

Preface

“Theology is autobiography.” This phrase is often invoked to illustrate that our constructive theological proposals are intensely personal. They are shaped by our personal histories, our past and current contexts, the specific issues that concern us. They are shaped by whom and what we have encountered—what we read, whom we know, those whom we engage in conversation. And yet, as I constantly remind my students at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC), theology, while personal, cannot be private. It must be something that could apply to someone other than the theologian. It should be something you would recommend to others. It should be something you’d be willing to preach.

This book reflects my own faith and social commitments. When I wrestle with pain and suffering, I press God and faith communities for answers. When I experience undulating joy and friendship, I feel a deep connection with God and community. I want to ask how and why and “says who?” I’m a faithful black woman who wants to know how things work. Some kind of womanist and metaphysical work was almost inevitable for me.

I am a theologian because I believe that faith matters. I believe that what we believe about God, ourselves, and the world affects how we operate within the world. I believe theology should expand our world. This book is a womanist theology inasmuch as and because it is grounded in and tested by the religious experiences of black women. I am honored to join a conversation, hewn from tough academic rock, that asserts that black women’s lives can be the center of theological activity. This book is also a constructive postmodern theology, a process theology, because I stand with religious scholars who are inspired by the philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. We who embrace change, process, and becoming as the foundations of our understanding of God and the world have formed an international community impassioned by the power of this outlook.

This work also reflects my North American context. I am an educated woman of African American and Cherokee ancestry who lives in the United States. I’ve worked as a minister, professor, community organizer, women’s advocate, freelance writer, grocery store cashier, and a couple of other things here and there. These experiences help inform this work. This book also reflects

my personal taste in literature, music, and scholarship. In many ways, I've written about and used the sources I find authoritative in both my personal spirituality and my constructive theological activity. The constructive work here feels like braiding hair. I'm pulling together different strands of conversations, scholarship, stories, and experiences into a unity.

Thus, this book represents my attempt to answer some of my own questions and reflect on my own faith while also trying to hold together the experiences of many people and communities I've come to know and love. I want to honor my grandmother's tenacious black Baptist faith, which runs throughout every family gathering we have. I also want to celebrate my friends who feed candy to a concrete head with cowrie-shell eyes as part of their practice of *Ifa* or *Santería*. I want to respect the sleepless hours caused by unspeakable acts of violence and physical pain, without neglecting the exuberance felt when love is reciprocal, rhythm ignites our bodies, or everything seems to come together as we hoped and planned. I pray I have done justice to these communities and experiences.

The writing of this book has been a communal process influenced equally by those who contributed to my personal and professional development, those who encouraged me in the present, and those who believed in the direction of my research and career. I thank my parents, Pauline A. Bigby and the late Allen M. Coleman, who have always supported my education. I've written this in part so that my parents could understand what I do. While I am grieved that my father did not live to see this publication, I am inspired by the pride he took in me and my work. Thank you, Mama, for how you have fostered my critical inquiry and also inquire about what I do.

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To God be the glory.