INTRODUCTION

HERE I AM, SEND ME

The Making of a Catholic, Womanist Theologian

MY MOTHER WAS BORN in the old South, before the civil rights movement, in a small town called St. Elmo, which no longer exists, as it was annexed to the much larger city of Chattanooga, Tennessee.[1] The fifth child, the fourth daughter, she spent her formative years in the segregated world of Jim Crow. To be born black and female in the old South was to be born into a life of struggle, hardship, and limitation. How did they survive, we wonder today? Her greatest shame was that she had to leave school at the age of 12 to work as a domestic to help her family. Despite that early introduction to a life of labor, my mother survived and somehow managed to find a joy in life that bore her up until she passed at the age of seventy-nine.

I often wonder at the loss of intellect and wisdom that was the result of the discrimination against and prejudice toward persons of African descent in the United States, a loss, a hemorrhage really, that continues to the present day as bright, intelligent women and men of African ancestry are denied the right to study, to pursue graduate education, and to work at meaningful jobs that they choose rather than having jobs forced upon them, narrowing and eventually destroying the possibilities that dwelled within them.

My mother taught me to read when I was three. She was one of the most intelligent human beings I have ever known. She was intelligent, not because of formal education, for, as I noted, she had very little. Her intelligence was that of so many black women of her time, including her sisters. It was an intelligence grounded in a wisdom that came from deep within them, born

of their experiences of being black and female in the rural South. From that well, my mother drew forth the strength and spirit to hold on to life's precious moments and to build a world and worldview that nurtured and sustained, challenged and taught the young black women and men coming after her. Like many women unable because of their limited circumstances to live the lives they would choose for themselves, she prepared her daughters and countless others, male and female, for a future she knew nothing about. She and our other sheroes of faith somehow prepared us and provided us with whatever it was that we needed to survive. As Alice Walker noted, these named and nameless black women "dreamed dreams and had visions"[2] of a world unlike that which they themselves lived in. Somehow, they wove a tapestry of strength and protection and constructed shoes made for walking in unknown worlds. They constructed a support system, made of equal parts love, strength, fearlessness, wonder, faith, and hope in the unseen and as yet realized future. Somehow they knew what we needed to exist and persist in the new world aborning, even though they themselves would more than likely never see that world.

I stand today in the shoes my mother made, wrapped from head to toe in that wondrous tapestry that she created that protects but also encourages me to challenge the status quo and keep movin' on up a little higher. These shoes are strong, firm, and supportive. They have enabled me to stand tall on a foundation of faith—in myself, my family, and my God—and to enter into worlds that historically were off-limits to black women. I, and my brothers and sisters in the black community, owe our mothers, our grandmothers, our godmothers and othermothers, our play mothers and aunties, our foremothers, stretching back through the centuries to Africa, a great debt as we attempt in our daily lives to live up to their dreams and our own. They stand, a great cloud of witnesses, sending us forth, urging us forward, naming and claiming us as their own in whom they have great faith.

I am a Catholic womanist theologian. When I make this claim, I do so based on several assumptions. First, that to be a womanist is to be black, that is, of African ancestry.[3] Second, that to name myself Catholic is to call upon two thousand years of African and African American history claiming the Roman Catholic Church as black and African long before the existence of the English, Irish, Polish, Germans, or Italians as Catholic and catholic.[4] Third, I lay claim to myself as a woman, equal in grace and beauty to those of European ancestry, "black *and* beautiful" as the unnamed lover of King Solomon proclaims in her song (Song of Solomon 1:5). I make these claims in the face of centuries of denial of my womanhood, my femininity, my faith, and my race in the United States and its Christian churches.

As a womanist, I am concerned about and committed to the survival of an entire people—male and female, rich and poor, gay, lesbian, and straight, physically and/or mentally challenged, and of every race and ethnicity. I believe that my rights as an African American, as a black woman, are guaranteed only when the rights of all people are guaranteed; that my liberty is restricted when that of another is restricted; that my human dignity and thus my creation by God is denied when that of others is trampled into the dirt for any reason. I believe that no one can be free until all are free.

Part of my struggle is to name and affirm myself and my sisters as women of African descent who have been denied their rightful place in the history of humanity. We speak a new and challenging word, born out of centuries'-long struggles to be free women created in the image and likeness of a loving God, as all women and indeed all of humanity have been created. Our words well forth from centuries of denigration and dehumanization, from the denial of our female persons and our right to control our own bodies, minds, and souls. We speak words of love, of passion, of anger, and of frustration; words that cut but also heal; words that challenge yet also affirm; words that call for new ways of being and seeing in our communities and throughout the world.

