



PROJECT MUSE®

Ain't I a Womanist, Too?

Coleman, Monica A. , Maparyan, Layli

Published by Augsburg Fortress Publishers

Coleman, M. A. & Maparyan, L..

Ain't I a Womanist, Too? Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought.

Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book
<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/25166>

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?¹

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 McMahon 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

experiences the starting point or center of their religious reflection. This is no small point. It reflects the larger trend in the U.S. academy wherein black women earning doctoral degrees in some critical mass during the 1970s and 1980s insisted that the histories, literatures, and experiences of black women were worthy subjects of study and study by those who considered themselves part of the community they studied. It also speaks quietly to the difficulty of doing so within the Western academy. When black female religious scholars attend the meetings of their disciplinary guilds, nine times out of ten they are outnumbered by the white men in their midst. Thus to not only validate and reference black women's religiosity, but to make it the center of one's theological and religious reflection is no small accomplishment, and one that honestly does not have universal support throughout the academy. It is also significant that Floyd-Thomas argues against language of definition or movement in relationship to womanism in religion and society. She names this womanist "intellectual revolution" an "epistemology." While I prefer the language of movement and wave, Floyd-Thomas and I agree that the centering of black women's religiosity constitutes a sea change in religious scholarship. This is an important first step, indeed the foundation of womanist religious reflection. There may still be first wave womanist religious thinkers on the horizon—in subfields of religious studies that have yet to interact with black women's religious experiences. Thus for many religious studies fields, this wave still roars.

SECOND WAVE

The second wave of womanist religious thought is known by both its development of its respective disciplines and its establishment of normative womanist discourse. The second wave takes the initiatives of the first wave and extrapolates them into descriptive and constructive work within its field. More than a mere extension of the first wave, second wave womanist religious thought digs in and builds upon this focus on black women's religious experiences. I can best describe this through my own professional discipline of theology. In the first wave of womanist theology, Delores Williams and Jacquelyn Grant identify how an examination of the multiple oppressions that affect black women lead to different theological conclusions than their black male and white feminist theological counterparts, respectively. For Williams, this was about understanding the role of "survival" and "quality of life" in the quest for liberation. For Grant, this was a Christological position focused more on redemptive activity than the maleness of Jesus. Second wave womanist theology begins to delve deeper into theological reflection based on black

women's experiences. Thus we see more in-depth reflections on Christology, as in the early work of Kelly Brown Douglas, and the development of womanist soteriologies, doctrines of the trinity, etc. I give this example to also highlight the need for a continued second wave. There is still much work to do. Again, to return to my own discipline, there is, at this time, still no published book-length womanist systematic theology ecclesiology or pneumatology, for that matter. Womanist religious scholars are still articulating their preferred methodological approaches and perspectives on their subject matter.

This wave can rightly continue for generations. For one womanist perspective on a particular dimension of a religious studies discipline is not sufficient or corollary to the plethora of work established in the centuries of Western (Christian) religious reflection. The growth of the second wave is related to the constituency of the field. In some religious studies disciplines, we can still number, on one hand, those scholars whose work seriously and centrally engages with black women's religiosities.

The second wave also, intentionally or not, establishes normativity within womanist religious studies discourse. As the field is developing, it develops in particular directions with specific assumptions and interests. There is great value in this wave's activity because it is instituting a canon within this multidisciplinary field. Traci West names womanist canon-building work as the "naming [of] ideas in response to silences in prevailing cultural discourses [that] extends the dissemination of ideas beyond existing venues in the academy."⁶⁰ We see this kind of canon-building and naming in black nationalism, Africana and Black Studies, Women's Studies, etc. As womanist religious thought gains a foothold in the academy, this is harder to deny. After all, one can take a "qualifying" or "comprehensive" exam in womanist religious scholarship or womanist approaches to one's religious studies discipline. With the development of coursework, syllabi, examination readings, and frequently cited sources, womanist religious thought builds its own canon within the larger canon of the field. In "Structured Academic Amnesia," Katie Cannon laments the devaluation of this womanist canon by the predominantly white and male religious academy, noting that some individuals "go to great lengths to demand that our [womanist] intellectual concerns and canons of discourse be ignored in all matters of contract evaluation, tenure review, refereed endorsements for promotions, grants, fellowships and awards."⁶¹ Cannon reminds us that the existence of a womanist canon challenges the existing norms and has real consequences, with issues of standards, power, and economics on the line.

