

Introduction: Ain't I a Womanist Too?

Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought

Monica A. Coleman

But what's all dis here talkin' bout? Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages and lifted ober mud puddles, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody eber help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles or gibs me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have bourne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?!

In her now famous 1851 speech at the Akron, Ohio women's rights gathering, Sojourner Truth critiqued the default understanding of womanhood with her poignant question, "And ain't I a woman?" Sojourner Truth noted the ways that the work and lives of enslaved black women departed from the Victorian standards of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity—more commonly referred to as the "cult of true womanhood." Having different experiences and perspectives from white middle- and upper-class women did not negate Truth's womanhood. Rather, Truth calls for a redefinition, or more aptly, an *expansion*,

of what it means to be a woman. This refrain has served as a touchstone, first for black women, and eventually for women of all backgrounds, to ensure that no woman, no matter how different her experiences, was left oppressed.

Likewise, there is a third wave of womanist religious thought that asks a similar question, “Ain’t I a womanist too?” In so doing, this movement redefines and extends, from within and without, what it means to place black women’s religious experiences at the center of theological activity and religious reflection. This introduction will address womanism in general, and issues of identity politics. It will discuss how third wave womanism dovetails with third wave feminism and will give some markers for what constitutes third wave womanist religious thought. The final section will note how the essays in this volume variously reflect third wave womanist religious thought.

HISTORY OF “WOMANIST” AND “WOMANISM”

ALICE WALKER

Within religious scholarship, Alice Walker’s description of “womanist” is often invoked as a definition, at the most, or as poetic inspiration, at the least, for the religious reflection by and about black women. Alice Walker initially uses the term “womanist” in her 1979 short story, “Coming Apart.” Almost parenthetically, she writes, “The wife has never considered herself a feminist—though she is, of course, a ‘womanist.’ A ‘womanist’ is a feminist, only more common.”² Walker gives greater explanation in her 1981 article, “Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson.” Ruminating on the writings of the nineteenth-century black female Shaker preacher, Rebecca Jackson, Walker reflects on Jean McMahan Humez’s editing of Jackson’s work where Humez refers to Jackson’s decision to live with a close woman friend as a relationship that, in modern times, would have been referred to as openly lesbian. Walker rejects Humez’s naming for many reasons with these concluding remarks:

The word “lesbian” may not, in any case, be suitable (or comfortable) for black women, who surely would have begun their woman-bonding earlier than Sappho’s residency on the Isle of Lesbos. Indeed, I can imagine black women who love women (sexually or not) hardly thinking of what Greeks were doing; but instead, referring to themselves as “whole” women, from “wholly” or “holy.” Or as “round” women—women who love other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people (and this would go back very far), for their fathers, brothers and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males. My own term for such women would be “womanist.” At any rate, the word they chose would have to be both

spiritual and concrete and it would have to be organic, characteristic, not simply applied.³

There are hints to where Walker will go with the term, “womanist.” Community will be important and the term will be spiritual and concrete, organic and characteristic. Walker continues to frame the term “womanist” in contradistinction to the separatist trends within the white feminism of the time.

We see Walker’s fullest discussion of “womanist” in the prologue to her 1983 collection of prose, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Here she writes of womanist, in definition format, in four parts. For the sake of space, I will abbreviate them:

1. From *womanish* (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown-up. Being grown-up. Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.
2. Also: a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universal. 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 to lavender.⁴

Within religious scholarship, Walker’s articulation has held the most sway. There are at least two significant challenges associated with Walker’s understanding of womanism, and its use in religious studies. The first challenge is that Walker’s “definition” is not really a definition. It is poetic in nature, which makes it attractive. It resonates. It has staying power. You want to read it aloud. And yet, as Layli Phillips writes in “Womanism: On Its Own,” it is “theoretically slippery and frustrating.”⁵ Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that the “definition” is both historical and visionary, and that it represents conflicting political ideologies of nationalism, pluralism, integrationism/assimilationism.⁶ Even Floyd-Thomas notes that Walker coined the term “womanist,” but “*womanism* became a movement [within black women’s religious scholarship] when black women scholars of religion used

their *logos*” to unite theological reflection with social transformation.⁷ Within religious scholarship, few womanist thinkers incorporate the breadth of Walker’s writings and activism into their reflection. Karen Baker-Fletcher,⁸ Melanie Harris,⁹ and Arisika Razak¹⁰ are notable exceptions, and they do this in quite different ways. The notable point is that Walker’s definition has served as an important starting point—and point of departure—for reflection on black women’s religious lives. However, its poetic nature requires significant exposition, explanation, and construction on the part of any who invoke the term.¹¹