I am a Catholic, celibate, female, womanist theologian and attorney; an affirmative action dream to some. That dream, however, can quickly turn nightmarish as I attempt to hurdle the obstacles laid before me and my brothers and sisters who have been schooled to be "better than" but are interpreted by those seeking to obstruct if not overturn our progress as "less than" those with whom we compete in the white world outside the communities that have nurtured and sent us forth. But, as noted above, we did not come unprepared. To be an affirmative action baby, for me and many like myself who insist upon self- rather than "othered" definition, is to wear a black badge of courage that we use to pin up, and hold tightly around us, that protective tapestry woven for us as shield and goad so long ago.

Standing in my mother's shoes has provided me with the courage to look back to where she and so many other black women paved the path I walk today. These shoes allow me to also look forward to a time when I shall pass them on to a daughter not of my own womb but certainly of my own convictions and faith. They are shoes meant for endless walking, for long-distance running, for standing patiently in hope and defiance; they lift me up to heights unexpected and carry me over the traps and snares that beset my path. They are womanist shoes, made by and for strong, centered, courageous, defiant, responsible, faith-filled black women who seek to have a positive impact on the world and people around them. They were my mother's shoes and her

mother's before her, and now they are mine. I wear them with pride as well as awe at the faith and courage of my mother and foremothers who challenged me to dream my own dreams and make them come true though my own efforts but never forgetful of those upon whose shoulders and in whose shoes I now stand.

I am a womanist. Inspired by Alice Walker's defiant definition of a renewed understanding of black womanhood, I, and many others like myself, found in the term *womanist* a home where we could be comfortable and find peace and rest. My understanding of womanist is very simple and relates intimately to my own experiences of living as a black woman in the United States. I define the term theologically, for the first women to take Walker's powerful statement and use it for self-definition were black women seeking to survive the masculine and patriarchal worlds of seminaries, divinity schools, and theologates. Thus, for me, a womanist is a female African American Christian theologian. I use these terms deliberately, not to exclude other women of color or of other religious beliefs nor to narrow or restrict Walker's definition, but simply to recognize the historical development of womanism as well as to be specific in my self-naming, because of my own circumstances (which I will discuss in greater detail below). I honor Walker's definition but have, like many other black women, moved beyond it. Therefore, I deliberately drop her first sentence: a "womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color." I do so because I believe that it is long past time that we of African ancestry in these United States and elsewhere in the African diaspora name and claim ourselves as the unique individuals we are without having to resort to placing color before a term that has already been defined and over-defined. I do this while affirming, at the same time, solidarity with my feminist sisters of whatever race or ethnicity, recognizing that as women we share a great deal in terms of the oppression of sexism and heterosexism. And yet as women of African descent, we have experiences that are uniquely our own, oppressions that sadly our sisters of other races and ethnicities have too often participated in to our detriment.

> Womanist theologians use the "stuff" of women's lives to spin a narrative of their persistent effort to rise above and beyond those persons and situations, which attempt to hold them down. Their sources are social, political, anthropological and, especially, literary, seeing . . . Black women's literary tradition as a "valid source for the central rubrics of the Black woman's odyssey"[5] for it is in her literary writings that she sets forth the documentation of the living out of Black lives in a world confronted daily by racism, sexism, and poverty.[6]

Alice Walker's classic dictionary definition of womanist is both expansive and pointed. The first section reveals that a womanist is grown-up, daring, responsible, and self-reliant. This necessarily negates the historically stereotyped image of black women (and their men) as irresponsible, careless, shiftless, childlike beings needing care by others. It reflects the reality I discussed earlier, of girl children being required to leave school early, giving up cherished dreams in order to help support their families; of young women raising both their children and those of others, as my mother did, in order to supplement the income their husbands brought in. It is a recognition and affirmation of a black womanhood that allowed little time for playing childhood games, for partying, or living out one's dreams. Zora Neale Hurston placed in the mouth of Janie's grandmother the prayer of many black mothers for their daughters: "The nigger woman is the mule of the world. I been praying it will be different for you, Lawd, Lawd."[7]

Growing up in the 1950s and '60s, young women usually began mirroring their mothers at an early age, preparing themselves for love, marriage, and the eventual baby carriage. I did not. At the age of ten, I consciously rejected the idea of marriage, committing myself to a celibate lifestyle, which I did not fully understand, however, until I converted to the Roman Catholic faith. As the second of four girls born to loving parents, but whose father was also an abusive alcoholic, I was the one on whom the responsibilities of protecting and supporting my mother and sisters fell. That commitment is one I have kept to this day. But it pushed me, like my mother, into a life of responsibility at an early age. My way to escape was through books and education, access to which my mother did not have in the South but which, in the more integrated Northeast, became increasingly available to young black women and men. I was determined to find a better way by going to college and further if possible. As in Walker's definition, I was bold, daring, audacious, and outrageous, a woman long before I reached adulthood.