This is an issue of contention for those who see diversity as a hallmark of canon-resistance. About the wider field of womanism, Phillips argues that the “open-ended, polyvalent, polyvocal, dialogic, noncentralized, and improvisational character of womanism, allow[s] it to resist canonization, academic appropriation and ideological subsumption.”⁶² Floyd-Thomas concurs, arguing that “womanism is a movement with multiple voices, cultures, and experiences, rather than a school or a canon that prefers one voice, culture, or experience of ‘woman’ or of ‘the Black woman’ over others.”⁶³ I agree that there is a level of diversity within second wave womanist religious thought, and that people are still contributing to it. This makes for an open canon. I believe the aforementioned perspective mistakes the openness of the canon for the absence of a canon. That is, some individuals seem to resist the language of “canonization” because of how it has traditionally excluded black women’s selfhoods and interests.

While there are multiple voices in the second wave, the diversity of perspectives exists within certain boundaries. As religious scholars invoke the work of the first wave and expand this work within the academy, they establish particular themes as normative. For example, second wave womanist religious thought still associates black womanhood with the experience of multiple oppressions—usually named as “racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism”—named and engaged in that order. Victor Anderson’s *Beyond Ontological Blackness* offers a salient critique of the challenges of defining blackness, or in this case, black womanhood, around essentialized experiences of oppression.⁶⁴ Similarly, the connection to Alice Walker’s articulation of the term “womanist” often leads womanist religious scholars to focus so intently on the “survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female,” that it can fail to adequately critique male [religious] power that dominates, excludes, and selfishly names and violates. Traci West gives an excellent description of the circumstances in which the maintenance of black women’s safety necessitates relinquishing commitment to the entire community.⁶⁵ In “Must I Be a Womanist?” I also described this second wave as largely Christian, heteronormative, and detached from local and global political movements. All this is to say that I do believe that there *are* classics and foundational works in the womanist religious thought, and that they have a certain tenor and tone to them. The moral value of this normativity is still up for debate because the existence of a womanist religious canon—especially in less than thirty years—is not a scandal, but a triumph of the field’s staying power.

THIRD WAVE

Finally, there is a third wave of womanist religious thought. I understand the naming of this wave to be descriptive and constructive. That is, I am naming some trends and patterns of scholarship that I have seen emerging, while also developing my own marks of what this third wave may be.

To begin with, third wave womanist religious thought focuses away from the identity of the scholar to the ideology of the scholarship. Although I have argued for the value of engaging in identity politics, articulating just what is at stake in issues of naming, the third wave of womanist religious thought challenges the identity politics of the second wave. That is, I have noted that I am a black female religious scholar and asked if I have to be a womanist. Now I flip the question and ask if a womanist has to be a black female religious scholar.

Although Phillips asserts that people other than black women or women of color can be womanists, discussions within religious scholarship cohere around the opposing position. Phillips states that “there is a consensus among the main progenitors of womanism [by which she means Walker, Ogunyemi, and Hudson-Weems] . . . that people other than Black women or women of color can be womanists.”⁶⁶ Stacey Floyd-Thomas states the opposite opinion by noting that “to be a womanist is to be a Blackwoman”⁶⁷ and “that students and scholars of all backgrounds can *do* womanism even if they cannot *bewomanists*.”⁶⁸

Karen Baker-Fletcher is even more dogmatic in her insistence that womanists can only be black women. For Baker-Fletcher, “a womanist is never a white woman or a white feminist.”⁶⁹ In fact, women of color can only claim “womanist” nomenclature if they are “in authentic relationships of mutuality, equality, and respect with black women.”⁷⁰ For Baker-Fletcher, this is an issue of protection. She writes, “The world has cruelly placed black women at the bottom of the totem pole. This requires us to protect one of our few oases.”⁷¹ Although Baker-Fletcher believes that white women can learn from womanists and advocate womanism, they cannot be womanists. Baker-Fletcher connects a white woman’s desire to be womanist to the historical practices among white Americans of “[stealing] the most creative, cultural productions of black people.”⁷² Dialogue, mutuality, and respect with white women are acceptable, even hoped for, but naming is not. Baker-Fletcher rejects arguments about inclusion with a hermeneutic of suspicion that asserts “that the deeper, unexamined issue at stake is power and ownership. We [black female womanists] will not be reenslaved.”⁷³

This is no small issue and one reiterated among third wave feminisms. In Heywood and Drake’s discussion of third wave feminism, they note the delicate

nature of appropriation between white women and women of color. That is, third wave feminists connect to the language and images of multiplicity and difference found in the works of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ntozake Shange, Bharti Mukherjee, and Toni Morrison. Thus they must acknowledge how much they owe to women-of-color feminism. This influence is so profound, that white third wave feminism must tread gently around appropriation aware of how, to use Hazel Carby's words, "feminist theory has frequently used and abused [the writings of black women] to produce an essential black female subject for its own consumption."⁷⁴ Thus for Heywood and Drake, a definitive aspect of third wave feminism is "negotiating multicultural and antiracist standpoints amid the ongoing tensions between borrowing and appropriating."⁷⁵

I understand the fear of appropriation, or rather misappropriation, of a term that was created for self-naming. Especially given the history of the relationship between black and white cultures in the U.S. in general, and the development of white feminism vis-à-vis black political struggles, in particular. Yet, it is important that all constituencies understand the history of feminisms and womanisms, and cite the work and scholars to whom they are indebted for the current state of the field.

