voice is not present here?"

Womanist theology is a diamond with several facets, which were first illuminated in the work of Cannon (ethics), Grant (theology), Williams (theology), Weems (Bible), and Townes (ethics). It has evolved in some significant ways since its early days, returning to Williams's fundamental hermeneutical question about whose voices are missing—and giving increasingly broader answers. Yet it remains committed to its original orientation: a concern for the black church and community, the privileging of black women's experiences, an intersectional perspective that sees oppression as multidimensional, and a blunt interrogation of doctrine and prior theological claims (as evident in the critical scholarship of Karen Baker-Fletcher and M. Shawn Copeland).

This interrogation includes incisive questions that remain as poignant today as they were when they were first posed. Who is Jesus Christ for black women, and why does that matter? Who is God and what is God doing in the world? Who does God call us

to be as people of faith? What forms of moral wisdom should we seek out? What are the unique contributions of black women's creative agency to communal flourishing?

The answers to these questions remain unsettled, perhaps in part because womanist methodology is inherently expansive. Committed to hearing suppressed voices and incorporating multiple perspectives, womanist theology is at once focused and flexible. One significant shift in womanist theology in recent years has involved broadening the category of "black woman" beyond the social locations of its progenitors. Both *black* and *woman* are now being viewed through wider lenses.

The first years of womanist theology seemed to be dominated by southern black American women's perspectives. However, early on Cannon and Grant began collaborating with the African feminist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye to connect continental and diasporan black women with one another. The goal was to enhance the quality of life of women and girls of African descent worldwide. Conversations between African women and women of African descent in the diaspora (including the United States) have taken on new life in recent years. The Daughters of the African Atlantic Fund under the leadership of womanist ethicist Rosetta E. Ross has hosted biennial consultations on religion and theology since 2012. The newly founded Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership at Union Presbyterian Seminary supports engagement between women of African descent across the world.

Interrogating the social category "black woman" also demands making space for the many varieties of black women's sexualities, gender identities, and family ethics, including the perspectives of black trans women and black femmes. Although queer black women have consistently been leaders in womanist theology, its emphasis on Christian experience—which tends to erase the lives of black queer folks—has limited its ability to engage robustly with heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia.

The scholarship and activist commitments of thinkers like womanist ethicist Jennifer Leath, womanist theologian Pamela D. Lightsey, black queer ethicist Thelathia "Nikki" Young, and sexual ethicist Monique Moultrie represent this critical strand of black women's theoethical discourse that deepens the earlier contributions of theologians like Kelly Brown Douglas. Benaë Beamon, Elyse Ambrose, and Whitney Bond are doctoral students whose black queer ethics and womanist sexual ethics trace their roots to black feminist and womanist foundations even as they gesture toward more expansive theological and ethical imaginations. As womanist

theologians continue to engage broader constructions of the category “black woman,” their questions take on new meanings. Williams’s question “Who is Jesus Christ for black women?” must now be restated as “Who is Jesus Christ for black trans women?” or “Who is God in Christ for black girls kidnapped in Nigeria or sexually assaulted by a Grammy-winning singer in Chicago?”

Several other shifts have helped reshape womanist theology in recent years. One significant change involves the decentering of the black church. Black churches have been a source of strength and empowerment for black women because they have, as womanist ethicist Marcia Y. Riggs has asserted, been places where black women come to know a God of love and justice; places where black women have affirmed, with womanist theologian JoAnne Terrell, that there is “power in the blood.”

Womanist sociologist of religion Cheryl Townsend Gilkes shows, further, that black churches have often been women’s spaces. Through programming like Women’s Day, as well as ministries and auxiliaries like the Women’s Ministry and Mother’s Board, black churches have empowered women to practice their faith, strengthen their Christian discipleship, and support their communities through various types of service.

At the same time, the black church has been overwhelmingly led by black men. Male power and sexism in the church have induced gendered violence against women, often with appeals to the name of God. Many practices contribute to such a culture: the exclusion of women from pastoral leadership and from lay leadership, the tokenizing of women with no power in pastoral and lay leadership, misogynist and homophobic preaching that belittles and demonizes women and LGBTQ persons, sexist preaching that affirms the subordination of women to men, the theological and sexual objectification of women and girls, the labor exploitation of black women volunteers who mobilize and sustain the church (and who, because of gender, could never be compensated pastoral leaders), and the consistent use of male pronouns for God. These types of practices give a sacred aura to women’s suffering and oppression.

In addition, the black church has tended to dismiss the significance of varieties of spiritual experience that exist outside of it. A decentering of the black church in womanist theology opens up space for asserting that not all black women are Christian. In fact, black women’s religious experiences stretch beyond the Abrahamic boundaries of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, encompassing African diasporan and indigenous traditions and practice. As Monica Coleman’s scholarship

indicates, womanist theology must be accountable to the experiences of non-Christian black women too. It must also attend to the theological significance and moral viability of black subaltern sacred spaces and aesthetic practices—like the dance hall, black visual art, and black performance art—that allow space for black women’s spiritual yearning to bloom beyond the sometimes confining structures of institutional religion.