In other words, like my mother before me, I was modeling what it means to be a womanist without consciously knowing it. My first encounter with the term did not come until I returned to graduate school to study theology in 1980, after having practiced law for a number of years. As an attorney, I was familiar with NOW and had supported the Equal Rights Amendment. I had begun to hear of the term *feminist* but did not feel particularly drawn to it. My response was the same as that of a group of black churchwomen to an effort to explain the feminist movement: "There isn't enough fabric in that dress to fit me."[8]

The Language of Womanism

Although I empathized deeply with feminists and their issues, I found myself disconnected, especially in response to their constant assertions that I must be a feminist as I was a woman studying theology. I refused to be stuffed into the boxes others built for me as I had done all of my life, daring to be different in whatever ways I could. There were too many issues in feminism that did not affect me or my black sisters who were trying to find our voices during this time. We wanted to speak a language created from our lives and experiences of humanity and God, not a language others had written. Although I have had my differences (what woman hasn't?) with my black brothers, we have been through too much together as persons of African descent for me to exclude them from my life.[9] Additionally, the problem of overemphasizing the experiences and concerns of white, middle-class women to the exclusion of women of color and working-class women, although more acknowledged by white feminists, still in many ways remains, despite the valiant and persistent efforts of black and other feminists of color to draw attention to issues of race and class within the feminist movement. Sexism is not and cannot be the only concern as we who are black acknowledge our triple and often quadruple oppression in today's world.

Also, the issue of inclusive language, although it sounded a stronger chord of affinity, especially with regard to the over-masculinized language of the Roman Rite of the Catholic liturgy, was not as critical to my understanding of Jesus as Lord and King and God as Father. To me, these were not negative but positive statements. They were and are, quite simply, a recognition and affirmation of Jesus as the one who overcame all obstacles and suffered greatly to do so as my people have done. Jesus' maleness just is not—or should not be—an issue of division in the black community as the man Jesus is seen in so many ways: as brother, lover, friend, helpless child; one who earned his kingship as a bringer of peace and overturner of the oppressive status quo. Language is, indeed, critical, but as a womanist, I see and use it very differently.

I find the work of Dolores Williams, in her seminal articles on womanist theology, as well as in *Sisters in the Wilderness*,[10] very important in this discussion. As the experiences of black women are often radically different from those of other women, especially white women, so too must our language be different. As a critical aspect of her womanist theological methodology, Williams proclaims "a commitment both to reason and to the validity of female imagery and metaphorical language in the construction of theological statements."[11] Calling for the creation of a theological language grounded in both

imagery and reason, one which brings "black women's history, culture, and religious experience into the interpretive circle of Christian theology and into the liturgical life of the Church,"[12] she, thereby, reveals how womanist theological language must and can serve as an instrument for social and theological change in both church and society.[13]

Williams especially questions the language of surrogacy that has been so prevalent in Christian tradition, seeing it as a way of restricting the freedom of women especially and black women in particular.

> Two kinds of social-role surrogacy have negatively affected the lives of African American women and mothers: coerced surrogacy and voluntary surrogacy. Coerced surrogacy, belonging to the antebellum period, was a condition in which people and systems more powerful than black people forced black women to function in roles that ordinarily would have been filled by someone else. . . . Slave women could not exercise the choice of refusing surrogacy roles.
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> After emancipation, the coercion associated with antebellum surrogacy was replaced by social pressures that influenced many black women to continue to fill some surrogacy roles. . . . The difference was that black women, after emancipation, could exercise the choice of refusing the surrogate role, but social pressures often influenced the choices black women made as they adjusted to life in a free world. Thus post-bellum surrogacy can be referred to as voluntary (though pressured) surrogacy.[14]

Her critique of Anselm's doctrine of salvation via atonement is critical in today's world where so many have-nots sacrifice years of their lives and health for the benefit of those who have and constantly want more. How do we move away from this masculine language of subservience and subordination to a liberating language of inclusive humanity? Just as Anselm and others used the language of the sociopolitical thought of their times to render Christian ideas and principles understandable, thought that took for granted a patriarchal worldview with its accompanying hierarchical order, womanist theologians today are empowered to do the same.

> . . . the womanist theologian uses the sociopolitical thought and action of their African-American woman's world to show black women their salvation does not depend upon any form of surrogacy made sacred by traditional and orthodox understandings of Jesus' life and death. Rather their salvation is assured by Jesus' life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive the death of identity caused by their exchange of inherited cultural meanings for a new identity shaped by the

> gospel; ethical world view. This death of identity was also experienced by African women and men brought to America and enslaved. They too relied upon Jesus to help them survive the forging of a new identity. This kind of account of Jesus' salvific value . . . made compatible and understandable by use of African-American women's sociopolitical patterns frees redemption from the cross and frees the cross from the "sacred aura" put around it by existing patriarchal responses to the question of what Jesus' death represents.[15]

Jesus' death was, indeed, liberative for all. His life and death brought renewed life for all, a new vision of life, one Williams declares as ministerial because it is a vision of life that seeks to right relations "between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and tradition) and spirit."[16] This ministerial life is one available to all of humanity, both male and female, because of Jesus' own life of relationship and community. It is incumbent upon women and all who are oppressed—especially black American women, historically the "mules of the world"—to drop that burden and come down from the cross of surrogacy, rejoicing in their long overdue liberation.