On this point, I stand with Phillips who says that "the womanist idea is not owned by Black women and women of color, even if it was developed, launched, articulated, and elaborated primarily by Black women and other women of color."⁷⁶ I'd like to take the radical position that black women relinquished ownership of the term "womanism" when they published it and brought it into the academy, just as Walker loses definitional rights to her term "womanist" to the "womanisms" that developed from her term. Can black female religious scholars really "own" a term originally borrowed from Alice Walker? Shouldn't the idea of "ownership" bother people from communities whose selves and bodies have been bought, sold, bartered, and colonized? To claim ownership of a term seems to reinscribe the hierarchies and attitudes that feminisms and womanisms resist in the first place. Finally, should these black women, as Baker-Fletcher declares they have done, call the religious academy or any institution they didn't create an "oasis"?

Many womanists have tried to address the issue of membership by distinguishing between "womanist" and "womanism." I prefer a more substantial shift. I want to move the conversation away from the identity of the scholar that centers black women's religious experiences and onto the work that is grounded in black women's religious experiences. That is, a hallmark of third wave womanist religious thought is that it is more of an ideology politic, than

an identity politic. “A womanist,” if we should even speak in those terms, is one who does womanist work; “womanist” may be only one of many descriptors for one’s work. To put it more constructively, if womanist religious thought relinquishes a sense of ownership around membership identity and consciously notes the connections among white feminisms, black feminisms, women-of-color feminisms, global and third world feminisms, it has the potential to link to various types of struggles and form unlikely but fruitful alliances in its pursuit of social transformation.⁷⁷ To push the envelope even further, when men and nonblacks understand the history of womanist religious thought, its nuances, developments, and politics and identify their work in this way, they may be better positioned to challenge oppressive power structures than if black women policed this term and concept.

Third wave womanist religious thought as an ideology does and does not espouse a certain politic. Like Phillips who talks about five “overlapping characteristics” of womanism,⁷⁸ or Floyd-Thomas who discusses four to five tenets of womanism,⁷⁹ I resist rigid definition of third wave womanist religious thought. I prefer to say that there are “marks” of third wave womanist religious thought. That is, third wave womanist religious thought: (1) engages the religious lives of women of African descent; (2) maintains a goal of justice, survival, freedom, liberation, and/or quality of life; (3) understands itself to both draw upon *and also depart from* a tradition of womanist religious scholarship; and (4) engages work and thinkers both inside and outside of black religious scholarship.

BLACK WOMEN’S RELIGIOSITY

Third wave womanist religious thought includes and takes seriously the religious experiences of black women. In so doing, it questions what is meant by all of these terms: “religious,” “black,” and “woman.” Third wave womanist religious thought expands upon what has become normative in second wave womanist reflection: that black female descendants of the U.S. slavery system are Christian and experience an interlocking tripartite—perhaps quadripartite—oppression.⁸⁰ Discussions in third wave womanist thought have made it increasingly acceptable to discuss black women’s non-Christian religious experiences. Thus discussions of black women in New Thought, Buddhisms, African-derived religions, spiritualisms, and humanisms are marks of a third wave of womanist religious thought. That is, third wave womanist religious thought may have convictions, but it cannot be dogmatic. It is an advocate of religious pluralism and will not condemn anyone to hell, if it dares even confirm the existence of a hell.

But there are still assumptions to be questioned. In these postmodern times, we cannot assume we know what “Blackwoman” means. In the binary racial codes of the United States, “black” refers to descendants of enslaved Africans in the U.S., but also to certain immigrants and their descendants with significantly different cultural, geographical, and religious histories and experiences. Outside the U.S., third wave womanist religious thought may encompass the religious experiences of those in the Caribbean, South America, various continental African experiences, or even the diaspora and women of color in Asia and Australia. In those contexts, “black” and “color” and “ethnicity” are construed in relevant local terms with particular meanings and significations. “Black” is also problematized by the voices of self-identified multi- and bi-racial individuals with a level of black “African” cultural and geographic heritage, however far removed.