The second challenge that womanist religious scholars face when relying on Walker’s writings on womanism is the neglect—and near erasure from the scholarship—of the two other significant progenitors of the term: Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, whose perspective came to be known as African womanism, and Clenora Hudson-Weems’s articulation of the term, which calls itself *Africana womanism*.

CHIKWENYE OGUNYEMI

First publishing on “womanism” in 1985, Ogunyemi works with African diasporan literature to articulate the differences she sees among white feminist, black feminist, and womanist writings. For Ogunyemi, an African womanist is best known by the fact that she is conscious of more than issues of sex and gender. Rather, a womanist “must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy.”¹² Ogunyemi defines her concept of womanism even more explicitly as a philosophy that “celebrates black roots [and] the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom [and] concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks.”¹³ She notes the need to focus on an ethics of survival—a principle that would become, through quite different routes, an important feature of womanist theology. She also highlights the complexity of sexual and gendered relations by arguing that “matrilineal and polygynous societies in Africa are dynamic sources for the womanist novel.”¹⁴

CLENORA HUDSON-WEEMS

Clenora Hudson-Weems’s description of *Africana womanism* draws explicitly from Sojourner Truth’s famous speech, while being rooted firmly in a pan-African nationalist politic. In her 1993 essay, “*Africana Womanism*,” Hudson-Weems states that her use of the term “womanism” recalls Sojourner Truth’s

“Ain’t I a Woman” speech “in which [Truth] battles with the dominant alienating forces in her life as a struggling Africana woman, questioning the accepted idea of womanhood.”¹⁵ Hudson-Weems describes Africana womanism as “an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women.”¹⁶ In her 1989 writings, unlike Walker and Ogunyemi, Hudson-Weems establishes priorities in Africana womanism, stating, “Africana people must eliminate racist influences in their lives first, with the realization that they can neither afford nor tolerate any form of female subjugation.”¹⁷ Hudson-Weems sees sexism as a secondary problem that arises out of racism and classism. She finds inspiration from Sojourner Truth, arguing that “before Sojourner could hope to address gender problems, she had to first overcome discrimination from her White audience. Clearly, gender was not her primary concern.”¹⁸

Hudson-Weems is interested in the impact of Africana womanism within the field of Africana studies and Africana women’s studies. She believes that Africana men and Africana women are and should be allies. Spirituality plays a smaller role in Hudson-Weems than in Ogunyemi’s and Walker’s expressions, and in another interesting departure from Walker, Hudson-Weems rejects homosexuality outright.

NAMING/IDENTITY POLITICS

These early articulations of “womanist” and “womanism” are joined in their desire to differentiate themselves from a largely white feminist movement, as well as from those who identify as black feminists. At the risk of being reductionist, the critiques can be summarized in the following ways: feminism is often critiqued for being racist and classist with an implied “white and middle-class” positionality in all its activities. Black feminism is critiqued for having a singular focus or privileging gender issues, within the multiple oppressions that black women experience. Both “white” feminism and black feminism are charged as being separatist from men. Some womanists also critique and resist feminism’s association with same-gender-loving women. I think this is a decent summary of the critiques, although like Beverly Guy-Sheftall, I think that many of these critiques represent mischaracterizations of white feminism and black feminism—even at the times that they were made.¹⁹

Feminism, black feminism, and womanism have all evolved significantly since the 1980s. Many of the critiques have been addressed in the growth and diversification of each movement. Nevertheless, Patricia Hill Collins notes

that the terms black feminism and womanism connote different academic and political agendas. Collins is correct when she reminds readers that “the womanist/black feminist debate occurs primarily among relatively privileged black women.”²⁰ Indeed, this navel-gazing over names and nomenclature becomes dizzying. Here’s what I think matters:

What seems central to these conversations is that “womanism” signifies a kind of self-naming. Alice Walker indicates that she chose the word “womanist” (over “black feminist”) because there “was more room in it for changes,” and it was “more reflective of black women’s culture, especially Southern culture.”²¹ She liked “the feel, the fit, the sound” of the word.²² Likewise, Floyd-Thomas connects womanism with Sojourner Truth around the issue of naming: “More than a century and a half after Isabella Baumfree changed her name to Sojourner Truth, a small cadre of Black female scholars of religion claimed a similar power of naming and called themselves womanists.”²³ In fact, Phillips reminds us that womanism “named something that had been in existence for some time, functioning below the academic and activist radar and outside dominant histories of consciousness.”²⁴ Those who adopt and adapt the nomenclature of “womanist” and “womanism” are making a particular statement about how they want to be referenced and with whom and what they want to be associated. And as corollary, those with whom they do not wish to be associated.

So names matter. The words we use, the names we call ourselves, or are called by others, matter. And this naming matters. Some scholars are prepared to establish the criteria by which they are willing to wrangle over names. In “Is a Womanist a Black Feminist?” self-described black feminist religious ethicist Traci West states that “specifying the boundaries between feminism and womanism in [her] work is of little significance to [her], unless it furthers some form of woman-affirming social shift toward a more just and compassionate world, and gives special attention to those persons who are victimized by violence [. . . especially] wives, prostitutes, lesbians, gay men and transgendered persons.”²⁵ In her essay, “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond,” Patricia Hill Collins concludes that the work we do is more important than our naming. She believes we need to shift the emphasis from “black women’s oppression to how institutionalized racism operates in gender-specific ways . . . and how gender oppression works in tandem with racial oppression.”²⁶ I most appreciate Phillips’s view. She states: “Self-labeling is a psychologically and politically valuable process, yet labels and identities are socially negotiated through dialogue. People may or may not agree about how to name a thing, but the process of negotiating the label is healthy and

inevitable.”²⁷ Thus conversations about this naming are relevant because of what’s at stake.

The first thing at stake is black women’s ability to name themselves. In the “Gifts of Power” article, Alice Walker asserts that choosing the name “womanist” is connected to a sense of freedom. She writes, “I simply feel that naming our own experience after our own fashion (as well as rejecting whatever does not seem to suit it) is the least we can do—and in this society may be *our only tangible sign of personal freedom*” (italics mine). In this sense, the politics of identity are not just about politics, but they are about identity. I believe this is true of all people, but it can be particularly relevant to those individuals and communities who are so often named by other people in ways in which they would not name themselves. In the movie version of Alex Haley’s *Roots*, the slave master tries to tell the protagonist that his slave name is “Tobey,” while the protagonist insists that his name is “Kunta Kinte.” The viewers witness a brutal scene as the slave master physically and publicly whips Kunta Kinte into submission until he responds to the name, “Tobey.” What I’m trying to say is that naming is an important step in reducing a subject to an object, and self-naming is a critical step in the move back to one’s own subjectivity.²⁸

The second issue at stake in womanist naming is power. In my 2006 roundtable article, “Must I Be Womanist?” I was trying to raise *this* question of identity politics. Why is it that some scholars and activists refer to themselves as black feminist, while others prefer womanist?²⁹ What is the difference? And, more importantly, what do we do when a title designed to give black women the space to name themselves is imposed upon activists and scholars from without, as Traci West describes so poignantly in her essay “Is a Womanist a Black Feminist?”³⁰ I am not referring to the ways in which some might ascribe the label “womanist” or “feminist” to historical personages who did not have access to such naming, and thus did not name themselves this way. Rather, there are individuals and institutions in the academy, religious leadership, and publishing that declare who, what, and how black women pursue and name their work, holding them by the golden handcuffs of employment, tenure, publication, and access to leadership and community. When the words designed to promote personal freedom become bars to cage in and restrain, we need to have a conversation about the viability and usage of those words.