> Jesus came for life, to show humans a perfect vision of ministerial relation that humans had very little knowledge of. As Christians, Black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement.[17]

As Williams and other womanist theologians acknowledge, for centuries a life of surrogacy has been the experience of African American women. Womanist theology provides us with a foundation upon which to critique not only the masculinized, self-serving language of Christian theology but its embodiment in the Christian churches themselves, cleansing them of their sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia by creating a language that speaks of life, hope, equality, and love; a language that builds, rather than destroys, communities of affirmation. To do so, however, we must first come to grips with our own selves, recognizing who we are and how the women we are today have come into existence.

Becoming Catholic, Becoming Womanist

Finding myself in a predominately white religious institution, the Roman Catholic Church, after growing up in a historically black religious community, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, was a shock in every

way. Initially, although believing, as I still do, that God for God's own reasons called me into this church, I feared that the words of my younger sister when I first told her of my conversion were true: "You've finally become white!" Thank God, when I moved to Washington, D.C., I encountered "cradle" (born into the faith) black Catholics, who could trace their Catholic heritage back over many generations.

I began to learn a history that, for the most part, was unknown and untaught, the history of persons of African descent in Christianity. I was astounded to learn of the African origins of and influence on Christianity from its earliest beginnings as well as the significant role that Africans played in preserving and passing on the Christian faith in North and East Africa. Like most Christians, I had assumed that African Americans became Christians only in the colonies of North America. It was exhilarating to learn of not just East and North African Christianity but of the Christian and Catholic King Afonso, whose son became the first indigenous Central African bishop. The role that Africans like St. Moses the Black played in establishing monasticism in the Egyptian desert was an additional revelation.

It was less exhilarating, however, to learn of the role that Christianity as a whole, and the Catholic church in particular, had played in beginning and sustaining the African slave trade as well as the institution of black slavery in the Americas. Learning this history and at the same time encountering the liberation theology of James Cone, I began to explore black theology with an eye toward developing a black Catholic perspective. I was excited about the prospect of developing a theology that brought forth the particular experiences of Catholics of African descent but became increasingly perplexed at the absence of the historical experience and voices of black women, Catholic and Protestant, in Cone's and others' early writings. It was at this point that I encountered the term *womanist* in Alice Walker's essay collection *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*.[18] My entire world shifted. As did other black women, I recognized in Walker's definition a voice like my own, which spoke of my own particular experiences as a black woman. Walker's definition fit me! It described my experience and the journey I had been on for most of my life, one of naming and claiming myself as a black woman, boldly, proudly, and loudly. Thus, unlike many of my Protestant sisters, my encounter with both feminism and womanism, as well as with black liberation came at almost the same time as I was beginning my theological studies. I found it necessary, therefore, to make choices based not on intellect alone but, quite honestly, on a gut reaction to what felt right intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. I had to learn to trust my instincts rather than depend

on the assertions of others. As I studied the seminal writings of womanists such as Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Delores Williams and began to meet other womanists at the American Academy of Religion, I began to participate with them in the development and refining of womanism from a theological perspective.

We who claim womanism as a critical aspect of our self-understanding do so from within the context of our own lives. But, at the same time, it is important that we recognize the many shared experiences that have shaped us as black women as well. This is a critical part of defining the term *womanist* for ourselves. Thus, in order to understand my rendering of womanist, you also must know me. That was and is the purpose of the autobiographical pieces interspersed throughout this book. It is also important that you are aware of the context in which I now live and that continues to shape my theologizing: the Roman Catholic Church, a historically predominantly white church that is slowly and rather unwillingly being transformed, in this century, into a church of persons of color, African/African American, Caribbean, Asian, Latino/a.