Lastly, we cannot make assumptions about what is meant by the signifier “woman.” Third wave womanist religious thought makes room and accounts for individuals who are biologically female, intersex, and transgendered. It can speak of individuals who may not be biologically female, or who do not fit into binary biological classifications and, yet identify as woman. When using the signifier “woman,” there is no room in third wave womanist religious thought for hints of heterosexism, assumed-monogamy, or homophobia. Honestly, to do otherwise is a betrayal of the evolution of womanism itself. Both third wave feminism and womanist religious scholarship are wholly dependent on the work, writing, and public lives of women-of-color feminists—especially black and Chicana feminists—who courageously and unapologetically identify as lesbian and bisexual. These experiences produced the writings that elucidate the challenges of being silenced, marginalized, hybrid, complex, and brave. Thus while one of the marks of this third wave of womanist religious thought is its occupation with black women’s religiosity, it does not assume singular meanings of those terms, but troubles them in its scholarship and casts wide the net for the contemporary complex meanings of identity.

GOALS OF JUSTICE, SURVIVAL, FREEDOM, ETC.

Third wave womanist religious thought also maintains a goal of justice, survival, freedom, liberation, and/or quality of life. In this way, the third wave is directional. There is an ethical telos to the work of this wave. While valuing academic reflection as a goal unto itself, third wave womanist religious thought does have normative dimensions that cohere around principles of freedom and health. It can resist multiple oppressions without defining itself in terms

of those oppressions. It can well embrace what Victor Anderson refers to as the grotesqueries of lived experience, highlighting both the challenges and joys of history and culture while advocating a particular ethic.⁸¹ Advocating a particular ethic is the activism of the third wave, but just as in the realities of survival, health, and freedom, it may have as many individualist tones as it does communal tones. Herein individualism and separatism are neither the counterparts to community, nor values to be shunned as eurocentric and destructive. Rather they are integral components of the journey to spiritual maturity, personal freedom, and a socially transformed academy and world.

RELIES ON AND DEPARTS FROM WOMANIST RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP TRADITION

I hope by now it is clear that third wave womanist religious thought both relies on and departs from the second wave of womanist religious scholarship. Like the second wave, the third wave develops scholarship within the religious disciplines. This wave appreciates and stands upon the shoulders of the second wave of womanist religious thought with its interest in black women's religious lives—however we construe them—and its connection to activist and liberative efforts and ends. Yet it also sees itself as departing from the womanist religious tradition as it is established. The departures may arise as third wavers redefine black, woman, and religious. They may arise as third wavers challenge key ideas in the second wave canon. Thus third wavers may never be canonized. More importantly, when they start to become canonized, it may be time for a new wave.

Likewise, Alice Walker's articulation of womanist may not be the touchstone to third wave womanist religious thought. For religious scholars, Walker's articulation of womanist was the departure and source of inspiration. As second wavers begin to acknowledge, womanist religious scholarship or "womanism" exists quite independently—for better or for worse—of Alice Walker's writings, life, and politics, intersecting with Walker's work more like a tangent than a Venn diagram. Third wave womanist religious thought may refer to the first and second wave of womanist religious scholarship as a launching pad, *or* look to the other architects of womanism, *or* work with Phillips's understanding of womanism *or* take another direction altogether. Thus third waver womanist religious thought assumes its roots, but needn't be loyal to them for loyalty's sake, personal affection, or political expediency.

Why not, then, find new terminology? Why not thoroughly distinguish this third wave from the larger womanist religious discourse with other

naming? It is because we are in the same “ocean”; there are continuities; and we are connected—in subject matter and in interpersonal relationships—to those from whom we differ.

French poststructuralist Jacques Derrida writes compellingly about ways to relate to one’s academic and cultural forebears. There is a level of affirmation in relating to one’s heritage. But to affirm “means not simply accepting this heritage but re-launching it otherwise, and keeping it alive.”⁸² One should not accept one’s heritage literally or as a totality. Rather, how we relate to our past should be a matter of choice. Choosing one’s heritage is not accepting everything or erasing everything. For Derrida, “the best way to be faithful to a heritage is to be unfaithful.”⁸³

Thus the third wave declares that there is no need to disown our history because of the differences. Third wave womanist religious thought does not need to be characterized by rejection, arguments, criticism, and academic chiding between waves. To question is not necessarily to disavow; to depart is not necessarily to reject. Questioning and departing, rather, are indications of growth and expansion. This growth and expansion is often done in directions that feel more true to an individual’s passions and self—the personal freedom that is integral to the naming of “womanist.”