Likewise, black women are sometimes the ones with the power. Collins deftly reiterates that “talk of centers and margins, even the process of coining to voice itself, that does not simultaneously address issues of power leaves masses of black women doing the dry cleaning, cooking the fast food, and dusting the

computer of the sister who has just written the newest theoretical treatise on black women.”³¹ In other words, we must also be aware of the instances and positionalities whereby we who write about black women, oppression, religion, and justice hold power over other black women by virtue of factors we either cannot or do not wish to control, such as class, color, sexual behavior, and geography, to name a few. That is, black women—especially black women in the U.S. academy—are not *all* at the bottom of the proverbial scale.

THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

In “Must I Be a Womanist?” I wrestled aloud with whether or not “womanist” was the most appropriate nomenclature for black women religious scholars. Could not “black feminist” be equally or perhaps more apt, depending on one’s political and religious commitments? I think I made a legitimate argument for black feminist’s historic and current ability to address issues I saw as shortcomings within womanist religious scholarship. With notable exceptions, I found black feminist work more strident in addressing religious pluralism, sexual difference, and global politics than womanist religious scholarship. Of course—and this is an important aside—there are many who feel that black feminism has been a rather secular movement, becoming post-Christian and post-religious early on. Or to say it in kinder tones, black feminism, as such, has not engaged black women’s religiosity in the ways that those who name themselves “womanist” have. Nevertheless, I did not require an abandonment of the term “womanist” for those working within religious scholarship. Trying to highlight the heterogeneity of the scholarship on black women’s religiosities, I suggested that there might be a third wave within womanist religious thought.

Third wave feminism is the name given to an eclectic group of young feminists with diverse issues and strategies of addressing injustice in contemporary society. The idea of a third wave within feminism depends on identifying the first two waves of feminism. The first wave is often identified in the women’s suffrage and abolitionist movements of the nineteenth century. This wave is composed primarily of liberal, northern, white U.S. women, but could well include the efforts of Anna Julia Cooper, Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. The second wave is identified with the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Often dated with the 1964 publication of Betty Freidan’s *The Feminist Mystique*, with corollary movements in Europe, the second wave of feminism is often characterized by its push for equality and equity, reproductive rights, etc. Explicitly named black feminism and women-of-color feminisms, also referred to as “U.S. third world feminisms” in the

late 1970s and early 1980s, serve as a bridge between the relatively white and middle-class second wave feminism and where third wave feminists see themselves.

Finding voice in the mid-1990s, third wavers often distinguish themselves as being members of a particular generation. In *Feminism and Christianity*, Caryn Riswold describes herself as a third wave feminist because she is “raised on the benefits of first- and second-wave feminist activism.”³² That is, third wavers are the “first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of [their] lives.”³³ Third wave feminists often see themselves as sharing particular generational experiences. They benefit from the gains of second wave feminism: women’s studies programs in universities, feminist organizations, and publishing outlets, to name just a few examples. In *Listen Up!: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, Barbara Findlen says that third wave feminists have

been shaped by the unique events and circumstances of [their] time: AIDS, the erosion of reproductive rights, the materialism and cynicism of the Reagan and Bush years, the backlash against women, the erosion of civil rights, the skyrocketing divorce rate, the movement toward multiculturalism and greater global awareness, the emergence of the lesbian and gay rights movements, a greater overall awareness of sexuality—and the feminist movement itself.³⁴

Yet other third wavers believe that they are better identified as a political generation.³⁵ That is, membership in the third wave is not simply age or birth rite, but affiliation with similar issues and politics.³⁶ After all, some individuals might have the generational experiences that Findlen describes, but align themselves more closely with second wave feminist politics.

Thus another marker of third wave feminism is that it is a departure from the second wave. Rebecca Walker describes this best in her anthology, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, when she writes that her generation has “a very different vantage point on the world than [their] foremothers.”³⁷ In fact, many third wavers have experienced the second wave as a dogmatic, demanding conformation to a status quo that takes particular stances on work, abortion, beauty, and family. Walker describes this second wave mythos thusly:

In order to be a feminist one must live in poverty, always critique, never marry, want to censor pornography and/or worship the Goddess. A feminist must never compromise herself, must never

make concessions for money or for love, must always be devoted to the uplift of her gender, must only make an admirable and selfless livelihood, preferably working for a women's organization.³⁸

Angela Y. Davis concurs that such a feminist status quo, while never intended by its architects, does “establish strict rules of conduct” and serves to “incarcerate individuality.”³⁹