As a Roman Catholic womanist theologian, I seek to explore the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion in an effort to reveal the role that the Christian religion, especially my own faith, has played in affirming, exploiting, perpetuating, and upholding understandings of the above social constructs in ways that have served to provide not only a language but a pervasive, hegemonic ethos of subordination and oppression of women and persons of color. Grounded in the Neoplatonic dualistic separation of the sacred and secular worlds, such an understanding has enabled the spread of a race-based hierarchical, patriarchal system that supported the enslavement not just of other human beings but of other Christians, the dehumanization of women and persons of color, and a stance that supports rather than challenges the oppression of far too many.[19]

The challenge for me today is to look at these social constructs, including religion itself as it has come to be constituted in the United States, through eyes that have been opened by the recognition of the "other-createdness" from which they emerged. Dualistic systems allow for the emergence of an "either/or" understanding of life, knowledge, morality, and society. It enables the differentiation of human beings into "us and them," into "human and nonhuman," into those we recognize as friends and "others" by whom we feel threatened. It speaks a coldly sterile language of negativity, dualism, separation, subordination, and alienation. New words must be spoken that promote life, love, healing, holism, grace, community, relationship, and hope.

The Wisdom and Strength of Black Catholic Women

An important and as yet mostly untapped resource for Catholic womanist theologians to explore in their efforts to craft a more human-oriented way of being and speaking is to be found in the history of black Catholics in the United States, especially black Catholic women, lay and religious. Religious women laid the foundations of the black Catholic community, establishing schools, orphanages, and old-age homes in the midst of the slave-holding South. Mother Elizabeth Lange, founder of the oldest black religious order, the Oblates of Providence (Baltimore, Maryland, 1829), and Mother Henriette de Lille, founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family (New Orleans, 1851), refused to allow others, especially white men, to define or constrict their womanhood.[20] Denied entry into white religious orders, they founded their own in the face of severe opposition by those of their faith who could not imagine a black woman moral enough to be a religious sister. Unable to wear their habits in public for fear of being spit upon and stoned, these black women, few in number but strong in faith, established institutions that persist to this day.

> In a time when black people were accorded little or no respect or esteem, in a time when black women were degraded by slaveholders or abused by white employers, in a society where black women were considered to be weak in morality, black sisters were a counter sign and a proof that the Black Catholic community was rooted in faith and devotion, for vocations arise from a faith-filled people. Lest it be forgotten, the two black sisterhoods were not European transplants, they were very much American in origin.[21]

Faith in God and in their community of shared faith and oppression gave hope to black Catholics, both free and slave, and enabled them to persevere against daunting obstacles that threatened not simply their identity but their very lives.

African American Catholic women's wisdom emerges from an experience of triple (and more) oppression. Denied the dignity of womanhood; condemned for their skin color, whether too dark or too light; and often imprisoned by miseducation, demeaning and meaningless work, and a denial of their very humanity, they yet managed to forge a spirituality of hope and survival that has sustained them for centuries. They dreamed dreams and had visions, imagining a time and place when the pain and indignity of their lives would be transcended, not in some far-off heaven but right here in the future of their children and their children's children. Somehow our foremothers persisted in their faith. They made rosaries out of beads and knotted string and

learned scripture by rote memory. They resisted as best they could anything and anyone who attempted to keep them from living their faith daily.

Once so-called freedom came, they struggled, despite the callous disregard of their fellow Catholics, to remain faithful. When their children were forbidden entry into diocesan schools, when they were required to sit in upper galleries and back pews and to wait until last to partake of the sacraments, they did not suffer these indignities quietly but often walked out and with their meager resources built their own schools, holding church suppers and other events to raise the funds.[22] Somehow they wove a tapestry of love, faith, and hope, which they wrapped around any and all who came into their lives.

African American Catholic women, my sisters, as the bearers of many burdens, chosen and unchosen, have also been the bearers of culture as well. It is as the givers of life and the teachers of the future that they have suckled their children with a passionate anger and courage, which sustained the hope that always dwelled within them, despite and through it all.

It is the women who, a part of this church since its earliest beginnings, have influenced it as much as they were influenced. Although the first known convert to Christianity, the Ethiopian eunuch, was male, he was joined by countless numbers of women in Africa and the Middle East, some of whom had followed Jesus and supported his ministry, others of whom—like Sts. Perpetua and Felicity—followed him to their own deaths as martyrs for the faith. In the Americas, women of African descent arrived along with the Spanish and French explorers and the English Jesuits. They were an integral part of establishing the church in what is now the United States for, as I said earlier, they were the bearers of culture. It was and has always been the women who passed down the songs, stories, and prayers of their people to the children and their children's children, preparing them for the future.

Black Catholic women continue to do this today in the face of many obstacles. We see today communities and families that are crumbling due to the assaults made on them by an increasingly secular and individualistic society. We are in danger of losing the future because too many either have forgotten or never knew the past. The links in the chain of memory have become worn and some have even snapped apart, endangering the lives of our children and our children's children. We who are black Catholic women, triply if not quadrupley oppressed by reason of race, gender, class, and religious faith, know that many of our black Protestant brothers and sisters do not understand (due to their own lack of historical memory) or respect (because of their ignorance of our faith) our persistence in "defending the faith that is ours" (1 Pet 1). They see the Catholic church as a white institution that is

racist, sexist, and classist, which sadly too often it is, but they fail to see the shortcomings of their own churches, which often mirror ours in many ways, especially with regard to the treatment of women.