Lastly, third wave womanist religious thought engages academics, activists, and researchers both inside and outside of black religious scholarship. Declaring this aloud is almost unnecessary, for as Katie Cannon says, “You can’t get a PhD in the western hemisphere without knowing a lot about white men, whether you want to or not.”⁸⁴ All too often, an academic’s extensive and examined knowledge of the white Western male canon of one’s field leads to a virtual lack of knowledge about marginalized scholarship. The first and second waves of womanist religious thought respond to this trend through their extensive reference to black women’s literary, historical, cultural, and now religious scholarship. Even in her vigorous critique of womanist terminology, Cheryl Sanders admits how delighted she is to see the prevalence of scholarship by and about black women in the footnotes of the responding scholars, no matter their differences. Indeed, this is a hallmark of womanist religious thought—lifting up the important work of scholarship by and about black women—and not just for the sake of representation. Scholarship by and about black women is relevant to the scholarship of the religious academy as a whole, and increasingly available as black women’s presence in the academy grows, and the academy becomes more receptive to work on black women’s lives. This is no small task because, as I mentioned earlier, black religious scholars disproportionately and unjustly bear the burden of highlighting black religious scholarship. Including

scholars who do not identify as black and female under the rubric of “third wave womanism” is one way third wave womanist religious thought encourages womanist knowledge across the religious academy.

Third wave womanist religious thought insists on a kind of cross-pollination that dialogues with and between areas of scholarship that do not normally interact. At times, this means citing dominant voices within one's field for their theoretical or constitutive contribution to one's argument. Thus there is no need to defend using one's knowledge of white male theorists because one's subject matter includes the religious lives of black women. Other times, this principle means engaging marginalized fields of scholarship with each other. Third wave womanist religious thought may engage fields that appear to be natural allies, and yet are rarely interlocuted with religious thought; i.e., African philosophy, Caribbean history, feminist theory, queer studies, Native American educational critiques, and disability studies, to name a selected few. The choice of scholarship invoked in third wave womanist religious thought is a reflection of what best makes an argument while also acknowledging the multiple influences and identities that a scholar maintains. For while womanist religious thought is an influence upon one's work, so perhaps are poststructuralism, pragmatism, transcendentalism, psychoanalysis, mysticism, and law. Third wave womanist religious thought does not ask us to prioritize or compartmentalize our identities, alliances, or scholarship into untouching silos.

Defining this third wave by content, rather than by form, breaks open the boundaries of womanist religious thought. Persons with varied gender and racial identities may conduct womanist religious thought. Likewise, some work by an individual may fall under the third wave of womanist religious thought, while other work does not. Or some work by a singular individual may fall into the second wave, while other work falls more aptly into a third wave. This wave is generational inasmuch and only as it sees itself as part of a larger tradition of womanist religious scholarship. This wave needn't fight as vigorously as the first wave to suggest that black women's religious lives are worthy of academic study.

And yet in a dialectical move back to identity, I want to suggest that there are two regulative qualities about the individual who engages in third wave womanist religious thought. First, a third wave womanist religious thinker has a community of accountability. The third wave must present itself and answer to a community. Presumably, this is the community of the thinker. While this proposition may initially sound like a principle of second wave that I have denounced, I want to add that the thinker gets to identify the community of accountability, and this community may shift with different

pieces of scholarship. There's no reason to assume that the community of accountability is "the historic black church" as has commonly been expressed in black religious dialogues. The community of accountability may be a faith community, but it may also be an academic, cultural, gendered, nonprofit, political, ancestral, or grass-roots community. There is no hierarchy of value, no standard for what makes one a "legitimate scholar activist," because there is activism inside and outside of the academy. The community of accountability is no reflection of the depth of one's cultural and racial commitment. This community of accountability exists in part to ground the third wave thinker, but also to challenge and support the thinker in the production of new ideas. There is no reason that one should venture alone into uncharted waters.

Second, a third wave womanist religious thinker brings his or her whole self to one's work. This is more than a mere acknowledgment of one's social location. In some sense, this principle is manifest in the scholarship one engages and produces, and the community to which one is accountable. And while this may not occur in each article of scholarship, this should be true across one's body of work. More importantly, third wavers bring their whole selves to their work because they refuse to bear the ill-consequences of lives marked by silences of selfhood, betrayal of loved ones, compartmentalization, closets, or lives that are all-work-and-no-play. And yes, this is a privilege of being in the third wave. To be more personal about it, my work is no more or less womanist than it is process, constructive, postmodern, queer, black, feminist, American, Christian, pagan, and so many other things.

In conclusion, third wave womanist religious thought is a movement within the tradition of womanist religious scholarship, and larger global activist scholarship. To spend an article, a lecture, two days, and a couple of anthologies discussing womanist typologies is both a mark of academic privilege, and an insistent reminder that naming is about personal freedom and power—two things that must be monitored and revisited regularly if we intend to share them equally.