While there is a departure from the second wave, there is also significant continuity. In *Third Wave Agenda*, Lisa Heywood and Jennifer Drake distinguish third wave feminism from post-feminism. Unlike post-feminism, which defines itself against the second wave,⁴⁰ third wave feminism contains elements of the second wave—such as the critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures—while “acknowledg[ing] and mak[ing] use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures.”⁴¹ These continuities are best seen in third wave feminism's commitment to activism—another principle that distinguishes a third wave from post-feminism. Apart from the personal and academic writings about third wave feminism, the most common association for “third wave” terminology is found in the Third Wave Foundation, co-founded by Rebecca Walker. The foundation funds projects proposed by women, transgender and gender nonconforming youth between the ages of fifteen and thirty years of age:

Third Wave is a member-driven multiracial, multicultural, multi-sexuality national non-profit organization devoted to feminist and youth activism for change. Our goal is to harness the energy of young women and men by creating a community in which members can network, strategize, and ultimately, take action. By using our experiences as a starting point, we can create a diverse community and cultivate a meaningful response.⁴²

The words that consistently emerge in relation to third wave feminisms are: contradiction, ambiguity, multiplicity, hybridity, individualism, and activism. Third wave feminists are individualistic and communitarian, academics, activists and stay-at-home moms, knitters and athletes, bitches, punks, riot grrrls, dykes, and ladies. The third wave cannot be known without touching on its engagement with popular culture and the media images of independent women. Third wave writings reference Courtney Love, Madonna, Meshell Ndegeocello, Dora the Explorer, “Sex and the City,” Queen Latifah, Mary J. Blige, e-zines, and blogs.⁴³ Third wavers acknowledge that the battle has not been won, but they want to live out the rights for which the second wave

fought. Personally, I like the way Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards put it in their thorough third wave text, *Manifesta*. Third wavers say: “I’m not a feminist but . . .” and “I’m a feminist, but . . .,” to illustrate their connections and departures from feminist associations.⁴⁴

Admittedly there are generalizations being made in this typology. I’ve drawn broad strokes and missed the notable exceptions in each designated wave. Most importantly, I’ve failed to mention that the typology of waves differs significantly when examining black feminism on its own. That is, the aforementioned Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Shadd Cary could well constitute a second wave of black feminism wherein race women unite their resistance of racism and gender-based oppression; this is a “second wave” when considered with the resistance efforts of slave women in the antebellum period—well documented by Angela Y. Davis,⁴⁵ Deborah Gray White,⁴⁶ and Harriet Jacobs.⁴⁷ Black feminist Kimberly Springer believes that “the wave model perpetuates the exclusion of women of color from women’s movement history and feminist theorizing.”⁴⁸

This is not to say that black feminists do not speak of something like a third wave. Springer notes that there *is* a movement of contemporary black feminists, not unlike the aforementioned third wavers, that are post-civil rights era, college-educated, and middle-class, enjoying the benefits of the black feminist efforts that preceded them.⁴⁹ They too reference popular culture icons like Lauryn Hill, India.Arie, and Erykah Badu. While Springer laments their lack of engagement with sexuality, she notes that these black feminists do not speak of radical departures from or conflicts with their black feminist foremothers. This generation has its own ways of encountering popular culture, history, activism, “strong black woman” syndrome, and male engagement. More often calling themselves “hip hop feminists,” this endeavor includes the likes of Veronica Chambers,⁵⁰ Lisa Jones,⁵¹ and Joan Morgan,⁵² who, like W. E. B. DuBois and Delaney before them, are joined by male counterparts such as Michael Awkward,⁵³ Gary Lemons,⁵⁴ David Ikard,⁵⁵ and Marc Anthony Neal.⁵⁶ Springer rejects the terminology of “waves” and prefers to see the work of young (i.e., contemporary) black feminists as part of a historical continuum of black women’s raced and gendered activism in the U.S. Still, black feminists like Beverly Guy-Sheftall prefer to work with the wave terminology, redrawing the boundaries of the waves to be more inclusive of the activism of black women and other women of color.⁵⁷

Finding myself closer to Guy-Sheftall’s position, I give attention to the typology of waves, and a third wave in particular, because (1) it is generally accepted as a fair description of the development of U.S. feminisms (although

that's not a particularly compelling reason), and (2) I think it is a useful and instructive metaphor for describing what I see happening—and what I hope to see happen—in womanist religious thought.