Many of us have been called traitors to the black community as well as to black Christianity by colleagues and friends because we either chose to become Roman Catholic or were born Catholic and have no desire to leave because of our foundation in the Catholic church going back countless generations. This ignorance can only be addressed by acknowledging our own lack of knowledge of the two-thousand-plus-year history of African people in Christianity and therefore in the Roman Catholic Church. Ignorance is unacceptable for any of us. We must together reclaim the rich history of black Christianity in all of its diversity—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—refusing to accept excuses just as we refuse to accept ignorance of black history in any form as an excuse for those of other races and/or ethnicities to ignore our presence and contributions. This means we must also address the profound ignorance within our own churches regarding this history, which has been, consciously or not, overlooked, dismissed as of no consequence, or somehow whitewashed.

Black, Catholic women, as all black women, are still stereotyped in many ways, both in our church and in dominant society. Seen as sexually promiscuous and poor or as dominating male castrators, their issues and concerns are often overlooked or lumped together as social justice issues that do not affect the church as a whole. This is not only a lie but an insult to our very humanity as creations of a loving God. If the words of Genesis are true, then all of humanity reflects God in God's great diversity. Added to that is the growing awareness, through DNA and other genetic studies, that the first woman from whom all of humanity descended was a black woman, the true first Eve.[23] Black Catholic women can bring to the forefront of womanist dialogue images of black women that contradict the dominant perspective—women such as Hagar, abused and misused by both her master and her mistress, yet taught by God how to survive in the wilderness as African American women had to do for centuries in this land. Hagar models strength, endurance, and the passionate love of our foremothers for those entrusted to their care. They did what they had to do not simply to survive but to ensure that their communities would also survive and be prepared for whatever future might come.

And let us not forget the two Marys: one the mother of God, who had the courage and audacity to say *yes* to God that shattered all of human history, proclaiming in her magnificent song her awareness of her cooperation with God in an act that would change us all,[24] and Mary Magdalene, the

Apostle to the Apostles, as she was honored in the early church, the first to see the risen Lord rather than the fallen and lowly woman whom Jesus had to save from stoning as she has been incorrectly described for far too long.

As a Catholic womanist, I insist that our voices never again be silenced or marginalized. We must continue to speak out about the declining numbers of women seeking vocations to the religious life while those in religious communities are growing older. We must question why the tipping number for black women in predominately white orders is still in the twenty-first century usually one or two—and that only after great sacrifice on the part of the women of color. We must insist that the church and its agencies and institutions open themselves to different ways of being church, of being a religious, of being Catholic. No longer can we affirm a uniform model that is not universal, but Eurocentric, and that strips us of our culture and traditions, leaving us exposed and violated. We must return to our roots, following in the footsteps of Mother Henriette and Mother Elizabeth, who did not allow anyone to define or limit them.

Those women who seek to be leaders in the church but who follow a different vocational path from the religious life must also be encouraged and supported by the church and its entire people, especially those within the black community. For if we are to remain sane in our years of study and work within an institution still predominantly white in its leadership even though increasingly unrepresentative of the people within it, we need the love and support of all of our black sisters and brothers. There is too much that still needs to be done for us to divide along religious and lay, degree and nondegree, Protestant and Catholic lines. Womanism gave me my voice and has done so for many black women who found themselves enmeshed in the trials and tribulations of professional careers, whether religious or secular.

The Struggle Is Ongoing

Patricia Hill Collins speaks of black women, especially those now in professional fields, as "outsiders-within."[25] Our positions as women with degrees at the master's or doctoral level, especially in institutions of higher learning, provide us with an "insider's" status, enabling us to participate in academic discourse and have an impact on others in those institutions. At the same time, however, because of our personal situations as black women, we are also "outsiders" whose views are not always welcomed and whose input is often trivialized. We find ourselves straddling two worlds, that of academia or other professions, and that of the black community with its often very

different perspective. To truly belong to one, it is assumed that we must give up our existence in the other, as they are not complementary. These assumptions, however, are cynically grounded too often in issues of power, control, and manipulation, yet again, of black women's reality.