I was originally propelled to this idea because of my deep affinities with black feminism *and* womanism, and my sense that the power to name one's own work was being usurped by those who do not author said work. I do not know that I've undermined the power structures that try to decide who does what work and what they call it. Rather I've tried to acknowledge new sources of power within womanist naming as well as the factors that constrain radical impulses. I've tried to affirm the needed coexistence of different hopes for this field, even as they sharply disagree.

For this last reason I think it's fair to adapt Sojourner Truth's refrain to womanist religious thought. Just as Sojourner's question, "And ain't I a woman?" expanded the boundaries of work, race, and gender in the interest of inclusion, freedom, and power, so does the question, "Ain't I a womanist?" Although the context is much more circumscribed, the same issues are at stake. Third wave womanist religious thought includes scholars of varied gendered and racial identities who both affirm and problematize that which concerns the religious experiences of black women. Third wave womanist religious thought acknowledges the complexities of self-naming, other-naming, and the progression that occurs as one grows within, and from, a particular scholarly heritage. Third wave womanist religious thought learns from the developing canon and pushes back against it. Third wave womanist religious thought is a part of womanist traditions while exploring new directions. As a third wave, it is contradictory, ambiguous, multiple, hybrid, personal, and political. This is what it means to be faithful. To echo Derrida, "this faithfulness sometimes still takes the form of unfaithfulness and waywardness [by being] faithful to the differences; that is to say, one must go on with the conversation."⁸⁵ I consider this question, "Ain't I a womanist?" to be another part of the dialogue.

This volume includes colleagues whose work represents some of what can be considered third wave womanist religious thought. The third wave of womanist religious thought is not a mere proposition, but already contains lively and innovative scholarship. This volume is divided into four sections: religious pluralism, which is more aptly engagement with non-Christian religions; popular culture and media; gender and sexuality; and politics—grouped together under this rubric for the first time.

The section on religious pluralism reveals the third wave interest in the experiences of women and female deities in non-Christian religions. Debra Majeed's essay on the practice of polygyny in African American Muslim communities investigates the social, communal, and religious complexities of plural marriage among the single largest group of American Muslims. Stephen C. Finley explores the esoteric spiritual leadership of the Nation of Islam's Mother Tynetta Muhammad as she transformed herself from one of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's secretaries, to a trusted member of Minister Farrakhan's inner circle. Pu Xiumei offers a womanist ecospiritual reading on Di Mu, an indigenous goddess in contemporary China. Such a reading allows Pu to interpret a medicine woman's engagement with Di Mu and Buddhism as a survival strategy for indigenous religions in an increasingly technological era.

In concert with the third wave engagement with media, the section on popular culture asserts that understandings of masculinity and feminist affect

black women's religious and secular lives. Darnise C. Martin's essay examines how gospel house music culture functions as church for black gay men by deftly comparing the underground dance movement to the hush arbors of African American slavery. Elonda Clay's "Confessions of an Ex-Theological Bitch" plays on the popular memoir by hip hop music video dancer Karrine Steffans's "Confessions of a Video Vixen" to talk about the ways in which contemporary women continue to function in subservient roles in the media and churches. While examining the misogynist lyrics of hip hop artist Rick Ross, Ronald B. Neal argues against the prevailing notion that black males create sexism and homophobia in black America. Rather, Neal illustrates how the Abrahamic faiths construct and reinforce colonial concepts of masculinity that are echoed in contemporary hip hop.

Third wave womanist religious thought troubles categories of gender and sexuality as it explores their religious significance. In this section, Monica R. Miller problematizes both Don Imus's controversial statement about "nappy-headed ho's" and the black community's response to it. Noting the classism engrained in the response, Miller reclaims the deviant expression in an effort to highlight the diversity that exists within contemporary African American gendered communities. In "Dark Matter," Roger Sneed draws on neo-soul music and science fiction for useful constructions to describe the experiences of black queer individuals. This allows Sneed to construct a concept of liminality that is more appropriate for black queer life than the dominant theories of liminality. Nesette Falu wrestles with the ways that black lesbian identity is articulated in academic writings and contemporary film by interpolating postmodern theory with black lesbian activism and advocacy. Finally, EL Kornegay Jr. combines personal story with James Baldwin's writings for narratives on how men and women can redefine heterosexual masculinity. He finds answers in both narrative structure and the blending of the sacred and profane.