From the matriarchs’ adoption of the word *womanist* in the 1980s, black women’s creative voices have been a crucial component of womanist theological inquiry and imagination. As black women’s bodies were rendered invisible in church and society, so were their words and stories systemically erased from the historical record. Further, as Toni Morrison has pointed out, black women’s lived experiences are often too terrible to talk about or to be passed down through oral tradition. Storytelling—in literature, visual arts, and music—offers a resource into the interiority of black women’s lives, a mechanism for telling “what really happened” in ways that allow distance between the pain and the present moment.

In recent years, womanist theology has amplified its engagement with black women’s cultural sources to include e-platforms, social media, fashion, hip-hop culture, and other forms of pop culture. Attending to the entire imaginative culture that generates communal survival and flourishing for black women, womanists are using new modes of communication. Recently, Melanie Jones and Liz Alexander have asserted “millennial womanism” as a way of “doing womanist work in the age of social media, Black Lives Matter, Say Her Name, trap music, mass incarceration, religious pluralism, [and] a kaleidoscope of gender and sexual identities.” Millennial womanists like Lyvonne “Proverbs” Picou, Danyelle Thomas, Candace Simpson, Onleilove Alston, Candice Benbow, and storæe michele have engaged this work through the creation of sacred e- and aesthetic interventions that “do ministry and advocacy without waiting for traditional institutions” to hire millennial black women.

From its origins to its contemporary form, womanist theology and ethics have always been concerned with black women’s representation in the public square. Townes’s *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* and Douglas’s *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* propel a contemporary conversation about portrayals of black women that began with Williams’s interrogation of the complexities of black womanhood. The tragic images of black women driven by the white imagination—as asexual Mammies, sexually deviant Jezebels, wild and loud Sapphires, and wicked Welfare Queens—continue to dominate in popular culture.

Many womanist ethicists and black feminist religious scholars, including Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Angela D. Sims, Keri Day, and Tamura Lomax, have used a variety of methods to confront this challenge with scholarly rigor. Some have also interpreted the cultural production of popular black women icons like Beyoncé, Solange, Michelle Obama, and Shonda Rhimes as rife with insurgent theological significance that defies the mainstream caricature of black women.

One of the most promising recent developments involves the move toward emphasizing black women's flourishing as a primary and proactive source for the development of constructive womanist theologies and ethics. Black women's flourishing has by no means replaced the significance of black women's suffering in womanist theology. Black women and their children continue to suffer as the poorest of the poor in the world. A new generation of womanist theologians and ethicists like AnneMarie Mingo, Michele Watkins, Amey Adkins-Jones, Oluwatomisin Oredein, and Georgette Ledgister continue to be concerned with the social, political, and economic implications of black women's surrogacy and suffering.

But these black womanist theologians are now also endeavoring to mine the content of black women's survival and thriving—which in some ways points back to the “quality of life” that Williams wrote about in the beginning. This flourishing includes black women's celebration, black women's joy, black women's self-care and “squad care,” and black girl magic, all of which are proactive mechanisms of resistance in a world that continues to despise black women.

This emphasis on flourishing is significant. It means that there is a future for black women beyond the strongholds of racism, sexism, and economic, sexual, and environmental injustice—a future that is proclaimed in the preaching genius of homiletics like Teresa Fry Brown, Lisa L. Thompson, Melva Sampson, Donyelle McCray, and Neichelle Guidry; exegeted in the sacred text by biblical scholars like Gay Byron, Wil Gafney, Kimberly D. Russaw, Shively Smith, Shanell Smith, and Jennifer Kaalund; nurtured in the pastoral theologies and radical pedagogies of thinkers like Phyllis Shepherd, Stephanie Crumpton, Almeda Wright, and LaKisha Lockhart; pronounced in the ecowomanist visions of Melanie L. Harris; and practiced in community by womanist pastors and practitioners like Leslie Callahan, Gina Stewart, Emma Jordan-Simpson, Traci Blackmon, Cynthia Hale, Irie Lynn Sessions, Racquel Gill, Monica Roberts, and Dionne Boissière.

This representative sample of black women's ever-evolving theological terrain reveals an important truth: black women do not have to wait for whites to not be racist and men to not be sexist in order to love their whole selves and community fully and deeply. It shows that womanist theology moves into the future fighting and dancing, recognizing that black women's stories can be told many ways.

Womanist theology has moved the theological conversation beyond the demonic navel-gazing of whiteness and masculinity, always aiming for a more inclusive vision. It has grown in increasingly expansive ways, posing new questions even while its original questions continue to reverberate throughout the theological world. Accompanied and compelled by the Spirit, the story of womanist theology is, as Cannon would often say, the story of black women "doing the work our souls must have." It confirms today what it has asserted from the moment Cannon stood before that white audience at the AAR: black women will "make a way out of no way"—a way of moral wisdom, truth telling, willful virtue, "furious dancing," and deep faith.

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