> The exclusion of Black women's ideas from mainstream academic discourse and the curious placement of African-American women intellectuals in both feminist and Black social and political thought has meant that Black women intellectuals have remained outsiders within all three communities. The assumptions on which full group membership is based . . . whiteness for feminist thought, maleness for Black social and political thought, and the combination for mainstream scholarship . . . all negate a Black female reality. Prevented from becoming full insiders in any of these areas of inquiry, Black women remain outsiders within, individuals whose marginality provides a distinctive angle of vision on the theories put forth by such intellectual communities.[26]

Hill Collins's words describe my experiences as a Catholic, womanist theologian. I find myself straddling several often competitive worlds, attempting to juggle time, participation, input, and presence among them. The black community is one of these worlds—one that is, as noted above, still heavily and often restrictively Protestant in its religious outlook and male in its leadership. In this community, my status as a Roman Catholic as well as my gender often make me suspect, with my motives and concerns questioned. Issues that I and other black Catholics find significant are often derided or disparaged as being irrelevant either to the academic world because they concern the black community or to the larger black community because they emerge from a perspective outside of Protestant Christianity. Thus, my participation in either community is denied and/or restricted.[27] The fact that I am also single and celibate is often a point of contention as well, strangely enough, for both men and women. Another world is that of the university and its various scholarly organizations. Here the courses that I teach and the areas in which I do research, the communities of the poor and marginalized persons of color in the United States, are often looked down upon as not truly scholarly topics or worthy of academic discussion, perhaps because they deal with issues that are threatening to the status quo. At the same time the work that I do in the community is often rejected as pastoral rather than scholarly and a waste of time regardless of what benefit they may bring to others. Articles and scholarly texts that dwell in lofty climes are seen as having greater weight than efforts to heal the spirit of an abused woman or to help a parish tearing

itself apart because of racial strife. Yet, here again, I have found that being a black Catholic also makes me suspect as many seem incapable of conceiving of blacks in any capacity except Protestant. Finally, as a lay black woman, I am suspect in the Roman Catholic Church, where women who speak out and challenge the church and its teachings are condemned as radical and often as heretics, and where persons of color have been and continue to be marginalized, never fully accepted as truly and authentically Catholic.

Attempting to survive in these often contradictory worlds is a constant and often enervating challenge. I often feel as if I'm being torn in several directions, required to make choices that have severe consequences for my self-identity and for the work that I am trying to do. Throughout my experience as an "outsider-within," whether in the fields of law or theology or in nonacademic settings, I have come to realize once again the critical significance of language. It can be used to include and to exclude, to invite and to bar, to uplift and to put down, to develop positive and negative understandings of humanity in its diversity.

In my work as a Catholic womanist theologian, I seek to remove the masks that cover up the inherent illegitimacy of the existing forms of society and their use of language to exclude and restrict.[28] I do this by revealing other, more holistic, worldviews that serve to bring about unity rather than division, harmony rather than discord. I have come to realize that to authenticate myself and legitimate the work that I do, I must also remove the masks that have covered the many worlds in which I find myself, presenting them to public view and developing a unified challenge to them and to those worlds with which they appear to conflict. The words "appear to conflict" are used deliberately, for the reality is that they do not necessarily conflict but are made to appear so by those who are, in some way, threatened by them.

This means claiming the legitimacy of my being as a black, female professional and working to develop a critical understanding of both past and present to participate in building a more holistic future, one in which persons like myself will no longer be required to deny the totality of their being to "belong," but can embrace and be embraced for what they bring to intellectual and personal discourse in both the public and private arenas. In so doing, I, in company with other womanists, seek to speak in ways that are understandable to these communities—with a preference toward black and other marginalized communities—recognizing that we may as a result be accused of being too "popular," a term often used to denigrate the language of persons of color, women, and those lacking a string of letters after their names. As Patricia Hill Collins writes:

> My choice of language . . . typifies my efforts to theorize differently. A choice of language is inherently a political choice. Writing . . . in a language that appears too "simple" might give grounds for criticism to those individuals who think that the complex ideas of social theory (and theology-DLH) must be abstract, difficult, and inaccessible. Populist ideas become devalued exactly because they are popular. This position reflects a growing disdain for anything deemed "public" and for the general public itself. . . .[29]

The black presence in Christianity, especially in the Catholic church, serves as a subversive memory, one that contradicts the assumed reality and presents a paradoxical perspective. Black women are a critical part of that memory, for without us, there would be no black Christian or other communities today. We bring forth life, not solely from our wombs; we nurture it; we prepare it; we teach that life what it needs to know to survive and thrive; and then we set it free.

A Womanist Challenge

As woman of faith and courage, we must live our lives, both publicly and privately, in the same subversive manner that Jesus Christ led his. For our God is a God who takes sides, on the side of those most in need, to bring "the mighty from their thrones and exalt those of low degree" (Luke 2:52-53) as Mary proclaims in her song. Our God is a God who "preached good news to the poor" and released those in chains, whether physical or those of the mind and spirit. To subvert means to turn reality upside down, to look at it in another light, to confound those who believe they are the only source of truth by presenting another, more far-reaching and earth-shattering truth. Sojourner Truth knew well the meaning of a subversive faith, noting that "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone; together women ought to be able to turn it right side up again."[30]

As women of faith, we must become "extremists in love," as Martin Luther King Jr. urged, following in the footsteps of Jesus and the long line of saints and martyrs who followed after him; following also that long line of strong, proud, and loving black women who were able to "run on for a long time." Only in so doing will we recapture the spirit of the early church, which was "not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society."[31]

We must do likewise: drink deeply of the word of God and set out to right the wrongs that have been inflicted upon so many in our nation and in our church for all of the wrong reasons. This is the stance taken by strong, courageous, angry, hope-filled African American women down through the ages, who allowed no one to tell them who they were capable of being or becoming.