Third wave womanist religious thought has a political bent that advocates for justice and inclusion in global, American, and academic politics. In this final section Sharon D. Welch draws on womanist and Buddhist ideologies for global peace policies. Looking specifically at the political leadership of Ronald Dellums and Nelson Mandela, Welch finds new ways to embody the visionary pragmatism that black feminist Patricia Hill Collins proposed over twenty years ago. In "We'll Make Us a World," Barbara A. Holmes reads Michelle Obama's creative renegotiation of First Lady for clues to new options for engaging racism in a purportedly postracial society. The new model of empowerment is not limited to Christian themes, but utilizes embodied

creativity, reflexive memory, and trickster resourcefulness to move toward an egalitarian future in religion and government. Victor Anderson uncovers the historic tones within contemporary struggles to define “black culture” within religious studies. Anderson excavates political movements and current academic strivings to reveal the ongoing power and problematic category of “blackness.” Moving us even deeper into the academic classroom, Arisika Razak articulates a pedagogical approach that reflects the best of womanist striving. Razak finds that this is best done with a commitment to Alice Walker’s writings, the incorporation of various postmodern and antiracist theories, a plurality of embodied movements, multiple religious traditions, and personal engagement.

This volume presents the work of theologians, philosophers of religion, ethicists, cultural critics, historians, a midwife-healer, and a psychologist. While there is no representation from those working in textual studies or the practical theology fields, this is not to say that there is no third wave within these areas. In short, I believe this volume offers a partial, yet compelling portrait of a third wave in womanist religious scholarship. In this way, the connections between womanism and postmodernism are again revealed. Like poststructuralism, womanism “unpack[s] complex oppressive processes and forms of violence, concentrat[es] on the circulation of power; and . . . promote[s] equality and democracy while respecting difference and freedom.”⁸⁶ To find a way to draw from the past in constructive ways while moving boldly into the relevant concerns of contemporary society is nothing less than what process thinkers refer to as “creative transformation.” And this, I believe is a universal calling.

Notes

1. Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, With a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her “Book of Life,”* Schomburg Library of Black Women Writers, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Jeffrey C. Stewart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 134. Nell Irvin Painter notes that the phrase “ar’n’t/ain’t I a woman” ascribed to Truth is more rightly the words of Frances Dana Gage, who added them to a report made twelve years after the 1851 speech in Akron, where Truth is said to have given this speech. This expression has long been associated with Sojourner Truth, and even if the words are not hers, reveals the issues within black womanhood/black feminism highlighted in this volume. See Nell Irvin Painter, “Introduction,” *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 1998), x; and Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

2. Alice Walker, “Coming Apart,” in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006).

3. Alice Walker, "Gifts of Power: Rebecca Jackson," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 81.

4. A. Walker, *In Search*, xi–xii.

5. Layli Phillips, "Womanism: On Its Own," *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), xix.

6. Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name?: Womanist, Black Feminism, and Beyond," *Black Scholar* 26, no. 1 (Winter/ Spring 1996): 9–17.

7. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, "Writing for Our Lives: Womanism as an Epistemological Revolution," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 4.

8. Karen Baker-Fletcher, "Womanist Journey," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 158–75; and *Dancing with God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006), ix–x, 6–7, where she correlates aspects of Alice Walker's work with the Christian holiness traditions.

9. Melanie L. Harris, "Alice Walker's Ethics: An Analysis of Alice Walker's Non-Fiction Work as a Resource for Womanist Ethics" (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 2006); Melanie L. Harris, "Loving the Spirit: Expressions of Paganism in Alice Walker's Non-Fiction" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Washington, DC, 20 November 2006); Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue: Alice Walker and Womanist Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

10. Arisika Razak, "Her Blue Body: Alice Walker's Womanism," *Feminist Theology* 100, no. 1 (2009): 100–126, with ecological goddess/nature-based religions.

11. For two good summaries on womanism in religious thought, see Linda E. Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm," *CrossCurrents* 48 (Winter 1998–1999): 488–99; and Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

12. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (1985; reprint, New York: Routledge, 2006), 21.

13. *Ibid.*, 28.

14. *Ibid.*, 31.

15. Clenora Hudson-Weems, "Africana Womanism," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), 48.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 53.

18. Clenora Hudson-Weems, "Cultural and Agenda Conflicts in Academia: Critical Issues for Africana Women's Studies," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), 42.

19. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "The Evolution of Feminist Consciousness Among African American Women," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995), 1–22.

20. Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name? Womanist, Black Feminism, and Beyond," *Black Scholar* 26, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1996): 15.

21. Alice Walker, "Audre's Voice," *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writers' Activism* (New York: Random House, 1997), 80.

22. David Bradley, "Alice Walker: Telling the Black Women's Story," *New York Times Magazine* (8 January 1984): 25–37.

23. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, 3.