As Sallie McFague so well reminds religious scholars, metaphorical language is powerful, but limited. That is, our engagement of metaphors says a lot about what we are trying to theorize, but it always loses something. There is, as she says, an “is” and “is not” to metaphorical language.⁵⁸ The metaphor of “wave” has been extended into a model, and there is another significant competing model when speaking of womanism and womanist religious scholarship: the generational model.

I've noted that third wave feminism plays hide-and-go-seek with its relationship to age and generations. Some identify third wave feminism directly with Generation X. Others, myself included, prefer to associate third wave feminism with its characteristics and politics, noting that a second-waver by age may well have third wave commitments and vice versa.

In womanist religious thought, Floyd-Thomas invokes the language of generations. After identifying womanist “matriarchs” Delores Williams, Katie Cannon, and Jacquelyn Grant, Floyd-Thomas goes on to describe and name a first generation of womanist religious scholars. The second generation consists of those who were taught by or “influenced” by the works of the first generation. In her categorizing, the third generation “emerged as Black women are able to study with first- and second-generation womanists and learn about womanist theories and methodologies in seminaries and universities throughout North America and extending to the Caribbean and West and South Africa.”⁵⁹ The strength of this language is that it provides a kind of genealogy, or apostolic succession model, of mentorship and privilege. It acknowledges the gains of the early womanist religious scholars, and their living legacies.

Layli Phillips also uses family language to talk about the relationships among womanism, feminism, and black feminism. She refers to womanism and white U.S. feminism as cousins, and womanism and black feminism as sisters. I like the family resemblance revealed in Phillips's categorization. She well highlights that, despite our differences, we are family. I find this to be especially true in womanist religious thought. In womanist religious thought, the “first generation,” or “first wave,” is still living. No one has died. We are mentors, mentees, colleagues, students, teachers, and friends with one another.

The generational and family metaphors lose three things that I think “wave” language captures. Like waves, what I'm trying to describe about the scholarship on black women's religiosity has movement. Mimicking the ocean, it ebbs and it flows; there are seasons of high tide and low tide; and often, it even

roars. You can ride a wave, jump in it, or watch it wash your sand castles, or even your own physical brick-and-mortar house, away. I argue that third wave womanist religious thought has these same characteristics. Second, with a wave, one is known by when and where one arrives, rather than when one is born and with whom one studied. While generational language says something about what has been achieved, as well as when and where one learned, it doesn't say enough about how one turned out. While I think there are some generational markers to what I'm discussing, when it comes to one's politics and perspective, age, however, is more relevant in terms of how long one lives, what one lives to see, and what one does with one's life—the specific time period in which that life began.

Third, and most importantly, articulating “waves” within womanist religious thought has the connotations of third wave feminism. I find this particularly salient in helping to maintain the connections among womanist religious scholarship, the academic study of religion, white women's feminism, women-of-color feminism, global feminisms, and women's studies—connections that, most times, are tenuous at best. In reinforcing these connections, we become more able to see womanist religious thought as part of larger, global movements for social transformation in and through individual and communal religiosity.

Considering a “third wave” within womanist religious thought also suggests that there are shared traits between third wavers. Perhaps like third wave feminism, third wave womanist religious thought is also characterized by contradiction, ambiguity, multiplicity, hybridity, individualism, and activism. Perhaps third wave womanist religious thought also invokes popular culture and media images. Perhaps third wave womanist religious thought is also known by the compulsion to say “I'm not womanist but . . .” and “I'm womanist, but . . .,” to illustrate their connections and departures from second wave womanist associations.

WAVES OF WOMANIST RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

FIRST WAVE

And yes, there is a second wave of womanist religious thought—and a first. I agree with Floyd-Thomas that there appear to be womanist matriarchs. These “first wavers”—Williams, Cannon, and Grant in theology and ethics—are named so because they were the first to engage the term “womanist” in relationship to their religious thought. One might also extend this wave to the scholars in every religious discipline who first make black women's religious