We must continue to be the "voices that speak when others fear to." As a people, as a nation within a nation, African Americans were never truly meant "to survive."[32] But that has never stopped us before and we cannot allow it to now. Black women's existence is "a continuum, an invisible thread drawn through the women's stories to women readers and the men who will listen."[33]

It is long past time for black women to reclaim their voices, voices somehow silenced in a "culture that depended on her heroism for its survival."[34] That voice has been silenced because historically women lacked the power, as the disinherited, to recognize and claim their own power. Womanists, in and out of the church, are making the claim that we have the right and the responsibility in today's world to name our own experience and the experiences of our people, whatever they may be.

We have been nurtured and sustained by a spirituality that paved our way and softened the rough places just enough for us to continue. For, as an African people, we recognized the importance of and maintained our ties with the spiritual. We must return to the strengths that reside deep within us and use them to challenge the status quo. It is time for us to walk out yet again on faith and proclaim our hope by having the courage to release a cleansing anger, which transforms not only ourselves but our communities, our society, and even our world.

Black women remain the heartbeat of our African American communities, a status for which we are both exalted and maligned. We must use the strength of that status to be, once again, the bearers of culture and the birthers of the future to confound the minds of those who look down upon us and to "critique all human domination in light of black women's experience"[35] wherever that domination exists—in our homes, in our workplaces, in our communities, in our places of worship, and in our society as a whole.

Black women, in company with their black men and their black children, as family, have reason to hope. Ours is a hope firmly grounded in an incandescent love of self and community, a love threatened by today's "fatal attractions" but that persists regardless. We must pass on that love to those around us, teaching them how to love as well, across racial, sexual, ethnic, and class

lines. We must love ourselves into life once again, thereby overcoming the miasma of defeat and self-hate that pervades our once-thriving communities. "We must love one another or die."[36] We must be servants, not leaders, seeking justice, not personal fame or fortune.

In spiritual solidarity, womanists have the potential to create a community of faith that acts collectively to transform our world. When we heal the woundedness inside us, we make ourselves ready to enter more fully into community. We can experience the totality of life because we have become fully life-affirming. Like our ancestors using our powers to the fullest, we share the secrets of healing and come to know sustained joy. We must take a stand against the principalities and powers of our day. It must be revolutionary—that is, going against the grain, against the complacency, against the status quo that fosters injustice; it must be nonviolent; and it must embody love.

Black women, as their people's bearers of culture, have, historically, been the forgers of new ways of being and speaking in the world. They recognize with Collins that "privatizing and hoarding ideas upholds inequality. Sharing ideas through translation and teaching supports democracy."[37] It is our task today to speak life into the future, a future inclusive and representative of all. We do so by working to redefine what it means to be male and female in language that complements the actual experiences of those engaged in living out maleness and femaleness, in ways inclusive of both heterosexual and homosexual understandings. In our stories (history), songs (culture), prayers (spirituality), and God-talk (theologizing), black women speak life into being—not a stunted growth unable to flourish and condemned to premature death, nor one confined to dry, dusty tomes read and understood by only a privileged few, but a life that is fruitful and representative of a diversity created not by human hands but by divine ones.

Today we who name ourselves womanists do so not in opposition to others, for they must define themselves, but in creation seeking to "make community" wherever we find ourselves. We define ourselves not against but in solidarity with, affirming that new ways of self-definition must emerge, not as hand-me-downs or castoffs of others' self-understanding but created out of the fabric of our own lives. In so doing, we are creating a new language of liberation that is open to any and all that are willing to speak plainly without assuming their language will give them power and/or authority over another. As womanists, our challenge is to gather the myriad threads of the richly diverse black community and breath into it renewed life, which can serve as a model of life for our world. That model is centered on the co-createdness by God of all, and thus the human dignity of all, regardless of efforts to

separate. All who are oppressed share in solidarity with each other, a solidarity that should not be laid aside for individual desires or "battles." The struggle is communal, not individual, and can be won only if experiences are shared, stories are told, songs are sung, histories are reclaimed and restored, a new language emerges that speaks words of peace and unity, that recalls both the pain and the joy of our different heritages and leads us into a brand new day.