24. Phillips, xx.

25. Traci West, "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist?," *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanist Approaches to Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 292.
26. Collins, 16.
27. Phillips, xxxiii–xxxiv.
28. This is one of Clenora Hudson-Weems's strongest and most valuable points. She uses the African term/concept "Nommo" to refer to it in her text.
29. Monica A. Coleman, "Must I Be a Womanist?," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 85–96.
30. Traci West, 292.
31. Collins, 15–16.
32. Caryn Riswold, *Feminism and Christianity: Questions and Answers in the Third Wave* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Publications, 2009), 7.
33. Barbara Findlen, "Introduction," *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Seattle, WA: Seal, 1995), xii.
34. Findlen, xiii.
35. Nancy Whittier, "Turning It Over: Personnel Change in the Columbus, Ohio Women's Movement, 1969–1984," in *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, ed. Myra Marx and Patricia Yancey Martin (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 180.
36. Rita Alfonso and Jo Trigilio, "Surfing the Third Wave: A Dialogue between Two Third Wave Feminists," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 7–16.
37. Rebecca Walker, "Being Real: An Introduction," *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor, 1995), xxxii–xxxiii.
38. R. Walker, xxxii.
39. Angela Y. Davis, "Afterword," in *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, ed. Rebecca Walker (New York: Anchor, 1995), 281.
40. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, "Introduction," *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1. They are referring to thinkers such as Danielle Crittenden, Rene Denfield, Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, Wendy Shalit, and Christina Hoff Sommers. It is an interesting aside to know that the term "postfeminist" was first used after the "first wave" in 1919. Cf. Susan Faludi, "Feminism Then and Now," Public Lecture, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (27 May 2010).
41. *Ibid.*, 3.
42. *Ibid.*, 7.
43. Laura Brunell, "The Third Wave of Feminism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/724633/feminism/280083/The-third-wave-of-feminism>.
44. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), vii.
45. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983).
46. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 1985. Rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).
47. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, 1861, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).
48. Kimberly Springer, "Third Wave Black Feminism?" *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 1063.
49. Springer, 1064.
50. Veronica Chambers, *Mama's Girl* (New York: Riverhead, 1997).
51. Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex and Hair* (New York: Anchor, 1997).

52. Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).
53. Michael Awkward, "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism," in *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
54. Gary L. Lemons, *Black Male Outsider: Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man, A Memoir* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008) and *Womanist Forefathers: Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. DuBois* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).
55. David Ikard, *Breaking the Silence: Towards a Black Male Feminist Criticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007) and <http://nationofcowards.blogspot.com>.
56. Marc Anthony Neal, *New Black Man* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and <http://newblackman.blogspot.com/>.
57. Beverly Guy-Sheffall, "Response from a 'Second Waver' to Kimberly Springer's 'Third Wave Black Feminism?'" *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 1092.
58. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) and *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
59. Floyd-Thomas, 4.
60. West, 292.
61. Katie G. Cannon, "Structured Academic Amnesia: As If This True Womanist Story Never Happened," *Deeper Shades: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 22.
62. Phillips, xxi.
63. Floyd-Thomas, 7.
64. Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).
65. Traci West, 294. West gives examples of black women who experience intimate violence from black men, black male clergy who sexually harass women congregants, and state- and church-sanctioned arguments against same-sex marriage.
66. Phillips, xxxvi.
67. Floyd-Thomas, 6.
68. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), 4.
69. Karen Baker-Fletcher, "A Womanist Journey," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 161.
70. Baker-Fletcher, 163.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid., 164.
73. Ibid., 168.
74. Hazel Carby, "The Multicultural Wars," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Michele Wallace and Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay, 1992), 192.
75. Heywood and Drake, 10.
76. Phillips, xxxvi.
77. Vron Ware makes a similar point regarding white feminist appropriation of black feminist work: "[T]he extent to which this borrowing, or appropriating, is acknowledged obviously varies a great deal, but I think it can potentially provide an important link between different types of struggles . . . [leading] to forming alliances." *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (New York: Verso, 1992), 240.
78. Phillips names them as "anti-oppressionist, vernacular, nonideological, communitarian and spiritualized" in Phillips, xxiv-xxvi.

79. Floyd-Thomas names them as “radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love and critical engagement” in *Mining the Motherlode*, 8–11. She adds “appropriation and reciprocity” in *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 7.

80. By quad-partite, I am referring to the interlocking oppressive systems of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism.

81. Ibid.

82. Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow . . . : A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort, *Cultural Memory in the Present* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 3.

83. Derrida and Roudinesco, 2.

84. Katie G. Cannon, “Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community,” public lecture, Bennett College for Women, Greensboro, NC (30 March 2005).

85. Jacques Derrida, “The Last Interview,” *SV (Studio Visit)* (November 2004), 7.

86. Phillips, xxxi.

